

HOAXES AND FOLKLORE:

Inscriptions associated with the *Vergulde Draak* (1656) and *Zuiddorp* (1712) shipwrecking events

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Abstract

This article discusses two inscriptions thought to be associated with wrecks of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) ships *Vergulde Draak* and *Zuiddorp*, off the Western Australian coastline. We evaluate their authenticity using comparative studies with similar contemporaneous Dutch inscriptions, placing them within the broader context of pseudoarchaeology and the public preoccupation surrounding shipwrecks. The morphology and manufacture of the lettering argues against a 17th or 18th century provenance. Further, photographic records of the *Zuiddorp* site indicate that its associated inscription is modern. We argue these inscriptions were likely attempts by enthusiasts to ‘participate’ in the shipwrecking stories, or to claim some recognition with regards to the wrecks. Whatever the reasons, they have been used as evidence to support unorthodox hypotheses about the shipwrecks’ survivors, and serve to keep these theories alive in the public imagination.

Introduction

The wrecks of four Dutch East India Company, or *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), ships have been found in Western Australian (WA) waters: *Batavia* (1629), *Vergulde Draak* (1656), *Zuiddorp* (1712) and *Zeewijk* (1727) (Figure 1) (Drake-Brockman 2006; Green 1977, 1989; Ingelman-Sundberg 1978; Pental 1994:11–21; Playford 2006)¹. Each vessel sank while en route to South East Asia, having veered off course and, owing to an inability to calculate longitude, drawn too close to the treacherous coastline. Here the challenging sailing conditions include reefs, strong currents, unpredictable winds and shallow waters, the latter occasionally in conjunction with a rough and inaccessible shore. Considering these hazards, it is surprising that so few VOC ships were lost in these waters between 1602–1795 when the company operated (Bruijn et al. 1979a).

With the massive increase in public and sport diving post-1950s, the quest by divers and adventurers to locate the 17th



Figure 1 Dutch shipwreck locations, inscription sites and place names referred to in the text.

and 18th century VOC ships known to have wrecked along the WA coast began. The fervour—some might say obsession—that drove this pursuit was not limited to submerged sites, but extended to land as well, resulting in several inscriptions believed to be associated with the Dutch shipwrecks being reported. This article discusses in detail two of these inscriptions, placing them within the context of 17th and 18th century inscriptions by Dutch seamen, and examining their veracity as legitimate archaeological artefacts.

Background

Information about the *Batavia*, *Vergulde Draak* and *Zeewijk* shipwrecking events is available in VOC historical records, since some crew members made it to their final destination and reported the loss of their ship to the authorities (National Archives of the Netherlands [NA] 1602–1795). *Batavia* and *Zeewijk* survivors established camps and lived for a time in the Houtman Abrolhos Archipelago before they were rescued and/or headed off towards Batavia (modern-day Jakarta, Indonesia) (Drake-Brockman 2006; Ingelman-Sundberg 1978:7–11). While seven crew members from *Vergulde Draak* completed the voyage to Batavia in the ship’s boat, the vast majority of the survivors, including the captain, possibly never left the WA mainland after the wrecking event and their ultimate fate remains unknown, despite the VOC spending a great deal of time and effort searching for them, losing several ship’s boats and their crews in the process (Green 1977:48–60).

Of the aforementioned ships, *Zuiddorp* was the only one to vanish without word or trace, sometime after it left Cape Town (Bruijn et al. 1979a:2147.3). The VOC refrained from mounting a search for survivors of this vessel, since, for all they knew, the ship could have been lost anywhere between the Cape of Good

¹ The use of ship names in this article is consistent with the spelling provided in Bruijn et al.’s *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (1979a, 1979b, 1987). This publication offers a uniform and modern-Dutch spelling for numerous variations given in historic sources, because names of ships generally were used inconsistently. For example, they often had additional words added to their names, such as ‘large’ or ‘new’. The four Dutch VOC ships that sank along the WA coast are therefore referred to as *Batavia* (the same as in old Dutch), *Vergulde Draak* (old Dutch: *Vergulde Draak*, *Vergulden Draeck*, *Vergulde Draeck*), *Zeewijk* (old Dutch: *Zeewyck*, *Zeewick*, *Zeewijck*, or *Zeewijk*) and *Zuiddorp* (old Dutch: *Zuytdorp*). Geographical names, such as the Zuytdorp Cliffs, or the wording of inscriptions, however, are used verbatim.

