

# I

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# COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ROTTERDAM

With around 600,000 inhabitants, Rotterdam is the Netherlands' second-largest city. It has a reputation for being a city of hard workers who believe in letting their actions do the talking. This is the city whose port has propelled the Dutch economy forward, the city that labours away relentlessly. 'Rotterdam Dares', as its city-branding slogan said in 2004. That is certainly the case for its buildings: Rotterdam is famous for its impressive skyline and modern architecture. And '010', as Rotterdam is affectionately known after its phone area code, has now become a cool destination for travellers seeking to escape the tourist crowds in Amsterdam. Like the capital, Rotterdam too is a dynamic, multicultural city with a wealth of culture, bars and restaurants and a lively night life.

But there is another, less positive side to this success story: great disparities in wealth and privilege, serious inner-city problems and sharp divisions along political — and sometimes ethnic — fault lines. The waves of migration after the Second World War have played a key role here. As in other Dutch cities, large numbers of migrants from the former colonies and other parts of the world settled in Rotterdam. White Dutch people now make up about half the city's population, and migrants and their children from all over the world the other half. Over 12 per cent of Rotterdam's

inhabitants have roots in the former Dutch colonies of Indonesia, Suriname (in South America) and the Antilles. This has led to a debate in Rotterdam (as in other places) about the nature of the city and its inhabitants, about belonging and about rights and obligations, both old and new. This is a complex debate that is unlikely to die down any time soon. But for this debate to be constructive, sound knowledge and serious reflection is required concerning Rotterdam's colonial past and connections with slavery.

This reappraisal by society at large of the crucial role played by colonialism in Dutch history forms the context for the motion tabled by Peggy Wijntuin and passed by Rotterdam Municipal Council on 14 November 2017. In that motion, Peggy Wijntuin — a councillor of Afro-Surinamese heritage representing the Labour Party (PvdA) — called for an investigation into Rotterdam's colonial past and links with slavery. The underlying idea was that “knowledge of our colonial past and links with slavery will bolster mutual understanding and bonding going forward” and “shared knowledge about a past from multiple perspectives helps achieve an inclusive society both now and in the future; in other words, solidarity”. Rotterdam Municipal Council passed the motion, albeit not unanimously.

The Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) was tasked with carrying out the investigation, which started in 2018 and was completed in 2020. The results were published in three Dutch-language books: *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* ('Rotterdam's colonial past'), edited by Gert Oostindie, the monograph *Rotterdam in slavernij* ('Rotterdam in slavery') by Alex van Stipriaan, and *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging* ('Rotterdam, a dynamic post-colonial city'), with Francio Guadeloupe, Paul van de Laar and Liane van der Linden as the editors. The first edited volume gave a broad view of the history, ranging from the economy and politics to architecture and museum collections, and from the 'ethical vocation' and migration stories from the pre-war and post-war periods to contemporary debates in the city. Van Stipriaan's monograph focused exclusively on Rotterdam's slavery connections. *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging* examined the significance of this history for present-day Rotterdam, a city that in recent decades has increasingly been labelled 'super-diverse'.

The investigation findings were summarized in a document released prior to the results being presented. A translation of this document, which was widely cited in the discussions that followed among politicians and in the media, is included in this chapter (see inset). To give an even briefer

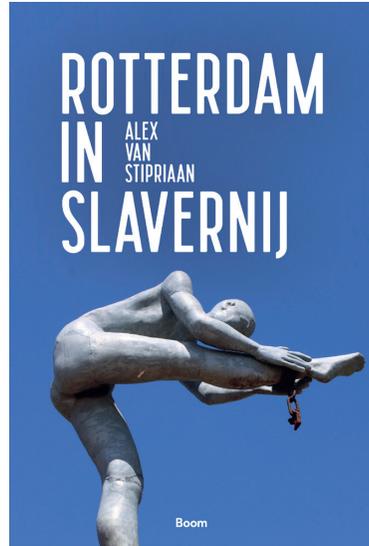
summary: colonialism and slavery were an integral part of Rotterdam's history from 1600 onwards, and this past has left a legacy not just in the former colonies but also in the Netherlands, and in Rotterdam in particular.

The presentation of the findings attracted intense interest from the Dutch national and local media. The results were accepted unreservedly by the Mayor of Rotterdam Ahmed Aboutaleb (himself a Dutchman of Moroccan origins), the responsible alderman Bert Wijknga and a majority of the Municipal Council. Peggy Wijntuin herself was delighted. In her foreword to *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging*, she called the volume “an instrument for combating ignorance. After all, if you have no knowledge of the past, it is impossible to know or sense why our community looks the way it does today.” She repeated her message at the book presentation, pointing to the importance of mutual understanding and solidarity as aspects of being a citizen of Rotterdam now and in the future. Since then, there have been various initiatives to develop educational and cultural products based on these books, all aimed at promoting an inclusive urban community. It hardly needs saying that the Covid-19 crisis has not helped.

Now we have produced this English-language book, with a wish to contribute to the debate in Europe and beyond about the significance of colonial history and connections with slavery for present-day societies. Our challenge was to take the findings of this extremely broad investigation, which resulted in three richly illustrated books totalling almost 1,300 pages, and produce a shortened version in English for publication as a single volume — this book. The bulk of the book consists of abridged versions of the chapters in *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam*. In addition, Van Stipriaan has contributed an article in which he summarizes the essential elements of his book on Rotterdam and slavery.

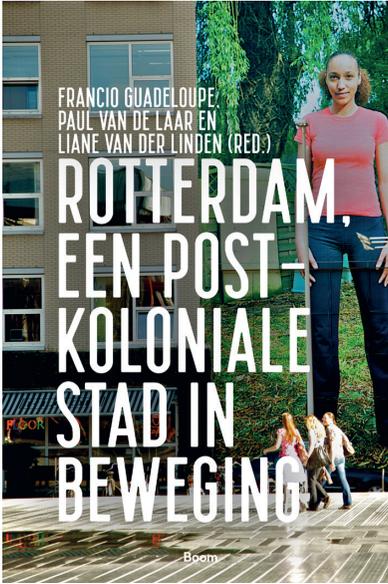
## ROTTERDAM'S COLONIAL PAST AND LINKS WITH SLAVERY

- ♦ From 1600 onwards, Rotterdam played an important role in Dutch colonialism and consequently also in the slave trade and slavery. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the city did so primarily as a participant in the Dutch East India and West India Companies. Later, the private sector took over. Rotterdam became the biggest port in the Netherlands, thanks in large part to the colonial trade with the Dutch East Indies.
- ♦ Rotterdam's mayors and other governors, businesspeople and seafarers played significant roles in the East India and West India Companies,



as well as in the private slave trade and system of slavery. The owner of one of the first recorded Dutch ships carrying enslaved Africans (in 1596) was based in Rotterdam. The city governors backed the East India Company, West India Company and private colonial entrepreneurs; many governors had colonial interests of their own.

