

ABSTRACT

In the Netherlands, opium changed from a legal medicinal drug widely used in Amsterdam up until the twentieth century in an illegal drug primarily consumed by Chinese immigrants after 1920, the year in which its production and sale became illegal.

This paper analysis the spatial effects of this change. It does so by mapping the locations of the opium distribution chain in Amsterdam at two moments in time and by comparing the resulting patterns. The first map depicting the situation in 1742 makes clear that the pharmacies where opium could be bought were almost equally distributed across the city. The second map from the interwar period, shows a large concentration of opium use in the Chinese district and also shows locations where the police enforced the law or where gang related assassination (attempts) occurred. We conclude that the change in the legal status of opium resulted in its distribution network changing from a public endeavour to underground smuggling dominated by Chinese gangs. We see this organizational change clearly reflected in the different parts of the city where these activities took place.



Opium Distribution in Amsterdam from Legal to Illegal: The Spatial Effects on Port and City

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KEYWORDS

History; Mapping; Commodity Chains; Smuggling; Opium; Amsterdam

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Introduction: Mapping Opium Distribution

Today, opium is intimately associated in the public imagination with illegal drugs, Chinese opium dens, anti-social behaviour and drug countercultures. These images have spread since the later nineteenth century through literature, media information campaigns around a 'yellow peril' threatening the West from China, and opium use among Chinese labour migrants. However, before and during the nineteenth century opium was also a normal drug routinely used in Western medicine, and a painkiller, sedative, and sleeping drug used on a regular basis for self-medication among the population of important European port cities such as Amsterdam.

This paper discusses a first exploration of opium distribution in Amsterdam over time. It results from a collaboration between historical geographer Thomas van den Brink (PhD candidate TU Delft) and drugs historian Stephen Snelders (PhD) of the University of Utrecht. In addition, it is part of Thomas' ongoing research to develop a *commodity ecosystem* approach, which consists of a theoretical framework and mapping method intended to identify and explain the long-term spatial relations between maritime commodity chains and port cities.

A systematic comparison of commodity chain maps of different moments in time enables to explain the (dis)continuities in the embeddedness of commodity flows in both the urban and rural landscape. Mapping the development of opium distribution before and after the drug was prohibited provides clear insights into how changes in legal frameworks can impact urban space. In a more general sense, reconstructing the spatial processes of commodity flows over the long term helps to reveal the undercurrents that steer port city cultures and their particular manifestations at specific locations. For this we need maps as they enable us to grasp the spatial nature of the commodity flows and their links with other aspects of the urban landscape. Interactions that are difficult to reconstruct by other means.

The approach used to map the opium chain adapts the *Petroleumscape* concept as developed by Carola Hein (Hein, 2018 and 2019). The *Petroleumscape* is understood as the layered landscapes resulting from the discrete activities, architecture and representations within a single-commodity chain that are locatable in time and space by applying a clear classification. These consists in the basis of extraction/cultivation, transport, storage, trade, retail, and use/consumption. Tested for petroleum, it revealed important insights about the complex dynamics in commodity chains as they impacted specific localities (Hein, 2018 and 2019).

However, the main challenge in creating the opium map series was to design a database classification and legend symbology that was applicable to both the period of legality and the period of illegality. After all, the involved actors, their activities and spaces shifted due to the different legal status of opium. At the same time, it is also possible to see continuity as illegality did not result in the complete disappearance of opium from Amsterdam. The database was therefore designed in such way to be sufficiently consistent *and* flexible in order to identify the spatial impact in different periods.

Opium from Legal to Illegal

In the Netherlands the regulation of opium production, distribution, and use in the drug laws (the first *Opiumwet* or Opium Act of 1919 and the revised second Opium Act of 1928), from a well-respected medicine available without prescription to an illegal drug, had significant impact on the

urban spaces of Amsterdam. The enactment of the Opium Act in the Netherlands followed the development of an international drug regulatory regime that was driven by the United States and the League of Nations. The first Opium Act was enacted in October 1919 in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles and the delegation of supervision over international drug traffic to the League of Nations. Coming into effect in 1920, the act prohibited the production and sale of opium and its derivatives (such as morphine and heroin), and of cocaine. This first Act did not yet mention individual possession and use, but this was criminalized as well in the second Opium Act of 1928 (de Kort, 1995; Blom, 2015).