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Hope and Batavia. In this case, the archaeological remains of the ship, its armament, cargo and any personal possessions provide the only evidence of the wrecking and the fate of possible survivors. Much has been speculated and written about the fate of the *Vergulde Draak* and *Zuiddorp* survivors, but archaeological materials found on land associated with both wrecking events provide no conclusive evidence of their survival or whereabouts (cf. Green 1977:63–64; McCarthy 2009:3–4, 27–31; Playford 2006:200–232).

The *Vergulde Draak* shipwreck was the first Dutch East Indiaman discovered in Australian waters. After much speculation as to its whereabouts, and several unverified claims of its discovery, it was found accidentally by several men while spearfishing in 1963. Having some knowledge of local maritime history, they soon realised it was likely *Vergulde Draak* (Green 1977:65; Pental 1994:13). After being notified of the discovery, the WA Museum (WAM) commenced its first major archaeological shipwreck excavation at the site in 1972 under the direction of Jeremy Green, with fieldwork continuing in 1981 and 1983 (Green 1977, 1981, 1983).

The *Zuiddorp* shipwreck site is located at the foot of the precipitous Zuytdorp cliffs on the remote and rocky coastline between Gantheaume Bay and Shark Bay. As early as 1927, local residents Ernest Drage and Tom Pepper, and their respective wives, Aboriginal sisters Ada and Lurlie (who will be mentioned again later), had observed material from a shipwreck on the cliff tops, along the scree slope and on the drying reef platform north of the Murchison River mouth, reporting the finds to authorities in 1931 (Pental 1994:14). In 1954, Playford (2006:110–139) organised an expedition to the area and found more relics along the shoreline, including coins dated 1711, which confirmed the identity of the site. Yet, despite being so close to shore in shallow waters, the wreck itself was not seen until 1964 owing to the treacherous surf zone in which it lay. Subsequently, between 1971 and the late 1990s the WAM led extensive archaeological investigations of the *Zuiddorp* shipwreck and adjacent coastline (McCarthy 2006, 2008, 2009).

The 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' Inscription

In 1956, *The West Australian* newspaper reported the existence of a rock inscription reading 'VERGULDE DRAECK 1656', crediting its discovery earlier that year to a local farmer (Figure 2) (Anon. 1956). The inscription is located on the beach near the Ocean Reef Marina at Joondalup, about 90 km south of the *Vergulde Draak* shipwreck site.

Two geologists, John Glover and Brian Glenister, accompanied the journalist to the site to inspect the inscription. According to the article (Anon. 1956):

Close examination by them showed the dark dolomite skin round the lettering had partly chipped away during the engraving. They believed that this skin would almost certainly have been replaced after 300 years. They thought that probably within the last ten years someone had spent hours chipping away at the hard rock.

Glover (pers. comm. 2009) was somewhat surprised when he read this, since he and Glenister had made only a cursory visual inspection of the stone and inscription and had not undertaken

any analysis to positively identify the material. He also recollected that the journalist seemed 'disappointed' when they advised that the absence of significant weathering of the letters suggested that the inscription was carved recently. According to Glover (pers. comm. 2009):

The inscription looked too fresh and the letters did not look as exposed to weathering as one would have expected after 300 years. We simply made a suggestion based on what we saw; it was no more than an educated guess.

Fuller (1991:99) recounts these events in his self-published *Gilt Dragon at Greenhead*, and states rather matter-of-factly in a footnote that the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription was 'chiselled in the rock by the late Harry Turner in 1954'—the author of *The Gilt Dragon Incident* (Paterson Brokensha, 1963).