- ♦ Rotterdam's businesses profited from their involvement in slavery and the colonial system. Some of these companies still exist or were taken over by other firms. Important early examples were Hudig, Mees and the predecessors of present-day companies such as ASR and ABN-AMRO. Then there are the enterprises that had operations from the nineteenth century onwards in what is now Indonesia. They include Van Nelle, Van Oordt, ASR, Rotterdamsche Lloyd (which became part of Maersk), Fijenoord (now part of Damen Shipyards), the Rotterdamsche Bank (which became part of ABN-AMRO), and NV Indische Fondsen (a predecessor of ROBECO). This list is far from complete and further research should be carried out to determine the involvement of Rotterdam companies in slavery and the colonial past.
- ♦ In general, neither Rotterdam's city governors nor its businesspeople showed any evidence of ethical objections to the slave trade, slavery or colonialism as such. While there have always been people in Rotterdam who expressed criticism, they were the exceptions.



1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 Covers of the three books, published by Boom (2020; design Bart van den Tooren).

- ♦ The present study focuses on the impact this history has had on the city itself, while not ignoring the impact elsewhere; in particular, in the history of slavery, it considers the effect on Suriname and Curacao and highlights the resistance to slavery. What was the impact of this history on the city of Rotterdam itself?
- ♦ The economy. Rotterdam's involvement in slavery and colonialism was an integral part of its economic development, affecting trade, industry and financial services. Its involvement was not restricted to businessmen: countless Rotterdam sailors, labourers and white-collar workers earned a living thanks to the colonial economy.
- ♦ Urban planning and architecture. The growth of the city of Rotterdam and its port was closely linked to colonialism. The bombing of the city by the Nazis in 1940 destroyed large numbers of buildings with colonial connections. Even so, throughout the city there are reminders of this history in its buildings and urban structure.
- ♦ Museums and collections. Wealthy Rotterdam residents built up collections of colonial art and ethnographica, mainly from Indonesia. These collections can now be found in Rotterdam's museums, such as the Wereldmuseum, Boijmans van Beuningen, the Maritime Museum and Museum Rotterdam. The City Archive also houses unique collections, mainly from private individuals, relating to the colonial

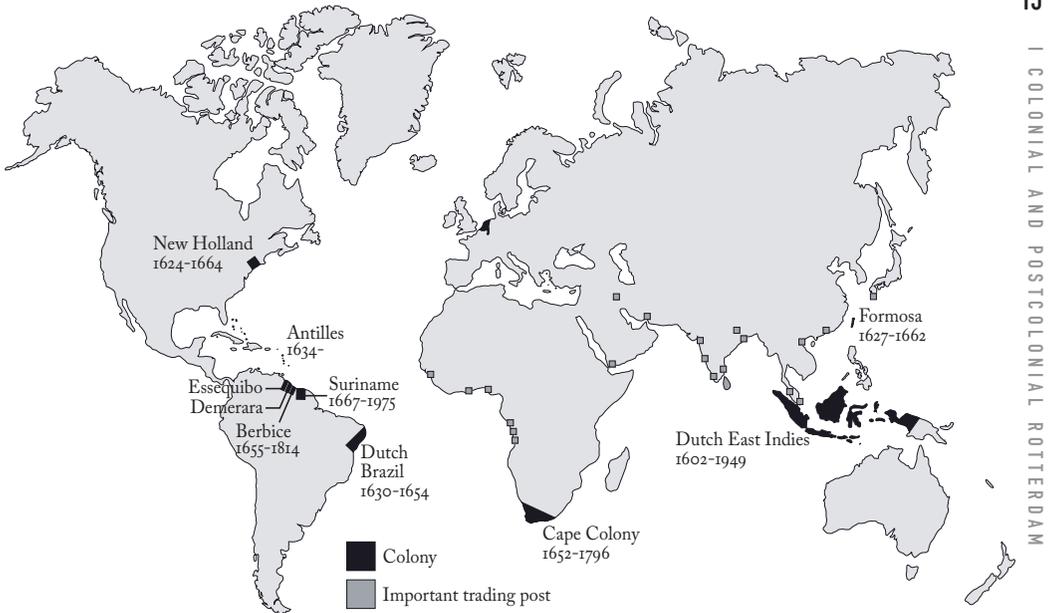
period and slavery in particular. These collections often reflect a colonial worldview, and the museums and other heritage institutions are now struggling to break free of that frame.

- ♦ Colonialism and slavery were inextricably linked with racism and violence, and this therefore also applies to Rotterdam's involvement and share of the responsibility. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the colonial system acquired a somewhat more critical, 'ethical' dimension. In Rotterdam, this took the form of campaigning for the abolition of slavery. The city later became a centre for missionary work and tropical medicine. The notions underlying this work were paternalistic and sometimes quite blatantly racist.
- ♦ Migration. Right from the early days of colonialism, people came to the Netherlands from the colonies, voluntarily or otherwise. Examples are servants, and later on students such as the Indonesian statesman Mohammad Hatta. Colonial migrants were actively involved not only in resistance against Dutch colonialism but also in the resistance against the Nazis during the Second World War. After the war, many more 'postcolonial' migrants settled in the city.
- ♦ Now, in 2020, Rotterdam is an incredibly diverse city with large groups of inhabitants from former colonies — not just those belonging to the Dutch but also from Portuguese, French, Spanish and British colonies. This means the colonial past lingers on in the present-day city. That helps explain the intense interest today in this past: slavery and the history of colonialism — a story of racism and exclusion — is not a closed chapter but continues to have a material and psychological effect in the here and now.
- ♦ Rotterdam's history of colonialism and slavery has been hugely significant, not just for continents far away but also for the city itself. For centuries, Rotterdam's governors played a crucial role in this history that is now being 'rediscovered'. Their modern-day successors face the task of determining what place to give this past in the present-day city. These three books provide thorough, indispensable background information but they are certainly not the final word on this subject. Much still needs to be investigated, reflected upon and discussed. The next step is to disseminate the information in a form suitable for a broad public.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE TODAY OF THE COLONIAL PAST