As stated above this new legislation was primarily a reaction to international developments, rather than to a domestic problem of drug abuse. Import and distribution of raw opium and of preparations including opium had been unproblematic in the previous centuries (see also our discussion of the first map below). The pharmacological innovations of the nineteenth century and the invention and popularization of new drugs developed on the basis of opium alkaloids, such as morphine and heroin, reduced to some extent the popularity of opium among the indigenous Dutch population, but did not end it completely. Until around 1900 use of and medication with opium preparations, either on prescription or as self-medication, seems to have been quite common; witness for instance the many advertisements for laudanum (an alcohol tincture containing opium), poppy sirops, and *specialité's* or secret mixtures many of which contained opiates (or for that matter cocaine, or cannabis) (de Kort, 1995: 28-43). From 1911 onward a new class of opium users arrived in the Netherlands, ironically less than a decade before the enactment of the Opium Act. Seamen from the south of China, from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces, were recruited to work on the Dutch steamships that worked the transoceanic routes between Europe and Asia and the Americas. These seamen settled in the large port towns such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam and created 'Chinatowns'. They also took their own habits and methods of consuming opium (smoked through pipes) to the Netherlands. Opium dens were embedded in the Chinatowns; raw opium was picked up by the seamen on board of the ships, mainly in Turkey, and smuggled into the Netherlands or via France, and there refined into smokeable opium; or alternatively, smokeable opium itself was smuggled into the Netherlands. Chinese 'secret societies' facilitated the smuggling that was uncontrollable for the Dutch authorities (Snelders, 2021a: 53-62).

Associations of images of Chinese with opium use, opium dens, and opium smuggling led to fundamental changes in public perceptions of opium. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century newspapers opium was sometimes discussed in relationship to suicide, murder, or date rape, but the drug was never seen as a danger in itself. This changed in the course of the nineteenth century, as in the western world opium use becomes associated with 'other' cultures that were perceived as potentially dangerous to the global and colonial dominion held by white people. In this 'orientalization' of opium use the user was perceived as losing the essential qualities, such as internal self-control and work ethic, considered necessary for white men to deal with oriental dangers (including the subjected populations of the colonies). By the end of the nineteenth century the association of opium use and the Chinese was established in western discourse as a threat to colonial power and empire (e.g., Padwa 2012). In the Netherlands the arrival of Chinese migrants further stimulated this discourse. An analysis of Dutch newspapers found that whereas before the introduction of the Opium Act opium was primarily associated with medicinal use, after 1920 the associations changed from 'medicines', 'poisons', 'science', 'pharmacies', 'sleep' or 'narcosis', to 'police', 'contraband trade', 'arrested' and 'confiscated' (Snelders, 2021a: 54). As in other countries Dutch prohibition policies did not lead to the eradication of the opium trade, nor to the establishment of large-scale criminal syndicates, but rather to what one of the authors has called 'criminal anarchy' in Amsterdam and other ports: i.e., since demand for opium among Chinese migrants and workers continued to exist, small and flexible networks of inter-ethnic composition (including Chinese, Dutch, Greek, and French smugglers) continued to find ways and methods to supply this demand (Snelders, 2021a).

The Map of 1742

The first map (see below) shows the port city of Amsterdam in 1742, at that time the biggest port city of the Dutch Republic. It had important connections with suppliers of opium in Asia minor (Turkey, Persia) and India. The period is characterized by a non-problematical wholesale supply of opium from the East, and especially from Turkey. Goods including opium entered the city via the *IJ*-inlet that connected the *Zuiderzee* (Southern Sea) located to the north-east of the city with the port. The *IJ* waterfront functioned as the docking ground for merchant ships (shown in dark blue). Transshipment of opium to smaller vessels that could sail the small inner city channels took place on open water. After arriving in the city, chests of opium were publicly auctioned at the *Brakke Grond* (shown in red), the cities' main auction house in the eighteenth century (Snelders 2022).