Ten years later, in November 1966, WAM staff members Sarah Meagher and Vera Ansinnck visited the site and made a cast of the inscription (Figures 3–5). Ansinnck (pers. comm. 2010) remembered being 'a bit sceptical as to whether the inscription was real or fabricated, especially in light of what was going on at that time surrounding the *Vergulde Draak* shipwreck; there were a lot of myths and legends mixed in with the truth.'

In 2009, the inscription surfaced again when the City of Joondalup (2013) requested advice about it from WAM in relation to the proposed Ocean Reef Marina Development. Located within the confines of the planned development, members of the local community had expressed concerns about the inscription's likely destruction during works. In October 2009, we (WvD and MEP) visited the Ocean Reef harbour and relocated the inscription. It was easily accessible, fully exposed to the elements and, based on the 1956 photograph, had remained in situ since its discovery. It had, however, degraded significantly over the past half century; the most distinguishable letters in 2009 were V, E and R (of 'VERGULDE') and D (of 'DRAECK') (Figures 7 and 8).

We studied the nature of the inscription and, to follow up on Glover's and Glenister's informal 1956 assessment, examined the rock into which it was carved. Using a sample measuring ca 3 × 3 × 1 cm collected in 2009 from an existing crack in the side of the inscribed rock, author PJD examined the sample at the CSIRO Earth Science and Resource Engineering Laboratory, Perth, using a variable pressure Philips XL-40 SEM with an energy dispersive x-ray (EDAX) analytical attachment. He thus identified the sample as a friable, poorly lithified, quartz-rich sedimentary rock, with a variable mixture of gravel-, sand- and silt-sized sediments cemented with calcium carbonate, formed along the shoreline within the intertidal zone (Figure 9). The precipitation of the calcite cement occurred through cyclical wetting and drying of the sediment associated with tidal and wave action, as the rock is only a few metres from the shoreline and possibly submerged at high tide and during winter storms. The sample also contains common quantities of halite (NaCl) crystals and rare alkali-feldspar and ilmenite. We conclude that the rock's 1956 identification as dolomite was incorrect and, since friable sedimentary beach rocks such as this erode easily, it is not surprising that a seemingly 'fresh-looking' inscription in 1956 looks so worn and faded today.



Figure 2 Newspaper article reporting the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription (from the *West Australian*, 13 September 1956).

The 'Zuytdorp 1712' Inscription

In 1975, Varney (1975:3) photographed and reported an inscription carved into the red rock face at the foot of the cliff near the *Zuiddorp* shipwreck site. The inscription reads 'ZUYTDORP 1712'; giving the ship's name and year of wrecking. Varney (1975:3) stated:

The carving is normally covered by sand and I personally found the carving. The legend is

Zuytdorp 1712

It is badly worn and eroded and its original depth would have been about 2" (two inches) I believe this carving to be authentic and request it be examined by a competent authority to determine its possible age. If it is genuine I request I may be considered its finder for record purposes and realise there is no question of a



Figure 3 WAM staff making a cast of the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription in 1966 (photograph by Sarah Meagher, courtesy of WAM, MA/W11/009).



Figure 4 The 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription in 1966 (photograph by Vera MacKaay, courtesy of WAM, MA/W11/012).



Figure 5 Detail of the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription in 1966 (photograph by Vera MacKaay, courtesy of WAM, MA/W11/015).

reward being sought. The sand had to be removed to uncover the carving completely but before leaving the wreck site the carving was again covered with sand.²

The cliff face bearing the 'Zuytdorp 1712' inscription is Tamala Limestone, comprised of layers of lithified aeolian sand dunes, with highly altered/recrystallised calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) minerals interspersed with layers of quartz-rich palaeosols. The cliffs contain up to 10 cycles of these so-called aeolianite-palaeosol couplets, and were formed during a glacial period

² A depth of two inches for the inscription is unlikely, especially compared to other (e.g. Nosy Mangabé) examples of carved letters and their much shallower depth.



Figure 6 Approximate location of the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription (yellow star) on the amended concept plan 7.2 of the Ocean Reef Marina Development (01/111/G023A) (City of Joondalup 2013).

in the early Pleistocene. The rock is relatively soft, resulting in cavernous weathering at some levels (Hearty and O’Leary 2008:29, 48).

