



The Haarlem Shipwreck (1647): The Origins of Cape Town

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Book Review

The Haarlem Shipwreck (1647): The Origins of Cape Town by Bruno Werz. 2017. Pretoria, Unisa Press. Price ZAR399.00. Pp. 171. ISBN: 978 1 86888 839 9 (paperback)

Despite the fact that a quick internet search informs us that since 1500 more than 2500 ships have been wrecked around the South African coast – that works out to one shipwreck for every kilometre of our coastline – no strong school or discipline of marine archaeology has developed in our region to augment our understanding and appreciation of this aspect of our cultural heritage. Bruno Werz, the author of *The Haarlem Shipwreck*, is almost alone in keeping the field of study alive in South Africa, and his work has contributed substantially to our knowledge. His latest publication deals with what is the most important shipwreck in South African history; that of the *Haarlem* in 1647 (often referred to as the *Nieuw Haarlem*) a Dutch East India Company (VOC) standard vessel of about 500 tonnes, completed in Amsterdam in 1643.

Werz, a member of the Royal Society of South Africa, emigrated from the Netherlands in the late 1980s to take up the post of lecturer in Marine Archaeology at the University of Cape Town. He has been a heritage consultant, researcher, and lecturer on marine archaeology for many years. Currently active in the African Institute for Marine and Underwater Research, Exploration and Education (AIMURE), Werz is an elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and a research associate with the University of Pretoria. His interest in history and antiques of all kinds was sparked by his family background, but his focus on marine archaeology began when he joined the team that raised the *Mary Rose* from the Solent in the early 1980s. This English warship sank in 1545, was rediscovered in 1971, and then salvaged to become a museum – a kind of “time capsule” – after a complex exercise. During Werz’s military training he was a member of the Underwater Reconnaissance and Diving Unit of the Royal Dutch Army and he holds commercial diving qualifications. His PhD thesis from the State University of Groningen argued for an interdisciplinary partnership between historical studies and maritime archaeology and he uses these ideas to good effect in this publication.

Although he has worked on many underwater excavations, the material for this book required no specialised diving techniques. Instead, Werz dived into the national archives in The Hague and in Cape Town to produce this, the first, detailed account of the *Haarlem* shipwreck and the documents that emanated from this event. Despite extensive archival and physical searches, the exact site of the wreck, and evidence of the ship and the camp of the survivors, has not been located, and all traces have probably disappeared from the surface in the many reconstructions of Table Bay and its harbour.

The wreck of the *Haarlem* initiated a new era in South Africa – the colonial period – and this makes it of enormous importance to our common history. The ship ran aground on 25 March 1647, on the eastern side of Table Bay, as it was returning to the Netherlands from the Far East with a rich cargo of spices, porcelain and textiles. Two accompanying ships weathered the storm that battered the *Haarlem* and they proceeded

on the homeward voyage. The 62 survivors of the *Haarlem* made the best of the dire circumstances in which they found themselves, salvaging what they could from the wreck as it broke up and staying alive in a makeshift fortified camp they named Sandenburgh through an entire year of the Cape’s harsh weather. They were rescued only in March 1648. Jan van Riebeeck’s refreshment station of 1652 would not have come about had the survivors of the shipwreck not influenced the Heeren XVII, the Directors of the VOC, on their return to the Netherlands that this would be a worthwhile investment.

Werz’s book is extremely valuable for recounting the details of this shipwreck. Chapter 4 explains the methodology of the entire *Haarlem* project and the process of investigation. This follows chapters that provide an explanatory Introduction, the historical background, and an analysis of the documents and their interpretation over the years.