As elsewhere in the Netherlands, debates in Rotterdam about identity often refer to the Dutch colonial past. This history started in around 1600, when the Netherlands — at the time a republic embroiled in a war of independence from Spain — set its sights as a trading and military power on the world beyond Europe. Two milestones are the formation of the Dutch East India Company (VOC in Dutch) in 1602 and the Dutch West India Company (WIC in Dutch) in 1621. Half a century later, the Dutch Republic had trading posts and even colonies all over the world. In some cases this was achieved with the cooperation of local rulers, but most were acquired through violence or the threat of violence (*see map*). Trade in human beings and their forced labour soon became part of the colonial repertoire. The victims of these practices were Africans and Asians.

Over the course of time, the Netherlands lost many of its colonies, mainly to the British. By the nineteenth century, all that remained were what is now Indonesia, Suriname and the six islands that were known until recently as the Netherlands Antilles. Indonesia declared independence in 1945 but the Netherlands did not accept that declaration until late 1949,



1.5 *The Dutch empire through the centuries*

after four years of fighting and negotiations. Suriname gained independence in 1975, after a short and occasionally hectic negotiation process but without violence. The Netherlands Antilles refused to opt for the same solution despite being urged to do so by the Dutch government. Instead, they decided to split off from one another but keep the link with the Netherlands. That is why the Kingdom of the Netherlands still encompasses territory in both Europe and the Caribbean, as a constitutional vestige of the Netherlands' colonial past.

There are other reasons too why the colonial past cannot be considered a closed chapter. In the post-war period, large numbers of migrants from the colonies settled in the Netherlands. The first groups came from Indonesia, then from Suriname, and later still from the Caribbean islands, a migrant flow that continues today. Depending on how they are counted, these migrants and their descendants now number one to two million, or 6 to 12 per cent of the Dutch population. Their arrival and the further evolution of these postcolonial migrant communities literally brought Dutch colonial history back to the Netherlands. "We're here because you were there!"

Slowly but surely, stories from and about Indonesia, Suriname and the Antilles have been recognized as *Dutch* stories. That required a fundamental change in the national mindset. Up until the Second World War, the fact that the Netherlands was a colonial power was taken for granted in the Netherlands itself. Its colonial history was mainly presented as a chronicle of adventure and entrepreneurial spirit, and in later years an ethical vocation as well. As late as 1941 — Rotterdam had already been bombed, the Nazis had occupied the Netherlands and Japan was on the point of capturing the Dutch East Indies — an assessment of Dutch colonialism was published in the Netherlands with the exultant title "What great things were achieved..." (*Daar wèrd wat groots verricht...*). The 'loss of the Indies' was a huge blow, and for decades afterwards the colonial past was buried in the collective subconscious. On the rare occasions when it *was* recalled in the old triumphant style — in 2006, for example, when the then prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende praised the entrepreneurial 'spirit of the East India Company' — the immediate response was criticism and an uncomfortable feeling.<sup>1</sup>

The critical 'rediscovery' of the colonial past is connected to the process of decolonization and the associated postcolonial waves of migration. The decolonization of Asia and Africa gave short shrift to the notion

that the colonized peoples had accepted colonialism as a fact of life. The Dutch were dumbfounded when Indonesia declared independence on 17 August 1945. The Netherlands' response, which enjoyed broad support throughout Dutch society, was a rejection followed by war. In 2005, sixty years later, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot made a statement on behalf of the Dutch government saying that the Netherlands had been "on the wrong side of history" in 1945-1949. Nearly all Dutch politicians and the vast majority of the population had not understood, or had not been willing to accept, that the colonial era had come to an end.

This immediately raises the question of whether colonialism was ever acceptable. That is a debate in its own right, but there has been growing realization that the motives driving European colonialism were primarily selfish (to promote economic and geopolitical interests) and the justification provided by Europeans at the time was based on a notion of superiority that was either racist or at best paternalistic. In other words, "on the wrong side of history" in a much broader sense. That realization has increasingly permeated the public and political debate in recent decades, and there is now wide recognition of what are termed the 'negative sides', or 'dark chapters' (a rather unfortunate expression in this context), in Dutch history. Nowadays, almost nobody attempts to defend the former human trade in Africans or Asians or the many savage colonial wars waged by the Dutch. Many people now condemn or lament *all* aspects of that colonial past. The debate has also moved on to some extent to the question of how much weight should be given to this colonial past in the larger history of the Netherlands. And we are still far from reaching a consensus on this question.

Dutch people with roots in the colonies have started to play an increasingly prominent role in these debates. That is hardly surprising, as they are familiar with their own history; also, they have discovered time and again that their fellow citizens in the 'home country' where they had settled knew pitifully little about that colonial history, and usually showed little interest in it either. They found (and still do find) that incredibly frustrating. The aforementioned phrase "We're here because you were there" has not infrequently been used indignantly by Dutch migrants precisely because they were told they had no place in this country.

That does not mean all Dutch people with colonial or postcolonial roots share the same views about that past and its present-day significance. Firstly, each individual relates to the past in their own way, with

their own ideas about the role that past plays in the present. But there are also differences that can be associated with particular groups. At this point, the notion of a single colonial past begins to fall apart; there is in fact little point in treating diverse contemporary experiences as one and the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

Most migrants by far from the Dutch East Indies had some kind of connection to the colonial regime and colonial lifestyle. Around 1940, 0.5 per cent of the East Indies population was classed as ‘European’ — about 300,000 people in a population of 70 million. Roughly one third of them were white and two-thirds were mixed Indonesian-European (also known as *Indisch*). This latter group was and still is sometimes termed ‘Indo’ in Dutch, including by some members of the group themselves. The vast majority of these ‘Europeans’ settled in the Netherlands during the war of independence or in the period immediately following the war. Other, smaller groups of migrants arrived from Indonesia: Moluccan families whose menfolk had served in the Royal Dutch Indies Army, and Chinese from the colony’s upper middle class. With the possible exception of the Chinese, what these groups had in common was that they had lost their homeland when Indonesia became independent. The Dutch East Indies was no more and there was no place in Indonesia for them, as representatives or ‘accomplices’ of the colonial state. For decades, their stories revolved around the loss of their homeland and the ‘chilly reception’ they got in the Netherlands. Only recently has there been more discussion about such sensitive subjects as their own position and involvement in the colonial, racially ordered system.