WAM photographer Patrick Baker photographed the inscription two years later (Figures 10 and 11). Comparing the 1977 photographs to those from 1975, Playford (n.d.) noted that part of the inscription seemed to have been ‘touched up’, observing that the shape of some of the letters and numerals had been altered. Furthermore, comparison of the photographs

showed that some of the letters and numbers had become less obvious during the two year interval, owing to the rapid rate of natural erosion.

As mentioned earlier, prior to Varney reporting the inscription in 1975, Playford had led two expeditions to the *Zuiddorp* shipwreck site in 1954 and 1958 (Playford 2006:110–139). His team meticulously examined the base of the cliff, the talus slope and the cliff top, finding an abundance of archaeological materials associated with the ship’s wrecking; however, they



Figure 7 The ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscription as seen in 2009 (Photograph by Patrick Baker, courtesy of WAM).



Figure 8 Detail of the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscription, north of Mullaloo Beach, 2009 (photograph by Patrick Baker, courtesy of WAM).

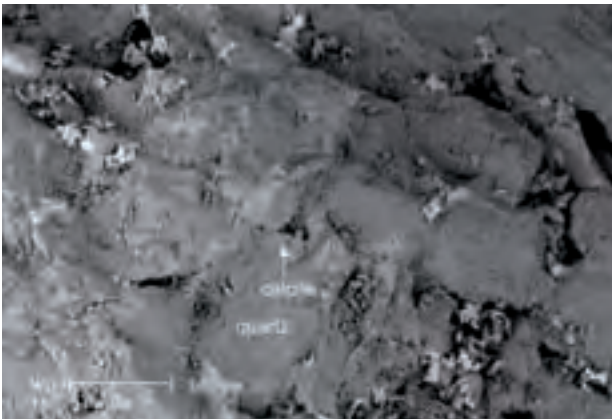


Figure 9 Micrograph of sample of the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscription rock.



Figure 10 ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscription in 1977 (photograph by Patrick Baker, courtesy of WAM, MA/ZUYDB/93).



Figure 11 Close-up of the ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscription in 1977 (photograph by Patrick Baker, courtesy of WAM, MA/ZUYDB/92).



Figure 12 Photograph of the same location shown in Figure 10 taken during the 1956 expedition, showing John Stokes descending into a blowhole (photograph by Todge Campbell, courtesy of WAM, MA5022).

found no inscriptions. Playford (n.d.) made two subsequent visits to the shipwreck site, 'each for one day, in 1959 and 1963, without sighting any inscription on either occasion'. During the 1954 expedition a photograph was taken of a team member descending into a blowhole at the base of the cliff at the same location as the inscription (Figure 12). The rock face shown in the photograph is clearly devoid of any inscription, establishing that the inscription was not present prior to 1954. Furthermore, Playford (n.d.) photographed the inscription in 2007, at which time it was barely discernible, evincing the substantial erosion that the rock surface in that locality has endured since 1954; we consider it likely that all traces of it will fade completely in the coming years.

Dutch Postal Stone Inscriptions from the 17th Century

Although the photographic and documentary records described above establish without doubt the fact that the 'Zuytdorp 1712' inscription is a modern product carved sometime in the second half of the last century, the question remains as to the authenticity of the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription. Its physical condition notwithstanding, the best means of gauging the inscription's genuineness is through compositional analysis of the inscribed message and morphological examination of the individual carved letters and numerals. This is done by comparing it to known 17th century inscriptions made by Dutch seamen, recorded in archaeological and archival records.

It was common practice for early Dutch and European seafarers to leave formal inscriptions to mark their passages. These inscriptions served variously as landmarks, to assert their nation's claim to the land, or as postal messages (Moree 1998:32–44, 162–169; Sigmond 2003, 2006:78; see also Bijlsma 1926, 1927; Mostert 1986; Schoonees 1991). The latter were basically rupestrian messages that sometimes also included notices regarding letters left for pick-up by crews of later ships. Postal stone inscriptions such as these were part of a communication system that European seamen established for relaying information about their ships' whereabouts when voyaging far from home—in effect, they were the precursors of the modern-day mailbox. In locations where stone was unavailable, other materials were used. Not only do these postal inscriptions serve as visual reminders of the earliest Dutch voyages across the Indian Ocean, they also provide tangible links to individual ships, voyages and people.