Interesting though these are, the fundamental importance of the book, however, is that it contains the archival documents in Dutch and in English translation on opposite pages (pp. 65–156) in an extended chapter 6. There are seven documents in all, written by Junior Merchant Leendert Jansz. There is a record of the wrecking; a journal kept from 25 March to 14 September 1647; a list of the merchandise that was salvaged; a muster roll of the survivors; and various letters to the commanding officers of ships that passed by. It also contains the document called the *Remonstrantie* that persuaded the VOC to consider the Cape more carefully as a Company stopping point; Van Riebeeck’s assessment of that document; and the VOC instructions in setting up the station. To have made these documents so easily available, to have included a discussion about this primary material, and also to have given the historical context succinctly and expertly, is an important contribution. It singles out this book as a significant nugget of South African history that had immense consequences, and ought to be better studied. The words of these men, recorded at the time, of the weather, their hunting exploits, their interaction with the Khoekhoe, their difficulties with food and shelter, and their care of their employer’s cargo make fascinating reading, unencumbered by hindsight or later accretions.

While Jansz’s daily record is well worth reading for a fresh view of the Cape, it was the *Remonstrantie* that was the more influential document. The Heeren XVII diligently studied this report, written by Leendert Jansz and Mattijs Proot, because they were cautious about investing Dutch capital in far-flung parts of the world in ventures that were unlikely to make a profit. It was, after all, no accident that the Portuguese had bypassed the Cape and sited their revictualling post on Mozambique Island. The VOC were aware that the southern coast of Africa had no spices or precious goods to offer and that money would have to be expended there rather than being accumulated. However, after calculating the pros and cons of the Cape of Good Hope with the *Remonstrantie* to hand, the Chamber in Amsterdam was instructed to secure it as the official rendezvous point for its ships plying their way to and from India and the East Indies.

Janszen and Proot’s *Remonstrantie* makes for interesting environmental and social deconstruction in what was still a

pre-capitalist, but nonetheless globalizing, era. The document was enthusiastic in declaring Table Bay to be a safe harbour, the peninsula abounding in fresh water, fertile soil in which to grow fruit and vegetables, and prolific offshore fishing and whaling, while good timber was available on the slopes of Table Mountain. Making the area even more attractive for the VOC, there were no tropical and other endemic diseases and the local inhabitants – the Khoekhoe herders – were declared to be friendly, interested in trade, keen to supply livestock to visiting ships, willing to work, to learn the Dutch language and to convert to Christianity. In short, before long – according to the *Remonstrantie* – the Cape peninsula would be transformed into a micro-Netherlands, with employees and their families working at intensive agriculture on small productive plots in harmony with their labourers, replenishing the supplies of the ships and thus benefiting the mercantilist principles of the VOC, namely monopoly, minimum investment and maximum profit.

However, as we know, the future turned out to be quite different; the *Haarlem* survivors had misread the environment and its inhabitants. Table Bay is treacherous, and many ships were unable to make landfall there – the Cape of Good Hope was indeed more appropriately named the Cape of Storms. Small-scale vegetable farming with European crops is not appropriate for the climate and soil of the Cape. The Khoekhoe, who were transhumant pastoralists, were not willing cultivators, and slaves were imported by the VOC to meet its labour needs. VOC employees were reluctant to

bow to the economic restrictions of the VOC and either absconded or were freed from their service contracts.

The long-term impact of this socio-economic cocktail was the emergence of a social order and class distinction based on race, an outcome that has had far-reaching consequences for the political, social, economic, and environmental future of our country. Jansz's and Proot's convincing image of a contained post at the Cape did not eventuate, and after a century the refreshment station had become an extended region over which the VOC had little or no control. Simply put, the process of internal colonization had begun.

To have easy access to the original vocabulary and documents of the time through this book (and its extensive bibliography) is extremely valuable. All too often the contemporary record is overlain by secondary and later work that distorts or obscures the original. Werz has augmented his accessible and well written text with relevant maps, woodcuts, and other illustrations that add to the pleasure and interest of the book. One hopes, too, that it will inspire more students of archaeology to explore the marine artefacts as well as those on the land, but also to combine text and artefact to enrich our understanding.

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