



Amsterdam

by Gert Hekma

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Famous as a major gay tourist destination and for its tolerance of glbtq people, in the second half of the twentieth century Amsterdam became a leader in the struggle for glbtq equality.

Founded around 1225, Amsterdam developed from a small village of 5000 inhabitants in 1500 to become one of the world's largest cities in 1700, when it achieved a population of 200,000. In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam's "Golden Age," the city became the trade center of the world, home of the first global capitalist enterprises. It saw relative decline in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but began to grow again in the mid-nineteenth century.

Today Amsterdam is the financial and cultural capital of the Netherlands, with 700,000 inhabitants. It has a reputation for religious tolerance, and--more recently--for liberal drug and sex policies.

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Prosecutions for Sodomy

There was, however, no tolerance of "sodomitical" activities until 1811, as sodomy was a capital crime in the Dutch Republic. For long stretches of time, very few prosecutions were reported. However, in 1730, Holland experienced a major moral panic around sodomy, which led to a wave of repression.

Amsterdam was affected by the 1730 panic in a relatively minor way, since only half a dozen of the 100 executions took place in the city. But later in the eighteenth century, Amsterdam was at the center of new waves of prosecutions, as well as the scene of isolated cases.

After the Batave Revolution of 1795, the Dutch version of the French Revolution, the number of prosecutions for sodomy increased, its definition broadened from anal sex to same-sex intimacies of all kinds, but the harshness of the penalties diminished. Even some "tribades" (i.e., lesbians) were prosecuted for sodomy.

Nineteenth-Century Prosecutions for "Public Indecency"

After the French emperor Napoleon incorporated Holland into his empire in 1810 and introduced the French Penal Code in 1811, sodomy was no longer a crime. When the Netherlands became an independent kingdom in 1813, it retained the French laws.

In the kingdom "public indecency" was the crime under which "wrong lovers" (*verkeerde liefhebbers*) were prosecuted. In the nineteenth century, prosecutions of public indecency--mainly targeting men having sex with men--increased slowly but steadily in Amsterdam.



Top: An aerial view of Amsterdam.

Above: One of three pinkish granite triangles that comprise Amsterdam's Homomonument. Aerial image courtesy Amsterdam Municipal Department for the Preservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings and Sites (bMA). Homomonument photograph by Adam Carr.

The basic principle of the new French laws, freedom in the private home but restrictions on public activity, had little meaning for same-sex practices, since few men and even fewer women with such interests could boast houses where they could freely pursue their interests beyond the control of family and neighbors.

In the period from 1830 to 1899, Amsterdam police arrested 280 men and two women for same-sex sexual activities in public, and another 180 men in the next decade.

With stronger enforcement of laws against prostitution after 1890, Amsterdam police also came across meeting places of "wrong lovers"--bars, bordellos, and private homes--and sometimes raided them.

The increase in prosecutions at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century may be partially explained by the growth and increased professionalization of the Amsterdam police force, but it was also the result of morality campaigns, mainly directed against prostitution. One argument against the oldest profession was that it served as a cover for--rather than a shield against--lesbian and perverted lusts.

Center of Sexual Culture

In the 1880s Amsterdam became a center of sexual culture, expressed in the publication of quack and serious medical books, the flowering of art and literature, and the production of pornography for consumers of all sexual tastes.

"Eighties" artists such as Willem Kloos and Lodewijk van Deyssel depicted gay topics and themes, as did novelists such as Louis Couperus and Jacob Israël de Haan.

In 1894, the quack doctor J. Schoondermark wrote the first booklet that asked for sympathy for homosexuals. Serious doctors took up the theme after 1898.

Arnold Aletrino, who belonged to the artistic circle around Kloos, wrote several essays and two booklets on "Uranism," as he referred to same-sex attraction. He described the phenomenon as an innate condition, and asked for compassion. Most courageously, Aletrino addressed the fifth Congress of Criminal Anthropology in Amsterdam in 1901 to speak on behalf of homosexual tolerance. He was fiercely attacked by the founder of the discipline, Cesare Lombroso.

Another physician, Lucien von Römer, also spoke up for homosexual tolerance. He wrote many long articles for Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*.

Aletrino and Römer were both denounced by political leaders, who declared, for example, that the University of Amsterdam, where Aletrino taught and Römer was a student, promoted the sins of Sodom.

The work of these authors strongly contributed to the possibilities of homosexual identification, which had been difficult before that time.

Gay Life in an Amsterdam Neighborhood

De Haan's novel *Pijpelijntjes* (1904), the publication of which cost him his jobs as teacher and journalist, describes gay life in an Amsterdam neighborhood. The main characters are lovers, but they pursue casual sex on the side, one with boys in their mid-teens. Closely resembling De Haan himself, this character picks boys up from the streets, serves them strong drinks, and has sex with them.

The novel's description of a same-sex sexual world without gay bars is realistic because there were very few homosexual venues in Amsterdam at that time. Those that did exist, fearful of being raided by the police, often changed their locations.

Growth of a Subculture

In the period between the two World Wars (1919-1939), Amsterdam developed a gay subculture, characterized by more stable locations for gay bars and other meeting places. These venues were strictly monitored and controlled by the police.

From one of these bars, the Empire, some clients produced the first Dutch gay journal, *Wij (We)*. They also intended to start a recreational homosexual organization, but just before they assembled to discuss this initiative, the police raided the bar, ending both ventures.