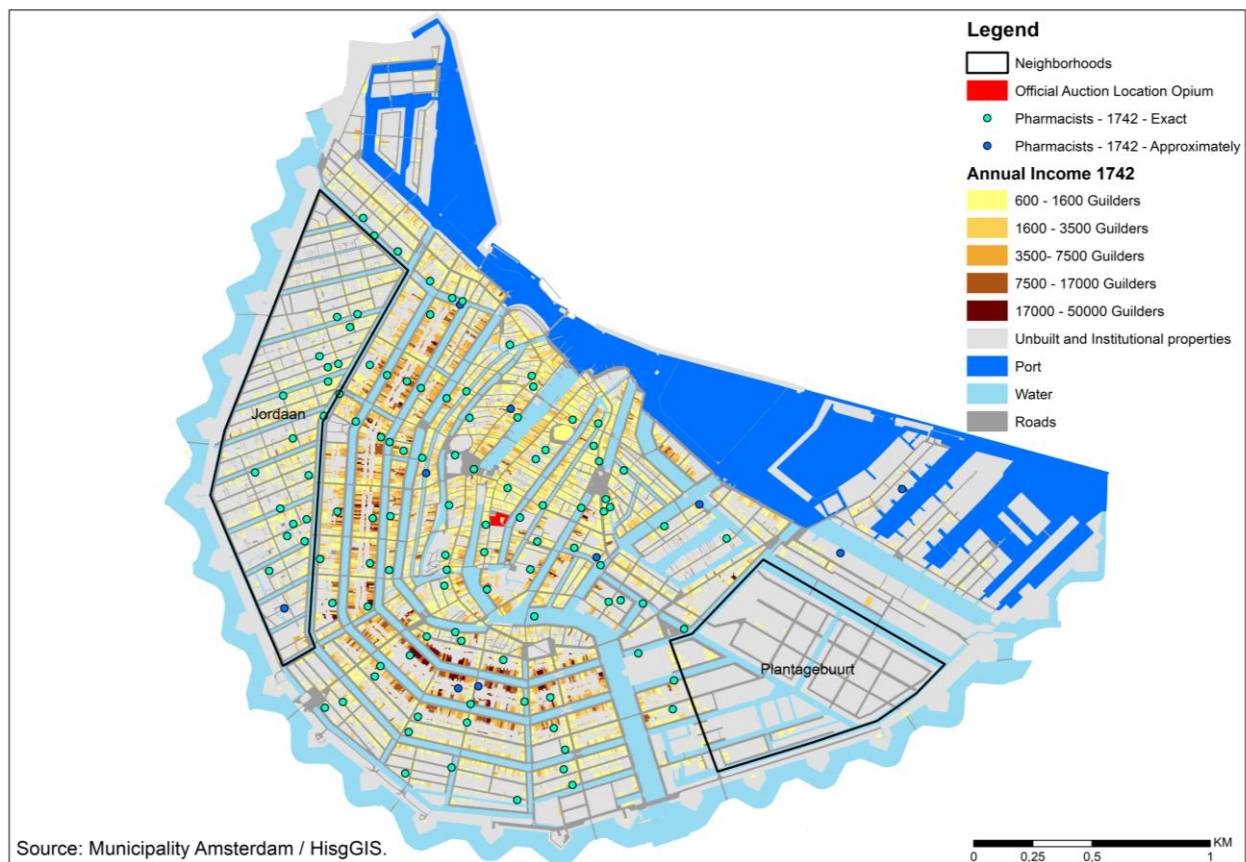


Figure 1. This map of Amsterdam depicting the situation in 1742 shows the port area (dark blue), the auction location (in red) and the spatial distribution of opium retail via pharmacies (blue dots) against a background of wealth distribution indicated by annual income¹. (Map: Annemarijn Douwes, Thomas van den Brink).

The data used for depicting the subsequent step in the commodity chain, namely the locations of opium retail, was provided by the study conducted by Annemarijn Douwes for her master thesis at Utrecht University on the availability of drugs and their imprint on space: *Visiting Pharmacies: An Exploratory Study of Apothecary Shops as Public Spaces in Amsterdam, c. 1600-1850* (2020). The thesis focused on apothecary shops as public places and retail hubs for different kinds of medical and pharmaceutical products in Amsterdam.

Douwes determined the locations of pharmacies based on official records, especially a tax register of 1742 and an official register for pharmacies. Despite the usual difficulties of determining the

¹ Some dots are located in the water, this is due to differences in projected coordination systems.

exact locations due to changes in the urban fabric and the way houses were administrated in historic records over time, she was able to accurately identify 111 pharmacies, and ten more with an approximate location. The blue dots on the map represent the pharmacies in existence in that year in both categories. Since opium pills and opium-based preparations such as laudanum (an alcohol tincture) and theriac were freely available in pharmacies, this map shows that the availability of opium was evenly distributed throughout most of the city.