Of all inscriptions found on postal stones, four Dutch and two English inscriptions specifically refer to paper letters left beneath the stones or in the immediate vicinity, while the rest are simply stand-alone messages. Valentijn (1726) described the early Dutch practice of leaving correspondence underneath stones; however, it soon became clear to the VOC that other nationalities arriving at the same locations were confounding their Dutch rivals by recording their messages and collecting their mail for the intelligence they contained. The VOC responded by revising its strategy and resorted to employing local people in the exchange of its proprietary mail (Valentijn 1726:123–124). Eventually, Dutch trading posts, such as Batavia (1619) and Cape Town (1652), grew into well-organised communities with permanent populations, stores

for reprovisioning ships, proper shipyards for maintaining and repairing vessels, and designated postal services for ships' crews and VOC officials (Valentijn 1726:123–124). Thus, the need for more remote and uninhabited anchorages that served also as *post restantes* waned.

Archaeological remains of Dutch postal inscriptions have been found on at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa and on Nosy Mangabé, in the Bay of Antongil in Madagascar, all dating to between 1601 and 1657 (Bijlsma 1926, 1927; Moree 1998:32–44, 162–69; Mostert 1986; Schoonees 1991). The inscribed messages, like those left by Portuguese, English and French contemporaries, include details such as names of ships, skippers, senior merchants, company officials or higher-ranking crew members, dates of arrival and departure, and other particulars (Gosse 1980:37–38; Schoonees 1991). The remote anchorage on Nosy Mangabé was one that remained in service during at least the first half of the 17th century. Ships' crewmen with masonry skills cleared and prepared rock faces and chiselled messages into large stone outcroppings that flank the small beach known still today as Plage des Hollandais. At the base of these rocks, they also left paper letters, carefully wrapped in layers of canvas and tar and sealed inside lead envelopes. The crew of the next Dutch ship to visit the anchorage would record the message on the rock and collect the buried letters.

The Nosy Mangabé Inscriptions

Two authors (WvD and MEP) recorded and photographed more than 40 Dutch inscriptions and iconography at Nosy Mangabé in April 2012, and are now transcribing, translating and interpreting them (a full report is in preparation)³. The inscriptions were left by officers and sailors of at least 13 different VOC ships that anchored off the island to reprovision and rest, and include both official communications and unofficial notes left by seamen who had their names chiselled into the stone, much as someone today might write, 'Hendrick was here' (Figure 13).

For example, one of the Nosy Mangabé inscriptions reads (Figure 14):

DEN 6 FEB 1626
VAN BATA TWAP
VAN ROTTRM GEARIVE
24 IVNI VRTROCKE [#?]
COMMANDR P CORNE
OPPRCOOPM WINCOOP
SCHIPR STIVESANT
OP WAS

On 6 February 1626, the ship *Wapen van Rotterdam* arrived from Batavia. It departed on 24 June. Aboard were Commander P[ieter] Corne[liszoon], Chief Merchant [Johan Jacobszoon] Wincoop [and] skipper [F.] Stuyvesant.

Another reads (Figure 15):

³ The authors were accompanied by Jayne Fyfe, a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Australia, and assisted by locals Seraphin Safianasy, an official guide from the Madagascar National Parks Service, and boat captain Mora Nery Tanambao.

Ao 1625
 OP DEN 10 APRIL IS T SCHIP
 MIDDELBVRCH HIER GECOM
 MASTELOOS DEN 25
 OCTOBER VERTROCKEN
 NAE PATRIA COOPMAN
 A VAN DER EICK
 SCHIPPER IAN
 DIRK IACOB CONSTANT
 AB[?]