These bars catered mostly to a homosexual-identified public who came there to meet similar-minded persons with whom to socialize. For their sex life, they cruised the streets for "normal" men of another class or youngsters of another age.

The best places for this kind of cruising were public toilets, parks, and the Red Light District. In the last location, half a dozen "queer" bars were established, often tended by lesbians who had worked as prostitutes and invested their money in these enterprises. They catered to a mixed clientele of prostitutes, johns, gay men, and lesbians.

The most famous of these bars was the Basket, established in 1927, by Bet van Beeren, "Queen of the Zeedijk," a cigar smoking, gin drinking, motorbiking lesbian in leather. The bar still exists but is closed to the public. A replica is preserved in the Amsterdam Historical Museum.

German Occupation

German forces occupied the Netherlands in 1940. The Germans introduced anti-homosexual legislation in the Netherlands, but did little to enforce it. Some Dutch men prosecuted under this legislation had had homosexual relations with German soldiers.

Most of the gay bars that had been established before the occupation continued in existence, though they were subject to raids by the Germans. There were even some new bars established, such as the Monico, which was opened by "Blond Saar" Heshof in 1941. She continued to operate the bar until 2001.

Dutch homosexuals reacted to the occupation in much the same manner as other Dutch citizens. Some supported the Nazis, others joined the resistance, but most remained neutral.

The gay artist Willem Arondeüs, who had been quite unhappy before the war, found a new zeal in the resistance. He joined the group that set fire to the Amsterdam Persons' Registry, an essential bureaucracy for the persecution of Jews.

Arondeüs's group included several homosexuals. It was betrayed and most of its participants, including Arondeüs, were executed.

Post-World War II Activism

Just before World War II, some courageous men in Amsterdam established a gay journal *Levensrecht* (The Right to Live), which was soon interrupted by the German occupation. After the war, in 1946, these men established the COC (Center for Culture and Recreation), which sponsored social events such as dances and lectures. In addition, they attempted to convince the police and other authorities that homosexuals were decent persons.

In 1953 the COC opened a dance hall, the DOK, that proved very successful. In 1955, COC opened another

venue, De Schakel (The Link). Suddenly, Amsterdam had two gay clubs many times larger than the traditional bars. These huge establishments were allowed to exist by the police, who would rather have gay men dancing behind closed doors than cruising in the streets. Soon other gay bars opened, including the first leather venue, Hotel Tiemersma.

Gay tourists--mainly Germans, English, French, and American soldiers from Germany--soon discovered the relatively open atmosphere of Amsterdam. Several hotels began to cater to a growing gay public. The first gay sauna opened in 1961.

The growth of the gay scene in the 1960s worried the city authorities, but the sexual revolution of the decade overtook them and their worries.

Homosexual activist groups were established by students in 1967. They organized disco evenings for gay men and lesbians under 21 and held the first gay rights demonstration in Amsterdam in 1970.

Lesbian Activism

Also in 1970, the first exclusively lesbian bar opened. In 1972, the first separatist lesbian movement, "Purple September," was organized, soon to be followed by "Lesbian Nation."

The COC changed its policies to be more affirming of lesbians and to address the sexism of gay men. Lesbians had always been members of the COC, but only in the 1980s did lesbian and straight women achieve central positions in the organization.

Amsterdam as "Gay Capital"

With the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1971 and other legal rights conferred on homosexuals soon afterward, there was an end of official intolerance in the Netherlands. Moreover, the police were now charged with protecting--rather than harassing--gay men and lesbians and the gay cruising areas.

Not surprisingly, Amsterdam continued to be a popular destination for gay and lesbian tourists from all over the world. It also emerged as a center of the international gay liberation movement.

Gay and lesbian initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s ranged from the establishment of all kinds of organizations and institutions to an annual parade (1977) and the Homomonument (1987), which commemorates the suffering of glbtq people. Openly gay and lesbian candidates were also elected or appointed to city office.

In the 1970s and 1980s Amsterdam strongly profited from its liberal reputation as the "gay capital" of Europe. There were new extravagant discos, with drag queens and kings and large and small parties for various sexual preferences and fetishes, from S/M to sport. The lesbian scene grew well beyond its one bar and monthly series of events.

Throughout the final decade of the twentieth century, however, city authorities were ambivalent about promoting the city as a gay and lesbian mecca. They were somewhat embarrassed by the city's reputation for "sex and drugs."

At the same time, however, other European cities became known for their gay and lesbian scenes that sometimes surpassed those of Amsterdam. In response, the city made an effort to emphasize its support for glbtq people. In 1989, it sponsored a large exhibit on gay and lesbian history, "Two of a Kind"; it hosted Europride in 1993 and the Gay Games in 1998. Since 1997, the city has also been the site of annual gay canal parades in the first weekend of August.

Amsterdam remains one of the world's most tolerant and welcoming cities for glbtq people to live in and visit. The main danger for queer Amsterdam is complacency and self-congratulation. Despite all the progress made in the last half-century, glbtq people, even in a famously tolerant city such as Amsterdam, are always in danger of marginalization.

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About the Author

Gert Hekma teaches gay and lesbian studies in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is editor of several books on gay history and sociology, including (with Kent Gerard) *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, (with Harry Oosterhuis and James D. Steakley) *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left*, and (with Franz X. Eder and Lesley Hall) *Sexual Cultures in Europe*. In the spring of 2004 his book on Dutch gay male history, *M/M*, will be published.