While much of the frustration in postcolonial *Indisch* and Moluccan circles was thus to some extent related to the *end* of colonialism, it was colonialism itself that evoked powerful emotions — anger, sorrow and shame — among Antillean migrants and the Surinamese of African descent; after all, the colonial system brought their ancestors slavery and racism. The result was a very different discourse and another political dynamic altogether. The *Indisch* and Moluccan communities in the Netherlands lobbied mainly for recognition of and compensation for their suffering during the Japanese occupation and war of independence, and what they saw as the cold reception in the Netherlands. The Afro-Surinamese and Antillean communities, on the other hand, pushed primarily for recognition of the immense injustice of slavery and the — assumed, perceived — legacy of that past.

There were also Indian-Surinamese and Javanese-Surinamese communities that developed relatively unobtrusively. These groups, which make up roughly half the Surinamese-Dutch population, are descendants of indentured labourers brought by the Dutch to the colony *after* the abolition of slavery there in 1863. While this system has been labelled ‘slavery by another name’, in Indian-Surinamese circles at any rate a different discourse seems to prevail, namely one of pride in their social advancement, first in Suriname and then in the Netherlands, and a cultural and religious leaning towards India or — in the case of the Javanese-Surinamese and to a lesser extent — Indonesia.

In other words, it is not really possible or desirable to attempt to understand and present Dutch colonial history as a single monolithic account, in particular as regards the view of that history among Dutch people with colonial roots. Statements about colonialism as a self-interested endeavour based on racism and instrumental violence are all too true, but beyond such generalities there are many stories to be told, and the history and subsequent perception of that history is more ambiguous. Perhaps you could say it is not so black-and-white.

This process is also evident in the way in which the Netherlands has gradually made room for its colonial past in the decades since the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> The first monuments in the public space marked the suffering by the Dutch in the war in Indonesia. This was followed by memorials of the ordeals of Indonesian-Europeans and Moluccans, and later still commemoration of their settlement in the Netherlands. The first monument remembering the history of slavery in the Caribbean only appeared in 2002, in Amsterdam; in 2013, a slavery monument was unveiled in Rotterdam. Similarly, over a century after all the Dutch cities had built ‘Indies’ districts and other urban areas with colonial names, streets were now given names honouring figures who had fought colonialism. An example is Hattasingel in Rotterdam, named after Mohammad Hatta, who gained his degree in Rotterdam and went on to declare Indonesia’s independence along with Sukarno in 1945.

## ROTTERDAM’S SHARE

Much has been written about the history of Rotterdam, with ‘port city’ and a ‘go-getting spirit’ as recurring themes. The dominant story in Rotterdam’s twentieth-century history is the destruction of the city by the Germans in May 1940 and its subsequent reconstruction. Then there is

the post-war social history, in particular the far-reaching demographic changes that turned Rotterdam into a highly multicultural city. There have been far more historical studies of the first topic than the second.<sup>4</sup>

Until now, there was no academic study or book for a general readership on Rotterdam's colonial past. That does not mean historians have deliberately ignored the topic of Rotterdam and colonialism, but they have never focused on it. Of course colonial trade and industry are discussed in the wealth of literature on the economic history of Rotterdam, but they are never the main topic of interest. The same applies to most studies of Rotterdam's economic and political elite and its colonial connections. Similarly, references to the colonial past can be found in historical studies dealing with education, culture or urban development but that aspect was never the central element. And while historians who have written about the Netherlands' colonial and postcolonial history have paid attention to the Rotterdam connection and made extensive use of Rotterdam's archives, the Rotterdam case has never been the focal point.<sup>5</sup>

The authors of *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* and *Rotterdam in slavernij* combined these two approaches. In both books, the authors made grateful use of the existing studies of the history of Rotterdam and of studies of Dutch colonialism, but they also carried out new research. The key question concerned Rotterdam's share in Dutch colonial history as a whole and the consequences this had for Rotterdam. Reflections were also added on the significance of this past for the modern-day city; this was the main subject of the book *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging*. As said, the essence of these publications is contained in this book, *Colonialism and Slavery: An Alternative History of the Port City of Rotterdam*.

This also brings us to a fundamental limitation of our investigation. We focus on Rotterdam and pay far less attention to the consequences in the colonies and the impact on the 'subjects' at the time, enslaved or otherwise. This dimension is constantly in the background, of course. For example, the chapter on urban planning and architecture briefly covers Rotterdam architecture in the colonies. But it is not our intention to explore the overseas effects of Dutch colonialism, in which (as we shall see) Rotterdam played an important role. Countless books have been penned about this broader Dutch colonial history, even though this subject is far from exhausted. We also have modest ambitions within the scope of the more limited assignment we set ourselves, though. There remains much

more to be researched and written on the Rotterdam dimension of Dutch colonial history than we were able to do in this first exploratory project. We therefore see these books not just as an important first attempt to do justice to the inspiration and questions underlying the Wijntuin motion but also as an invitation to future generations of researchers.