On 10 April 1625, the ship *Middelburg* arrived here without masts. It left for home on 25 October. [Aboard were] Merchant A[driaen] van der Eyck, Skipper Jan [Willemszoon van] Dijck, Jacob Constant ...⁴

Other Dutch Inscriptions

Perhaps the two best known examples of early Dutch inscriptions in Australia are the inscribed pewter plates left on Dirk Hartog Island by the island's namesake in 1616, and by Willem de Vlaming in 1697 (Gibbs 1996; Schilder 1976:67–71, 93–95, 183, 187; Sigmond 2003, 2006); however, they certainly were not the only such inscriptions left by Dutch seafarers along the Australian coast in the 17th century.

In January 1623, Jan Carstenszoon set sail from Ambon Island in the Moluccas, Indonesia, with the ships *Pera* and *Arnem*, to explore the South Land, charting a similar course as Willem Janszoon had with *Duyfken* in 1606 (Carstenszoon 1623; Parthesius 2006:66). Like Janszoon, Carstenszoon (1623) missed the Torres Strait and instead sailed down the western coast of Cape York. Carstenszoon arrived at a river on 24 April and named it Staten, recording in his journal:

... since by resolution it has been determined to begin the return-voyage at this point, we have, in default of stone caused a wooden tablet to be nailed to a tree, the said tablet having the following words carved into it: 'Anno 1623 den 24n April sijn hier aen gecomen twee jachten wegen de Hooge Mogende Heeren Staten Genl.' [A. D. 1623, on the 24th of April there arrived here two yachts dispatched by their High Mightinesses the States-General] (Carstenszoon 1623:39).

Carstenszoon's wooden tablet has never been found, though some have suggested that it was erected in the vicinity of the present-day Gilbert River, which lies less than 20 km south of the river now bearing the name Staaten (Brunton 2006:10; Leupe 1868:45). It is possible Carstenszoon's tablet was removed by local Aboriginal people, but, even had it remained undisturbed, it is unlikely to have survived long, since the climatic conditions, regular fire events and preponderance of termites in the region are detrimental to organic materials. Regardless, the tablet inscription is notable because of its similarity in content to

⁴ On its way back to the Netherlands, *Middelburg* stopped at Table Bay, South Africa, where its crew left a parcel of letters. The correspondence was eventually collected by the VOC ship *Leiden* and delivered to Batavia. Today they reside in the VOC archives in The Hague. Tragically, *Middelburg* did not fare as well as its letters and never returned to its homeport. After its port call at the Cape, the ship was engaged by two Portuguese carracks near St Helena Island in the South Atlantic and subsequently lost (Bruijn et al. 1979b:5170.2).



Figure 13 'Folckert Jansen van Swol' inscription [Folckert Jansen from Zwolle]. Rock A, Plage des Hollandais, Nosy Mangabé, Madagascar (photograph by Mark E. Polzer).



Figure 14 Inscription left by crew of VOC ship *Wapen van Rotterdam* in 1626, Nosy Mangabé, Madagascar (photograph by Mark E. Polzer).



Figure 15 Inscription left by crew of VOC ship *Middelburg* in 1625, Nosy Mangabé, Madagascar (photograph by Mark E. Polzer).

other ship communication markers that mention vessels by name, the times and dates of their arrivals and departures, and other particulars.

De Vlaming also posted several wooden tablet inscriptions during his 1696–1697 voyage coast, and left tablets on Tristan da Cunha Island in the South Atlantic Ocean, and on Amsterdam and Saint Paul Islands in the southern Indian Ocean (Schilder 1976:92). The latter tablet inscriptions were recorded by the crew of another ship in his fleet that was trailing a day behind. The first, located at the northern end of Saint Paul, bore the message:

Eastward: Ship the *Geelvink*, Skipper Willem de Vlaming, Ao 1696

Westward: The Hooker the *Nyptang*, and the Galion the *Wezeltje*,
on the way to the South-land

November 29 [1696] (Anon. 1701:8–9).

The second, set on Amsterdam Island, read:

The Ship the *Geelvink*. [16]96. Willem de Vlaming. The Hooker
the *Nyptang*, and the Galion the *Wezel*, the three ships on their
way to the South-land, the 3rd December (Anon. 1701:11).

