

Leidens Ontzet

What is Leidens Ontzet? What happened in those unsettled times around 1574? To understand this, we have to go back to the siege and the subsequent freeing of Leiden during the 80-year war against Spain. This was the second siege; in October 1573 Leiden was also under siege. The first one lasted until 21 March 1574 when Valdez withdrew his army to fight against Lodewijk van Nassau on the Mokerhei. Alas, on 25 May that year the Spaniards returned with a 5000-strong army for the second siege, which would last until 3 October 1574. Unfortunately, the city fathers failed to use the time between sieges to prepare the city against a possible second siege. There wasn't enough food within the city walls, there weren't enough weapons and even the Spaniards' entrenchments from the first siege were still in place. Valdez had thus no problem closing off the city.

Still, now and then someone managed to escape. They also managed to take homing pigeons to the Prince of Orange in Delft. The Prince sent the pigeons back with messages about a planned counterattack that gave Leiden's citizens hope. Unfortunately, traitors (called 'glippers') also escaped the city to inform Valdez of the situation within the city walls. Famine and the plague had taken hold. Thousands of citizens died. Valdez tried, with sweet promises, to force the city to surrender and many would have liked to surrender. But the city clerk, Jan van Hout, and the leader of the troupes Jan van der Does didn't want to hear of surrendering.

It falls to the Prince of Orange to come to the rescue. He decides to breach the dykes of Holland, which would cause all the low-lying land including Leiden's environs to flood – this should make the Spaniards draw back. It would also mean the loss of much fertile land, for a long time. Unfortunately it takes a long time for the water to rise. It's not until the beginning of October, when the wind turns south and increases in strength, that the water is forced toward Leiden and the Geuzen flotilla with its flat-bottomed boats can make its way to the city.

In the night of 3 October 1574 part of the city wall, near the Koepoort, collapses. The Spaniards, fearing an attack from within the city as well as the rising waters, flee in a panic. The population still can't believe it. A young boy, Cornelis Joppensz, creeps towards the Lammenschans and notices that it's deserted. The Spaniards left in a hurry, because they left a meal, consisting of carrots, onions, meat and parsnips, (later called 'hutspot;) on the fire. And on the morning of 3 October, at 8am, the Watergeuzen, led by De Boisot, enter the town by boat via de Vliet and bring herring and white bread for the famished people - Leidens Ontzet!



(Source: the website of the 3 October Vereeniging Leiden – www.3october.nl , translated from Dutch, with the Vereeniging's permission. Ed.)

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