

# Canals and energy.

## The relationships between canals and the extraction of peat in the Netherlands 1500-1950

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### Introduction

Fens and bogs, peatlands, are in the words of Julius Caesar "land that can not be walked upon and water that can not be sailed on". That it can be used for fuel is first recorded by Plinius the Elder, who in his *Naturalis Historia* (77 A.D.) mentions people who dug lumps of earth which they dried in wind and sunshine and then set fire to in order to cook their food and warm their houses. He writes about a people living in the delta of the river Rhine, now the Netherlands. Apart from this singular quote, almost nothing is recorded about the use of peat for fuel until well into the Middle Ages, and then only from the Low Countries (Flanders and the Netherlands). Yet millions of hectares of peatlands exist north of the Alps.

In the history of the use of peat for fuel it is necessary to make a distinction between the peat digging for domestic use only and the peat production on a larger

scale in a businesslike operation intended for larger markets. We will concentrate on the latter. Outside the Netherlands the literature on peat and its history appears to be very scarce or virtually nonexistent. If this means that elsewhere peat was not used for fuel or that it has never been a subject of scientific study has yet to be ascertained. In either case only of the Low Countries a comprehensive overview can be given.

The reason for the widespread use of peat for fuel in the Netherlands and Flanders lies in the lack of firewood on the one hand and the abundance of waterways (rivers and canals) on the other hand. The

A barge fully loaded with peat in the Hooegevensche Vaart ca. 1910.

relatively low costs of transportation of the bulky material combined with the engineering skills of the Dutchmen in controlling the water and managing waterways were

### Definitions:

*peat*: the geological formation  
*turf*: the material noun for the dried substance

*a turf*: a block of dried peat, predominantly used for fuel

*black turf*: peat used for fuel

*peatlands*: fens and bogs (moors) from which peat/turf is extracted

*dagwerk*: the amount of turf dug by a team of workers in one day, by average 10.000 blocks