There were only two significant exceptions. This can be related to the fact that after retail the use of opium took place entirely outside the public sphere. The sources do not contain indications of public opium use. This can help explain that there were few pharmacies in the small streets in the western neighbourhood called the Jordaan. This is a pattern that we also see with other retail stores. The Jordaan was a poor working-class neighbourhood where people had less resources for consumption, and less privacy for use. In the southeast of the city we see that pharmacies were missing in the so-called Plantagebuurt. As the grey colour indicates in 1742 this was still a largely uninhabited area. It consisted of pleasure gardens, orchards, and the botanical gardens. The high representation of pharmacies in the more well-to-do neighbourhoods of eighteenth-century Amsterdam possibly suggests a similar socio-spatial development as signalled by Carola Hein for the spread of gas stations and car-use, in which a new commodity was first adopted by the higher social classes before spreading more widely in society (Hein, 2018).

Unfortunately, there are no data available with which we can determine the price levels of opium and opium-containing products in this period. However, using the method of mapping we can risk forwarding the hypothesis that opium as a medicine (either on prescription or as self-medication) would, because they were retailed in the apothecaries, be primarily available to and used by more wealthier inhabitants of the city, rather than by the poor-working class labourers and sailors living in the Jordaan. To determine this intuition was justified, we used the spatial distribution of annual income from the same tax source used to determine the pharmacies' locations. This first attempt indeed suggests that there was a spatial correlation between the pharmacies and wealthier inhabitants. Moreover, to make a comparison: at the same time the distribution and retail of alcohol and tobacco was much more evenly spread around the city (Hell, 2017; Snelders, 2021b).

The Map of 1935

The second map (see below) was created by Thomas van den Brink and shows the locations of activities and their embeddedness in the urban landscape after opium became illegal. Compared to the pre-illegal period and the first map, some elements remained though they changed significantly. It can be concluded on the basis of the map comparison that opium still found its way to the city. However, the opium after 1920 was transported by large steamships through the North Sea canal that was constructed in the nineteenth century. This canal linked the modern dockland district in the north-east of the city (globally demarcated by the blue line) directly to the North Sea. The Chinese migrant workers working in the boiler rooms of the steamships played a crucial role in the illegal opium trade. This explains why the opium smuggling activities concentrated in areas with a significant Chinese presence. Moreover, key elements of the opium commodity chain of before the time it became illegal disappeared after 1920. These consist in particular of the public spaces: the former auction venue and the pharmacies used for retail. This is for obvious reasons, as opium's illegality is not compatible with (official) public trade. This, however, did not result in the disappearance of opium, only in its concentration in Amsterdam's Chinatown (pink line). As a result of this concentration the area became strongly under the influence of the illegal trade.

Moreover, raw and smokeable opium was smuggled in by Chinese sailors of the Dutch steamship companies through their docks on the newly-built Java- and KNSM-islands in the east of the harbour. A district that was characterized by large scale storage and facilitating buildings with a

lot of industrial activity. From here opium spread into the Chinatown in the inner city, to Chinese lodgings, opium sheds, and gambling establishments: the area was located in the inner city and close to the modern port districts. Since the Chinese were an immigrant group that smuggled, traded and used opium it is understandable that the use of the commodity spilled over from the area in which they worked to the neighbourhood where they lived and spent their free time. We can conclude that in this case of illegal opium trade this is a typical port city relation supported by migrant networks.

