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Hugo Grotius

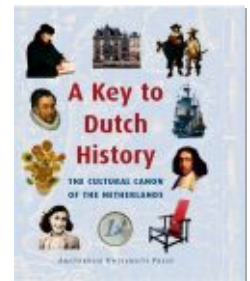
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1583 - 1645

Hugo Grotius

Pioneer of modern international law

Hugo Grotius was well known to the public at large mainly because of the book chest which he used to escape from Loevestein Castle on 22 March 1621. He had been imprisoned in the castle in 1619 for treason. As Pensionary of Rotterdam and political and legal advisor to government prosecutor Oldenbarneveldt, Grotius was one of the leading players in the Truce Negotiations. After the fall of Oldenbarneveldt, Grotius's days were numbered. Although (unlike his protector) he was not executed, he was sentenced to a life in prison. Thanks to the ruse with the book chest he did not serve his full term. He did, however, have to spend the rest of his life in exile abroad. Grotius died in 1645 in Rostock.

In 1621, Hugo Grotius's time in Holland came to an end but his intellectual activities and academic reputation continued to grow. He had earned his reputation

early in life. A child prodigy, Grotius was born in 1583 in Delft and at age eleven he was admitted to the newly established University of Leiden. Here, he was hailed as the successor of Erasmus. The young Grotius had an unparalleled intellect. He could write Latin verses as easily as he could write annotations to ancient Greek and Roman texts. In 1598 the French king referred to him as "the Dutch miracle".

Hugo Grotius remained a man of many talents for the rest of his life. He wrote discourses on theological, historical, and, in particular, legal topics. Initially, his Dutch roots could be clearly seen in his writing. For example, using a flood of historical and legal examples he tried to prove that Holland had had the ideal form of government since the time of the Batavians, or that the Dutch were free to use the seas as these were international waters (*Mare Liberum*). The way in which

he reached these conclusions was typical for humanist scholars like Grotius. Using his astonishing scholarship, his primary aim was to bring order and structure to existing knowledge as could be found in the works of classical writers. This approach delivered important new insights, particularly in his legal writings like *De iure belli ac pacis* (“On the law of war and peace”). Written in 1625, this work sets out the fundamental principles of international law.



In the Netherlands, Grotius is known as Hugo de Groot, and is still largely remembered for the tale of the book chest. Abroad, the name Grotius is associated with a man with a brilliant legal mind. Together with his fellow victims of the Stadholder (the De Witt brothers and Oldenbarneveldt), Hugo Grotius served as a symbol of resistance for the opponents of the Orangists. During the 1780s, the Patriot period, several relics of Grotius came to light, including two book chests.



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

Hugo Grotius: from celebrated genius to banished exile
Control of the seas (“*mare liberum*”)
International legal systems: Peace Palace, United Nations, Red Cross

Secondary education sector

Truce Negotiations
The De Witt brothers
War and peace: international law
Humanism and science
Maria van Reigersberch

Past and Present

The Hague as a city of justice
Laws of war
Child prodigies

In the Treasure Chest

Miniature book chest

References

Places to Go

Loevestein castle
The Hague: Peace Palace

Books for young people

Marion Bloem, *Zo groot als Hugo* (8+)

Background literature

H.J.M. Nellen, J. Trapman (ed.), *De Hollandse jaren van Hugo de Groot (1583-1621)*, Hilversum 1996.
Gijs van der Ham, “De Boekenkist van Hugo de Groot”, in Els Kloek (ed.), *Verzameld Verleden*, Hilversum 2004.

Websites

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