What is the general picture? Rotterdam has a long history of involvement in colonialism and slavery. That is hardly surprising. Colonialism started with the shipping industry, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Rotterdam vied with Middelburg and its harbour Vlissingen for the position as the second most important port in the Dutch Republic; only Amsterdam was bigger. In the late nineteenth century (by which time the Netherlands had become a kingdom), the port of Rotterdam even overtook that of Amsterdam. This development is discussed in the chapter by Gerhard de Kok. Rotterdam first became involved in colonialism and slavery very early on, before the East India and West India Companies were even founded. Both the first Dutch voyage around the world and the first Dutch slave ship had Rotterdam connections. The city was a partner in both the East India and West India Companies, but it had only modest stakes. For most of the Rotterdam businessmen involved in these companies, their shares were just one aspect of a broader portfolio of activities. Amsterdam dominated the East India Company and the West India Company, while the trans-Atlantic slave trade was mainly in the hands of Amsterdam and the province of Zeeland. Even so, Rotterdam businessmen were also involved, and there is no sign they felt any scruples. The slave trade stopped in the early nineteenth century and trade with the Caribbean declined to marginal levels. In contrast, trade with the Dutch East Indies became increasingly significant and was an important factor in Rotterdam's transformation into the global port of today. Furthermore, Rotterdam was actively involved throughout this period in the trade with the colonies of other European countries. De Kok argues that while this colonial trade did not make a large contribution directly to Rotterdam's economy, it was still a significant factor in the city's growth and development into a global port because of the spin-off effects in other sectors and the associated urban and maritime infrastructure.

De Kok also examines the significance of the colonial connections for the development of industry and financial services in Rotterdam. He does so by studying the principal sectors with colonial connections. The main industries were sugar refining, tobacco processing and shipbuilding.

To obtain a picture of the financial sector, he analyses eighteenth-century investments (*negotiaties*) in Surinamese slave plantations and nineteenth-century investments in the Dutch East Indies. He also considers the insurance sector, which had interests in the East India Company and the slave trade. This clearly points to an economic stake on the part of Rotterdam, but how important was it for the city? De Kok draws tentative conclusions. He argues that colonial trade — not just with the Dutch colonies but also with those of Britain and France — was particularly important for the city's industrial development between 1750 and 1850. In the period that followed, it was the financial sector that benefited most from the colonial relationship. De Kok concludes that Rotterdam's transformation into a global port was primarily due to its function as a transit port serving Europe, in particular the German hinterland, within a broader process of globalization. However, in the period prior to this the colonial connection had been a key factor in laying the foundations for the city's further development.

Rotterdam's merchant elite traditionally had close links with the city authorities and it is therefore no surprise that colonial interests were usually well represented in the city's administration, from city pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in the late sixteenth century to the mayor Pieter Oud in the twentieth century. Henk den Heijer describes the highly interconnected economic and administrative involvement of Rotterdam's elite in the colonies. This blurring between commercial and public interests was already evident in the period of the East India and West India Companies (whereby, as was the case nationally, the East India Company was much the more important). Rotterdam trading firms were, however, closely involved in Surinamese plantations, and consequently in the slave trade and slavery. After the slave trade came to an end in the early nineteenth century, Rotterdam's administrative and economic elite rapidly lost interest in the Caribbean colonies. West Africa continued to play a role for a while longer, but the focus soon shifted exclusively to the Dutch East Indies. Den Heijer shows how the men who ran the city enthusiastically promoted these colonial connections. Again, this is only to be expected as the colonial links not only benefited the urban economy and helped Rotterdam become a leading port but were also often financially advantageous for these men personally. So Rotterdam's municipal administrators were closely implicated in colonialism and slavery from the early days right through to the end. There is no evidence that they

had any doubts about their involvement, let alone scruples: it seems the city officials saw it as 'business as usual', good for the city and good for them personally.

Rotterdam's commercial, industrial and demographic growth was connected to the increase in colonial trade. Pauline van Roosmalen looks at how the colonial history resonated in the urban fabric, topography and architecture as the city expanded. She describes various traces and relics, ranging from street names, statues and ornamentation in public spaces to numerous buildings that were erected in the city and urban planning developments that reflected the city's colonial connections. Many of the original homes, warehouses and shipyards that were built by people with stakes in the East India Company, West India Company or subsequent colonial ventures were in the city centre and were destroyed when the Germans bombed Rotterdam in May 1940. Van Roosmalen rescues these buildings from obscurity using documents and images from before the Second World War. Other buildings, mostly elsewhere in the city, are still standing but they too are not self-explanatory; as she puts it, they need stories to reveal their past. Van Roosmalen also briefly mentions traces of Rotterdam's past 'overseas', from Fort Rotterdam in Makassar, Indonesia, and the offices of *Rotterdamsche Lloyd* in various Indonesian towns that have now been designated cultural heritage, to a settlement in Suriname that has since disappeared.

In the later stages of colonialism, the European countries became more concerned with what they saw as their 'ethical vocation'. As a result, they took on tasks somewhat comparable with what was later termed development aid. This definitely did not mean an end to the pursuit of profit, the racism and the violence of the preceding years. Moreover, this ethical colonialism was steeped in paternalism. Nevertheless, this shift did encompass a promise and was understood in this light in the colonies. Indeed, realization in Indonesia of the contradictions inherent in Dutch colonial policy and the failure of the new mission was a key factor stimulating the growth of nationalism. In his chapter, Tom van den Berge explores the history of Dutch missionary work in the colonies, a field in which Rotterdam played an important role. He shows that while Christian and humanitarian goals became much more important in this period, the view of colonial subjects as the 'Other' was thoroughly paternalistic and, not infrequently, blatantly racist. In his analysis, Van den Berge also shows how missionary activities contributed to the de-

velopment of tropical medicine, even if this was initially primarily aimed at protecting the missionaries.

While colonial relations may have principally been about economic transactions, the city also gained very different products from this relationship. In their contribution, Alexandra van Dongen and Liane van der Linden look at how prosperous Rotterdam residents, missionaries, scientists and later on museum staff built exceptional collections from the late nineteenth century onwards of ancient artefacts, craftwork and everyday utensils brought over from the colonies, in particular the Dutch East Indies. These collectors laid the foundation for some significant museum collections, first and foremost that of the Wereldmuseum, but also collections in the Maritime Museum, Boijmans van Beuningen and Museum Rotterdam. Van Dongen and Van der Linden not only describe this development, they also examine how the meaning attached to collecting as a pursuit has changed over the past 150 years and how the attitudes of museums and their visitors have evolved. There has been a shift from a highly racialized perspective in which the 'Other' was trapped in colonial contradictions, even when valued as such, to contemporary museum practices in which the colonial heritage is critiqued and the museum makes itself the subject of a process of decolonization.