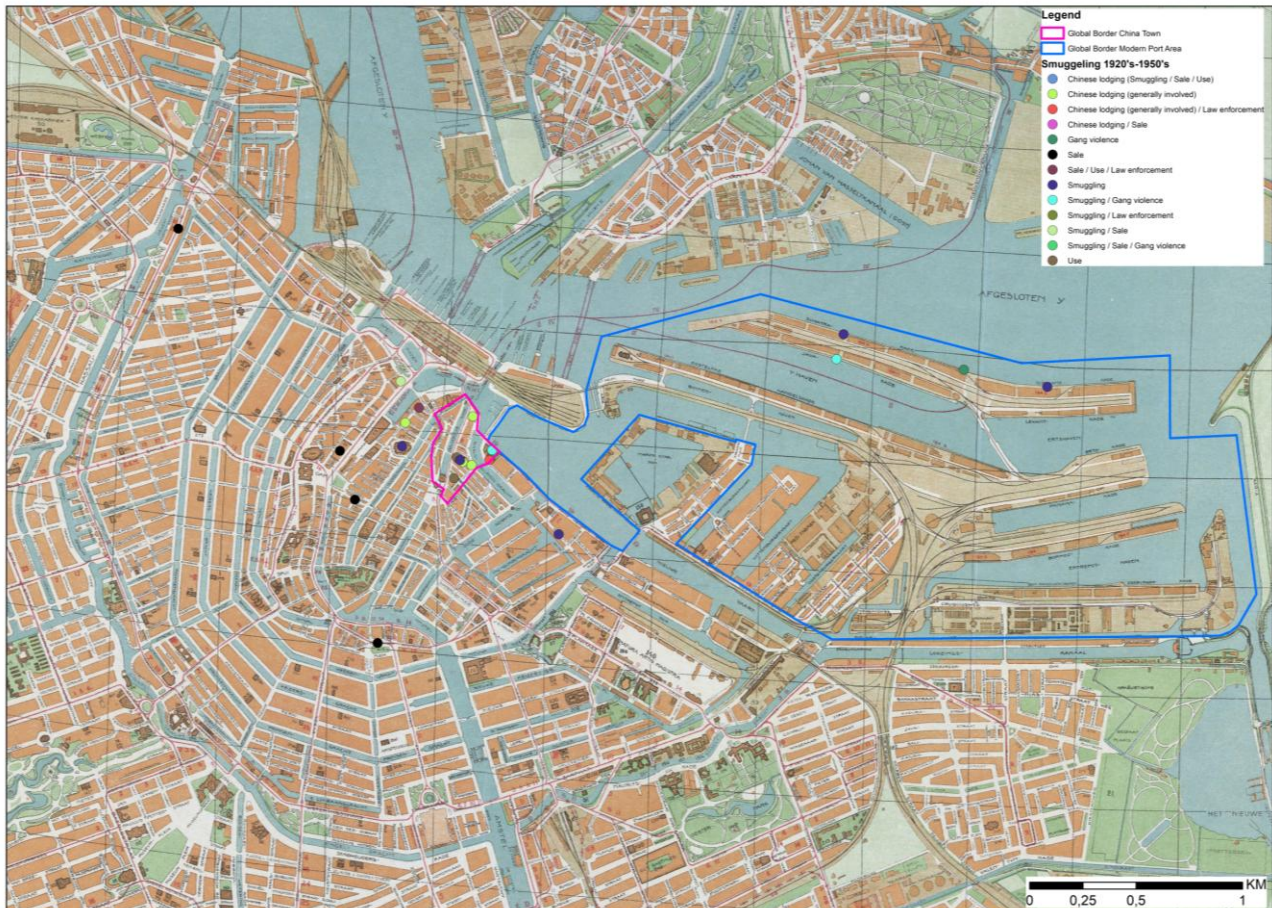


Figure 2. This map shows the concentration of illegal trade and use of opium in the interwar period in Amsterdam. The smuggle was concentrated in the port area depicted by the blue line. Further retail and use were concentrated in the city's inner city close to the port district. The background map is a topographical map depicted for context. (Source: *Plattegrond van Amsterdam*, Evers, N.A.I.M., Van Holkema and Warendorf, 1935, Collectie Stadsarchief Amsterdam: maps of Amsterdam, No. 758, KLAB09781000001).

We know more about the prices of opium in the interwar period than in the eighteenth century, due to mentions in police reports and newspaper articles. Smuggling opium was a profitable business, but at the same time using opium was affordable for people with a low income such as Chinese seamen. Prices would fluctuate, but in the 1930s one could buy a kilogram of raw opium for 27 guilders (almost 240 euros in purchasing power today) from a smuggler in the port. The opium was then cooked to smokeable opium, losing about one-fifth of its weight. In the retail trade opium was sold in packages of two grams, sufficient for two pipes per day (the average consumption of a moderate smoker), at a price of 50 cents (ten euros in purchasing power today). In this example the retailer would have sold the refined opium for a kilogram price of 250 guilders, making a sizeable profit (Comparisons of purchasing powers based on <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/research/projects/hpw/calculate.php/>).

There is also a new element of the commodity chain visible on the second map. The different legal framework led to the emergence of a new group of actors, namely Chinese gangs or ‘secret societies’ that competed with each other and fought the police for their share in the trade. Fights between gangs over control of the Chinese controlled distribution networks and market led to at least a suspected eleven murder attempts between 1920 and 1935 (Snelders 2021a, 53-62).

