

# ***The 'Batavia', an apothecary, his mutiny and its vengeance***

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## **Summary**

In 1629, the *Batavia*, the flagship of the Dutch East India Company, was wrecked on the coast of what is now Western Australia. One of the many survivors was Jeronimus Cornelisz, a Dutch apothecary. He took command on shore, when the captain of the ship sailed on to get help. He led a bloody mutiny in which most of those shipwrecked were massacred, before help could arrive. He was eventually caught and hanged. The old wreck was found in 1963 and many artefacts recovered. Though Cornelisz had little time for practice, he can be seen as Australia's first doctor.

## **Résumé**

En 1629, la "*Batavia*", le vaisseau amiral de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales, s'échouait sur une côte qui est maintenant celle de l'Australie occidentale. Parmi les survivants du naufrage, se trouvait un pharmacien hollandais, du nom de Jérôme Cornélius. A bord, ce dernier prit la commande du bateau quand le capitaine était occupé à naviguer pour rejoindre le port et demander de l'aide. Cornélius se trouva ainsi à la tête d'une sanglante mutinerie au cours de laquelle la plupart des naufragés furent massacrés, avant même l'arrivée des secours. Le chef mutin fut finalement attrapé et pendu. En 1963, l'épave du vaisseau échoué a été retrouvée et de nombreux objets y ont été récupérés. Bien que Cornélius eût bien peu de temps pour pratiquer, il est considéré aujourd'hui comme le premier docteur d'Australie.

Almost certainly the very first doctor to dwell, if not actually practise, on Australian soil was a Dutchman, Jeronimus Cornelisz. He arrived on June 4th 1629, in less than auspicious circumstances, having been shipwrecked on the Abrolhos Islands, 70 kms off the coast of Western Australia, due west of Geraldton and about 500 kms north of the state capital Perth.

The Abrolhos had been first charted and titled in 1619. The name itself means 'open your eyes' or 'look out' in Old Dutch,<sup>(1)</sup> which is just what Cornelisz and his mates on the *Batavia* did not do. But it is what happened after the shipwreck that gave Cornelisz his infamous place in history.

Jeronimus Cornelisz was an apothecary by training and plied his pills and potions in Haarlem in Holland.<sup>(2)</sup> For reasons best known to himself, at the age of thirty, he abandoned his profession and joined the Dutch East India Company (or VOC as they knew it) as an undermerchant. This was a rank on the Company's ships, a kind of second mate. For the rest of his life he does not seem to have used his medical skills, until as we shall see, his very last day. In passing, the motto of the VOC was Jesus is good but Trade is better.

Jeronimus joined the new flagship and pride of the VOC, the *Batavia*, on her maiden voyage. At 600 gross tonnage and 43 metres in length, the ship was among the largest vessels of her time. She was three times the length of any of Columbus's caravels and twice as big as the *Bounty*. As wooden ships go, she was a considerable craft.<sup>(3)</sup>

She carried 332 souls, including many women and children, a company of soldiers in case of pirates, and a rich cargo of coins, jewels and ivory contained in 12

chests. Two hundred and ten of the ship's complement were to die before reaching *Batavia* or Java, as it is now called. In command of the small fleet of three ships, but ensconced on the *Batavia*, was Francisco Pelsaert. The skipper of the *Batavia* was Adriaan Jacobsz.

Despite having an engaging personality and refined manners, undermerchant Cornelisz was at heart an evil man and on the journey to the East Indies resolved with others, probably including Captain Jacobsz, to take over the ship and use it as a pirate vessel. However, before the plans could be put into operation, the navigator made such a monumental miscalculation that they found themselves 960 kms off course in a group of uncharted and treacherous reefs off the Australian coast. Inevitably, they went aground on what was then known as Southland, or Terra Australis Incognita, specifically on the Mornington Reef.

That was June 4th 1629. Forty people were drowned, struggling to try to reach shore. They bypassed the low-lying, so called Traitor's Island, and reached an elevated piece of land, which they promptly called *Batavia's* Graveyard. It is now called Beacon Island.

On June 6th Pelsaert, having found no water on the adjacent low reef islands and not able to land on the precipitous coast of the mainland, elected to sail for help. In doing so he made an unbelievably cavalier decision, he omitted the tiresome chore of briefly returning to the wreck site and telling his plans to those left behind. During the eventual enquiry, his insouciance was never questioned.

Pelsaert, using the only intact long boat, set off for *Batavia* Island in what is now Indonesia. With him went all the senior officers, including Jacobsz, all the Company

officials, and two women and a baby, 47 in all. Leaving no senior people behind seemed a gung-ho decision and was to have fatal consequences.

At least, in common with a number of other well known navigational feats of the days of sail, they made a dead reckoning and covered the 2500 kilometres in 29 days with no loss of life. On reaching his destination, Pelsaert gathered a rescue crew and several soldiers and set sail back again in the *Zaardam* on July 15th. By coincidence, this ship had been in the original fleet, but had become separated in a storm and had made it safely to Batavia.

Meanwhile back at the Beacon Island there were about 250 people, who had initially enough water for two days. Luckily it rained heavily the next day and they were never short of water throughout the ensuing four-month ordeal. Even so 20 died from illness or drinking seawater.