From the very early days of colonialism, people came to the Netherlands from the colonies, voluntarily or otherwise. Esther Captain describes these waves of migration, starting with the often enslaved 'servants' who came to Rotterdam from the colonies with their masters. Her story continues with the 'zeebaboes' (female servants on ships) and sailors, and the first immigrants from the local elites, such as the student Mohammad Hatta who went on to play a leading role in Indonesia's struggle for independence. In the Second World War, various migrants from the colonies played a part in the resistance against the Nazis; some even gave their lives. For a brief period shortly after 1945 when nationalists declared Indonesian independence, the East Indies/Indonesia became familiar territory for tens of thousands of young men from Rotterdam as they were sent to fight in the last great colonial war. But after the Netherlands finally recognized Indonesia's independence in 1949 and handed over sovereignty, the mental separation grew greater than ever. *Indisch* Dutch and Moluccans were more or less forced to migrate to a country that they generally only knew from stories or schoolbooks. They were followed by other colonial and postcolonial migrants to Rotterdam (and the Netherlands more gen-

erally) from Suriname and later from the Antilles. Their stories reveal a wide range of experiences, from chilly receptions to warm welcomes, from appalling living and working conditions to tales of success and a lust for life. That brings us to the super-diversity of modern-day Rotterdam, a city where these postcolonial migrants have made such an important contribution.

In the final chapter, entitled 'Postcolonial Rotterdam', Francio Gueloupe, Paul van de Laar and Liane van der Linden look at how colonial and postcolonial history resonates in Rotterdam today. Their chapter clearly shows that the descriptor 'postcolonial' in the title does not mean for a moment that colonial history is dead and buried, but it is also a plea for Rotterdam to evolve as a community and outgrow the conflicts and contradictions of the distant and more recent past. Incidentally, their contribution also shows that it makes little sense nowadays to draw a sharp distinction between postcolonial migrants from the former Dutch colonies and migrants from other European colonies (such as the large Cape Verdean community).

There is that word again: super-diversity. In this super-diverse city, countless debates are going on at the same time, sometimes in bubbles of like-minded people, sometimes between myriad groups with very different opinions and backgrounds. New forms of media have added a layer of confusion to the debates and unfortunately have made them less amicable too. However, the authors of this book eschew polarization in their work and, in the spirit of Peggy Wijntuin's motion, look for what binds us.

## QUESTIONS AND REMEMBRANCE IN THE NETHERLANDS AND EUROPE

This book and the project it is based on deal with Rotterdam, but the same questions can clearly be asked of the history of other Dutch towns and cities. This is precisely what is happening, with the media and museums showing increasing interest in such questions. Particular attention has been paid in recent years to the history of slavery. That led to various publications. The book *Op zoek naar de stilte. Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Nederland* ('In search of silence. Traces of the history of slavery in the Netherlands') was published in 2007. Since then, various booklets have been produced for self-guided walks in cities including Amsterdam, Groningen, Haarlem, Leiden and Utrecht. Much of that material was

subsequently collated in *The Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide*. Incidentally, that guide also covers Rotterdam. In 2003, the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam organized its first exhibition on the topic of slavery, with the artist Felix de Rooy from Curacao as the guest curator. He sought to use this exhibition — which is also discussed in this very book — to “enhance the historical understanding and produce the societal emotions that are indispensable in the process of detraumatizing and healing our society.”<sup>6</sup>

As at 2020, there was no comparable publication to the book you are reading now that considers the traces of colonialism in the Netherlands in a broader sense. Amsterdam had *Amsterdam in de wereld* (‘Amsterdam in the world’), aimed at a non-specialist readership, but this book was not just about the city’s colonial history. The Hague too has a long association with the colonial past (it was known as “the widow of the East Indies”), but this has principally been in relation to the *Indisch* community in the city.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it would be no mean feat to summarize all the traces of colonialism in the Netherlands in a single book. This would of course require consideration of the postcolonial migrants and their forebears, and their contribution to Dutch culture. But there is much more. Once you start looking, you soon discover how close the links are between the history and the economic, political and cultural development of the Netherlands on the one hand and colonialism on the other. The Netherlands has countless buildings, monuments, parks, urban districts and scientific and art collections that have some connection or other with the country’s colonial past. Our aim with this book is to show what such a quest can turn up in the case of a single Dutch city — and a major one at that. The fact that we were tasked with doing this by the mayor and aldermen of Rotterdam at the explicit request of the municipal council testifies to a willingness to critically examine the city’s own past, a willingness that could for a long time by no means be taken for granted. This makes Rotterdam a pioneer.

But there have been numerous new developments since. Amsterdam’s municipal council also decided to investigate the city’s history of slavery, partly with a view to issuing an official apology — a gesture that is rather less controversial in the overwhelmingly left-wing capital than in Rotterdam with its more divided political landscape. The results of that study were also published in autumn 2020 and contained equally uncompromising conclusions about the direct involvement of Amsterdam’s civic leaders in slavery and the slave trade in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Like us, the Amsterdam researchers also stress that this history concerns all the city’s

residents, not just those with African roots.<sup>8</sup> Since then, a book commissioned by the city of Utrecht has been published about the involvement of that city, and KITLV has been asked to research The Hague's history of colonialism and slavery. That means the four largest cities in the Netherlands have each commissioned a critical reflection of that city's connections with slavery, or colonialism more broadly.<sup>9</sup>

Another highly symbolic landmark was the exhibition that the Netherlands' most prestigious museum, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, organized in 2021 on the country's history of slavery. The exhibition, which told the story of slavery through accounts of individual lives in Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Netherlands, was opened by King Willem-Alexander — in itself a significant gesture given the Dutch royal family's own complicity in that history — and received a great deal of media attention.<sup>10</sup>

The Netherlands is naturally not the only European country with a colonial past. In other countries with former colonies too, there is increasing recognition of the need to critically re-examine that history — of slavery, of colonialism, or both, and particularly of the ways in which empire left legacies in European cities and rural areas. The academic study of these issues is not new but was initially mainly a British affair, as in the pioneering volume *Imperial Cities* published back in 1999, or in University College London's Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery (established in 2009), which was set up by Nick Draper, Catherine Hall and others.<sup>11</sup> Over the past decade, similar such projects have blossomed not only in the United Kingdom, but equally in continental European countries, partly under the academic flag of the 'New Imperial History'.