Apart from this fighting the second map does not yet include the locations of disorder in public spaces caused by opiate users that were so characteristic for the illegal heroin distribution and heroin use in the 1970s and 1980s. While opium distribution was firmly entrenched in Amsterdam, the mapping and visualizations based on the commodity ecosystem approach show that opium use in Amsterdam was still very much a private affair in the interwar period, and did hardly spill over in public spaces.

Methodology

The illegality of opium resulted in challenges for the long term spatial reconstruction of its’ commodity chain and of the interpretation thereof. First, the basic classification of the chain in trade, retail and use, came under pressure, thus problematizing a consistent application for both the legal and illegal phase. Second, illegality also resulted in sources that were ambiguous in different ways. A third issue relates to the representativeness of the data.

The locations in the second map were for an important part determined by the data in police reports, newspaper articles and ethnographic observations that were the basis for contemporary and historical accounts (see the reconstruction in Snelders 2021a). The character of these sources, especially the reason for their creation, had important consequences. First, it can be assumed that much remains out of the spotlight of law enforcement authorities, journalists and other outside observers: the image is far less complete than that of the official list of pharmacies. Second, the information was much vaguer, as locations were often less exact and it was not always clear for what a location was exactly used for. A lodging could also be a den and a gambling house. It was therefore decided not to stick to the classical categorical distinction based on steps in the chain, but instead to combine them in one location and legend-item, namely “Chinese lodgings”. This container category can contain places where a combination of (temporary) sale and use activities took place like room-renting, gambling – more particularly, in casinos – and opium use (opium dens). New categories like smuggling and gang violence also had to be added to represent important new dimensions of the ecosystem.

Despite these limits, the overall spatial imprint following the illegalization of opium in the Netherlands in 1920 is evident. It led to a spatial clustering of activities within the chain. Distribution, retail and use no longer by definition happened at different and discrete places, nor were operated by different actors, but increasingly happened in the same room or building, especially rooms and buildings located in China town and operated by Chinese actors. Of the 28 cases of illegal opium activities, 13 were located in this area and four in the neighbourhood’s proximity². This spatial clustering was also closely related to the emergence of new roles in the chain. Hence, the second map, dated in the interwar period, expresses much more an underground tone of the opium trade. Nevertheless, both in the eras before and after illegalisation the Amsterdam port remained essential for the further distribution of opium.

² These locations were found in our first explorations. It is of course possible that this concentration was biased as a consequence of priority given to this neighbourhood by the Dutch law enforcers. This is something that deserves more attention in further research.

Conclusion

Opium distribution in Amsterdam was part of a broader seascape that connected the city through the port to sources of supply. Cultures of trade and smuggling as well as cultures of use were connected in this seascape by the ships of the Dutch trading and shipping companies, moving not only the drugs and the traders and smugglers but, to a certain point, users and practices and rituals of consumption as well. Once a link between supply and demand was established, opium chains continued to function even despite the illegality, and role of the port remained crucial even though the actors involved might completely change.

Because of the central position of ports in the international drug trade an understanding of the latter by a clear mapping and analysis of the cultural, economic, and social aspects of the ports is essential: witness for example the role of the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp in the international cocaine trade. The spatial analysis of opium flow in Amsterdam from legality to illegality shows that demand for foreign commodities will always find its way through the port, but that the way in which this unfolds can differ greatly. Exactly how this happens depends to a significant degree on functions of (port) city districts and infrastructures, urban design, spatial distributions of socio-economic classes and the availability of private or public spaces and involved actors. Mapping these developments is essential to grasp the exact role of actors and how their actions are spatially anchored. Only then can they be understood in the context of the commodity chain. In this way, a long-term perspective can also contribute to current discussions about the desirability and the consequences of illegality for specific commodities.

Acknowledgement

This paper has been written in the context of discussions in the Leiden Delft Erasmus PortCityFutures (<https://www.portcityfutures.nl/home>) and Intoxicating Spaces teams (<https://www.intoxicatingspaces.org/>). It reflects the evolving thoughts among group members on the socio-spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships. Special thanks for comments and reviews to Carola Hein, James Brown and Annemarijn Douwes.

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VAN DEN BRINK, Thomas and Stephen SNELDERS. 2022. Opium distribution in Amsterdam from Legal to Illegal: The Spatial Effects on Port and City. *PORTUSplus* 13 (November). <https://portusplus.org/index.php/pp/article/view/260>

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