As the most senior man left behind by the trusting Pelsaert, former apothecary Cornelisz took command and rallying his old conspirators, planned to take any rescue ship which might appear and use it for piracy. To facilitate this he further resolved to put into effect the scheme which was to propel him into history - to kill all those he considered useless or uncooperative, which meant of course most of the women and children. He persuaded Corporal Wiebbe Hayes and 46 of the soldiers not privy to his dastardly plan to go to look for water on an outlying island. In their absence, Cornelisz's villains, joyously and incredibly, slaughtered 125 of the remaining passengers and crew.

At first it was done by stealth at night with a sword, followed by a hurried burial in a shallow grave. Some were drowned, but soon any pretence of secrecy was abandoned and people were cut down as they fled in broad daylight. Their terror scarcely bears thinking of, for in truth they had nowhere to flee.

One young man, Andries deVries, pleaded for his life, so to earn this he was allocated the task of cutting the throats of twenty people in the sick tent. He complied, but it was to no avail as later he was chased across the beach and hacked to death. His skeletal body, cutlass wounds, dislocated jaw and all, has since been identified and is preserved in the *Batavia* exhibition of the Maritime Museum in Fremantle.

Cornelisz himself was careful to avoid actually bloodying his hands. For one thing he was of a cowardly nature, and second, just in case things went wrong, he wanted to appear in at least a reasonable light. Lastly, at least I like to think so, he was a medical man.

Several did manage to escape to join the soldiers and Hayes to help build a small fortress on what became

known as Wiebbe Hayes Island, now West Wallabi, the largest of the Abrolhos group. The ruined walls of this unique structure still stand as the oldest building of European origin, possibly of any origin, in Australia. Nearby, they assembled a fireplace to be used to signal to those on the main island if water was found. It was, but the smoke plumes were never answered, a negative response which aroused Hayes's suspicions.

Their fears were well founded and they came under attack. They twice beat off the mutineers and Cornelisz was actually captured during the second raid. If Hayes had despatched Cornelisz then, things would have worked out differently.

Meanwhile back on the *Zaardem*, after several lamentable navigational errors led to wandering among the reefs for over a month, after 63 days the rescue craft at last arrived, just in time to thwart a third attack by the rebels. They quickly saw the game was up and surrendered without a shot being fired.

Jeronimus Cornelisz was bound and brought aboard to face Commander Pelsaert. He tried to blame others for the mutiny, but was taken away to a specially built cell at the tip of the wreck island, Batavia's Graveyard.

Under contemporary Dutch Law if guilt was presumed then a prisoner could be tortured until he confessed. Jeronimus was duly tortured five times, each time retracting his confession when the agony ceased. When eventually the commander thought enough was enough, he was found guilty and condemned to have both hands cut off and then hanged. Other conspirators were more fortunate - they were to have only one hand cut off before hanging. The degree of degradation is moot, but apparently death alone was considered to be too good.

Cornelisz made several attempts to cheat the rope, including, at the very end use of his apothecary skills, an art he had sadly neglected over the recent past. It seems that he had secreted some poison about his person which he now took by mouth. We do not know what it was, but unfortunately for him it was ineffective. All it caused was severe abdominal pain.

With the acute symptoms, Cornelisz must have thought that hanging was the lesser evil, for he asked for some theriac or Venetian treacle, a treatment originally devised in classical times as a universal antidote and which by the 17th century was a compound of many drugs. Doubtless it was a therapy with which the victim was familiar. It worked, but not before he was recorded as having been up twenty times in the night with diarrhoea and vomiting. As Pelsaert noted in his report 'his so called miracle was working from below as well as above.'<sup>(2)</sup>

And so on October 2 1629, seven mutineers were hanged on the adjacent Seal Island, Cornelisz going first, minus both hands and shouting 'Revenge! Revenge!' as the noose tightened. As a chilling warning to the like minded, the bodies were left to hang until the weather and time did their stuff.

Two others had their death sentence commuted, but were abandoned on the mainland where Port Gregory is today. They disappeared without trace, which is a pity as they would have been the first Europeans to have dwelt on the Australian continent itself.

Six weeks later the *Zaardem* sailed for home, carrying most of the *Batavia's* treasure and a gig full of prisoners. Ten of the twelve treasure chests were recovered, one was split open and the contents scattered and one was jammed fast. These and many spilled artefacts such as ceramics, silverware and cannons were left as well as of course the wreck itself.

The curtain on the drama finally came down over 300 years later. Following a tip off by a resident fisherman on Beacon Island, the site of the wreck was found in 1962 by Max Cramer of Geraldton, the mainland community opposite the Abrolhos Islands. Cramer who was looking for the wreck anyway, was told that if all that he and his team wanted was the odd skeleton, there was one under the clothes line of another local fisherman, David Johnson.

Cramer and his companions sought Johnson out, and while looking at this amazing exhibit, he casually mentioned to the searchers that there were at least 10 more sets of bones under his hut. Having shown these to the incredulous Cramer, the fisherman also led the search party to where he thought the *Batavia* wreck was situated. It was, and Max Cramer retrieved a few artefacts which clinched the identity. He and others returned to salvage more, as well as what was left of the old wooden boat itself. The rest, as they say, is history.

If you go today to the Fremantle Maritime Museum, you will see many of these artefacts, including the now preserved wooden side of the retrieved *Batavia*, plus the skeleton of the terrified deVries, the trusting young man who had been mutilated and hacked to death. In the latter 1990s, a replica of the Dutch boat was constructed in Fremantle and sailed to Holland and several European ports to remind us of the mutiny and the part played by the infamous apothecary, Jeronimus Cornelisz, Australia's first doctor.

#### References

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