A number of aspects stand out.<sup>12</sup> First, most attention by far has been given to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean. This has almost always involved issues of acknowledgement, guilt and apology on the one hand, and a desire to acknowledge the arts of survival on the part of the victims and their descendants on the other. It is noticeable that this repentant rediscovery of a sad history and these hesitant steps towards debates about reparations and compensation are mainly seen in France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands rather than Spain or Portugal, even though the latter two countries have a comparable and even longer history as perpetrators in the system of slavery. This conundrum can to a large extent be explained by differences in the postcolonial history of migration: unlike France, the UK and the Netherlands, the Ibe-

rian countries do not have large communities of the descendants of slaves who can put this topic on the political agenda.

This does not mean that other European countries have looked only at the history of slavery, but neither does it mean there has been criticism everywhere to an equal degree of the broader colonial past. On the contrary, France has seen fierce debates about its colonial past, debates that continue to this day. In the previous decade, this was dubbed the *guerre des mémoires*, a war for the memories of its colonial history, with the French state becoming actively involved. The debate has centred on the colonization of Algeria and its savage war of independence (1954-1962). Other than in discussions of French slavery history, in this debate there is a strong movement, driven by repatriates and their descendants, that stresses what they see as the positive aspects of French colonialism.

A similar emphasis by certain groups on good intentions and positive results can be seen in the United Kingdom, as well as in Belgium, with its relatively brief but highly controversial colonial episode in Congo. Once again, Spain and Portugal are lagging behind where countries' efforts to critically re-examine their own colonial history and bloody wars of decolonization are concerned. However, we should not forget that for decades, the Netherlands too suffered from what the Dutch public intellectual Abram de Swaan once termed "colonial absences": "We don't want to know what we know".<sup>13</sup> Take for example, the fact that at least twenty Indonesians were killed for every fatality among those serving in the Dutch military in Indonesia's war of independence from 1945 to 1949.

Rotterdam's decision to commission a study of its own involvement in colonialism and the history of slavery in its entirety is unique, not just in the Netherlands but more broadly in Europe. To be sure, other European cities, particularly in France and Britain, have focused attention in recent years on their own involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery. In France, this has happened in the port cities of Le Havre, La Rochelle, Nantes, Bordeaux and even Marseille, as well as in Paris as the administrative centre of the colonial system. These cities have now erected monuments, set up permanent museums or organized exhibitions; in all cases, this was accompanied by historical research into the city's involvement in slavery and the legacy today.

In the United Kingdom, the capital London and the main port cities of Bristol and Liverpool took similar initiatives, as did cities such as Hull that played a key role in the abolition of the slave trade (1807) and later

slavery (1834-1838). The bicentennial of that abolition of the slave trade in 2007 was marked by a surge in remembrance ceremonies, studies, exhibitions, documentaries, publications and debates. They clearly showed that this history extended to the furthest corners of the kingdom and left traces everywhere. The history of slavery was and/or is now commemorated in cities including Belfast, Glasgow and Nottingham. It should be noted that the many books published during and after this bicentennial year also reveal the big differences in the perspectives and intentions of the various parties, with inevitable, painful misunderstandings and conflicts as a result.<sup>14</sup> Rotterdam can draw lessons from this experience.

There have been a few initiatives in European cities outside these three countries, for example in Barcelona in Spain and Lisbon in Portugal, but these have largely been private rather than municipal endeavours. What is more, they almost invariably focus exclusively on the slave trade and slavery. The same applies to Denmark (Copenhagen) and Sweden (Stockholm and Gothenburg).

Intriguingly, only Hamburg has come up with an initiative that is broader in scope and therefore closer in nature to Rotterdam's project. It is not widely known that Germany too has a colonial past, which started in the early seventeenth century and ended after the First World War. This history was long 'forgotten' as after Germany's defeat in the First World War it was forced to hand over all its colonies to the British and the French. Now that Germany's colonial past is being dug up again, it has sparked debates about various shocking episodes, in particular the suppression between 1904 and 1908 of the Herero and Nama peoples in German South-west Africa (present-day Namibia); in 2016, Germany officially acknowledged this to have been genocide. That was the context within which Hamburg – a major international port, like Rotterdam – decided to investigate its own role in Germany's colonial history and dedicated exhibitions to this subject. Such 'postcolonial' initiatives have also been instigated in Berlin and Bremen.

Our intention with this English-language publication is not just to raise international awareness of the Rotterdam case study but also to promote a debate more widely about how we can give colonialism and the history of slavery a place in our cities, both in the Netherlands and abroad, in particular in Europe. There is still a lot of useful work to be done here.

## VIEWS: TERMINOLOGY AND WHAT NEXT

There is only one history but there are many different views of that history. It has often been said history is rewritten in every generation. That is true but it is not the whole story. People with different backgrounds — for example, class, ethnicity, gender and age — can ask very different questions, and interpret and experience the past quite differently. That certainly applies to topics such as the history of colonialism, where a dividing line between people with personal links to the colonial past and people without such links is virtually unavoidable. Migrants from the former colonies and their descendants in particular have pushed for this ‘rediscovery’ of the colonial past and a more serious examination of what it meant and means today. Yet until recently most ‘white’ Dutch people knew little of this past, were not much interested in learning more and were particularly averse to being labelled the ‘perpetrators’ in this history. “My parents weren’t even born then!” “My ancestors were penniless farm hands in the Dutch countryside!” And so on. But much has changed in recent years. An opinion poll in early 2021 showed that a comfortable majority of Dutch people (56 per cent) judged the Netherlands’ history of slavery to be “a serious or very serious issue”. On the other hand, only a third felt that the nation should offer its excuses.<sup>15</sup>

The task of historians working on colonial history is not just to try and turn the chaotic and sometimes contradictory mass of data into a coherent and persuasive account but also to reflect on the reliability and perspectives of the various sources of information about the colonial past — whether those are archives and museum collections or the stories of people who lived in the colonial world or their descendants that have been passed down from generation to generation. That is no easy task, as is evident from the heated debates about what constituted the essence of the colonial system, the role of racism and violence in that system, whether or not the Netherlands became so prosperous thanks to colonialism, whether this past is responsible for modern-day traumas, and whether *everyone* in the Netherlands should see colonialism and the history of slavery as something that concerns them and perhaps also something they should be ashamed of. Questions that appear straightforward and factual turn out not to be so easy to answer, and moral questions cannot really be avoided.

The authors of the chapters in this book do not necessarily agree with one another on these matters, but they do share a conviction that thor-

ough knowledge of the colonial past is a *sine qua non* for a meaningful debate about the legacy of that past today in a city like Rotterdam. Just to be clear: their research produced a lot of new information and at times rather surprising findings about an aspect of Rotterdam's history that to date has been relatively neglected. Does that mean Rotterdam was only able to become the city it is today because of this colonial past, or that this past is the only or most important story to be told, or permitted, about the city? Of course not. But it has been a key theme running through Rotterdam's history, as will become evident in this book.

The words we use matter, especially as the topics covered in this book can make emotions run high. The authors of this book and the two other Dutch publications have chosen their words with care. Words such as 'negro' that were considered neutral and quite acceptable not so long ago are now deemed offensive and have therefore been avoided except in quotations (including the credits for the painting on this book's cover as the artist Charley Toorop used this description herself). But what should be done with terminological issues raised more recently, such as the choice between 'slave' and 'enslaved person'? That choice has been left to the individual authors, as we are certain that whatever terms they choose, it will be intended to be respectful.

This book is largely taken up with information and reflections on Rotterdam's colonial past and links with slavery. Only the final chapter focuses on what this knowledge and the associated debates mean for the city today. This is the underlying question that inspired Ms Wijntuin to submit her proposal and galvanized support for the Wijntuin motion but it may also explain the reluctance of the motion's opponents to vote for what was on the face of it a rather innocuous study of the blind spots in the city's history. It is regrettable that while the (radical) right-wing opposition to the motion has been aired in the press and in particular on social media, these parties' spokespeople were not prepared to cooperate with this study, if only to clarify their objections in more detail.

Thinking further along the lines of the Wijntuin motion brings us to issues such as how to give this history a place in education curricula, in museums and last but not least in public spaces. This in turn invariably raises contentious topics about whether or not apologies should be given for slavery, about the statue of Piet Hein (a colonial figure from the seventeenth century who has traditionally been seen in the Netherlands as a naval hero) or about the Rotterdam street and art gallery named after

Witte de With, another controversial Dutch naval officer from the seventeenth century. The decisions on these matters are for politicians to take. Again, the authors of this book do not necessarily agree on these questions. But they all agree with the proposition that it is better to shed new light on this uncomfortable past than to try and cover it up. Or, as Rotterdam's mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb put it, what matters is "the willingness to face up to our history" as a responsibility and "an achievement by our society", as a gesture of "conscientious processing" aimed at "turning the page".<sup>16</sup>

This brings us back to the present day. The past can teach us about the horrors of slavery and colonialism, in Rotterdam's history and the history of the Netherlands more broadly — indeed in global human history. Yet that same history also teaches us about resistance and those who spoke out in criticism of these systems. That is a story in which ultimately, not so long ago, slavery was defined internationally as a crime against humanity and colonized peoples were recognized as having the right to self-determination. That is progress and a reason for optimism. But we can all see that the real world does not yet match this ideal: many people still do not live in freedom, and slavery — whether linked to racism or not — still exists in various disguises (forced labour, child labour, human trafficking with sexual slavery, and so on), even in a city like Rotterdam. There is still work to be done.

## NOTES

- 1 Van Helsdingen, *Daar wèrd wat groots verricht...*; Balkenende, cited in *Proceedings of the Lower House of Parliament*, 28 September 2006.
- 2 The following section is based on Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands*.
- 3 Oostindie, Schulte Nordholt & Steijlen, *Postkoloniale monumenten*.
- 4 The post-war historiography of Rotterdam mentions the city's colonial and post-colonial past in passing but never deals with it as the dominant theme; see for example Van der Schoor, *Stad in aanwas* and Van de Laar, *Stad van formaat*. Colonial and postcolonial migration is barely discussed at all in Van de Laar, Lucassen & Mandemakers, *Naar Rotterdam*. In his later book *Coolsingel*, Van de Laar looks at Rotterdam's Summer Carnival, an event with roots in the Caribbean communities (pp. 214-217), and at how Rotterdam became a multicultural city and the reactions to that change, in particular the rise of the right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn (pp. 224-229).
- 5 For example, Van Stipriaan made considerable use of the archives of Rotterdam trading companies for his study *Surinaams contrast*; I did the same for *Roosburg en Mon Bijou*. Both studies deal with slavery in Suriname and the Dutch stakes in that system.
- 6 Van Stipriaan *et al.*, *Op zoek naar de stilte*; Hondius *et al.*, *The Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide*; De Rooy, *De erfenis van de slavernij*.
- 7 Hageman, *Amsterdam in de wereld*; studies that deal with Dutch colonialism more generally often focus in practice on Amsterdam. On The Hague, see: Captain *et al.*, *Indische zomer*.
- 8 Brandon *et al.*, *De slavernij*, 44-49.
- 9 Jouwe, Kuipers & Raben, *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*. Captain, Oostindie & Smeulders, *Het koloniale en slavernijverleden van Den Haag*.
- 10 Sint Nicolaas & Smeulders, *Slavery*.
- 11 Driver & Gilbert, *Imperial Cities*; <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>
- 12 What follows is discussed in more detail in Oostindie, *Postkoloniaal Nederland*, 207-237.
- 13 De Swaan, 'Postkoloniale absences'.
- 14 See for example Smith *et al.*, *Representing Enslavement* and Hanley, Donington & Moody, *Britain's History*.
- 15 I&O Research, *Excuses voor het Nederlandse slavenrijverleden?*, 2021, [www.ioresearch.nl](http://www.ioresearch.nl)
- 16 Ahmed Aboutaleb, Mayor of Rotterdam, in an answer to a written question from Tim Versnel (member of the right-wing liberal party VVD) on his plea for a national apology for slavery, 30 July 2019 (Rotterdam Municipality, Council information, 7839321).

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