In another example, the skipper of the VOC ship *Nachtglas*, Jan Jacobszoon, recorded in his journal that on 10 January 1656 he left a wooden tablet at Tristan da Cunha to verify his time there, having arrived on the island five days previously (Schilder 1976:35).

Critiquing the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ Inscriptions

Form and Content

All of the known Dutch postal inscriptions, whether on stone, pewter or wood, provide the name of the ship and/or of the persons in charge (skipper, officer, merchant), the date of arrival and/or departure, and additional information about the voyage. This information was a sufficient, if minimal, account in the event that the crew were unable to return to civilisation to report on their journey (Sigmond 2006:79; Stanbury 2006:80). As such, compositionally, the simple ‘ship name–date’ formulation seen in the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscriptions is inconsistent with this construction. Within the entire corpus of authentic archaeological postal inscriptions and those recorded in historical accounts, there is not one example of an inscribed message that shows only the name of the ship and a date; the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscriptions stand alone in this regard.

Further, while some of the known Dutch postal inscriptions detail disastrous events, to our knowledge none from the period of interest is associated with a shipwrecking event. The closest parallel is a paper letter in a powder flask discovered in the shipwreck survivors’ camp of the 1596–1597 expedition of Willem Barents and Jacob van Heemskerck in Nova Zembla (Sigmond 2006:79).

Style

The majority of Dutch postal stone inscriptions are formal in style and structure—they consist of block capital letters and

almost all visible letters have distinct serifs (Figure 16). The craftsmen created the lettering by making deep incisions with a sharp implement, such as a chisel, which was hammered to create precise cuts—a technique also seen on gravestones or the façades of buildings. The deepest incisions could be a few centimetres in depth and had sharp triangular profiles, suggesting a two-stage process with hammer and chisel. Some inscriptions have dividers between the words, such as the small ‘x’ marks in the 1626 *Wapen van Rotterdam* inscription (Figure 14), the dots in the ‘Folkert Iansen van Swol’ inscription on Nosy Mangabé (Figure 13) and the 1635 *Amsterdam* inscription at the Cape of Good Hope (Figure 17).

Typically, the rock faces to be worked had been dressed to create smoother surfaces in which to carve the inscriptions, which had the effect of making their presence more readily apparent to an observer. The worked surface of the 1626 inscription left by the crew of the VOC ship *Wapen van Rotterdam*, for example, is highly visible against a darker raw rock face, with the dressed inscription area having a much lighter appearance (Figure 14).

Both the ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ and ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscriptions are carved directly into the raw surface of the rock (i.e. they are not chiselled on cleared surfaces), their letters and numbers have no serifs, and they do not have triangular sections. Moreover, they have different morphologies than the letters and numerals from known postal stone inscriptions; this is particularly apparent in the forms of the V and U in the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscription. In the 17th century, the letterforms V and U were both chiselled as ‘V’, with the junction of the stem and arm forming a sharp angle, and the upper extremities of the stem and arm having distinctly carved serifs, as seen in Figures 14 and 16–20. In the case of the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ inscription, the V has a rounded bowl instead of the sharp angular junction that the letter has in all of the 17th century Dutch postal stone inscriptions and sailor name carvings. Furthermore, the U letterforms in the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscriptions both have a rounded bowl, rather than a sharp ‘V’ shape. In all of the known 17th century Dutch postal stone inscriptions, there is only one example, from South Africa, of a letter ‘U’ with a rounded bowl (Figure 20b) (Moree 1998:34–37, 162–69; Schoonees 1991:48–56). The morphologies of ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ letters are thus clear indicators that the inscriptions are modern.

Other Shipwreck-Related Inscriptions in WA

In addition to the two inscriptions already discussed, other so-called early European sailor inscriptions have been reported in WA. Most have been shown to be hoaxes of modern manufacture (McCarthy 2011), and it is unlikely that the others are related to any ship or shipwrecking event (Bednarik 2000; Henderson 1980:11–12; Murray 2004:99–100). To date, not one has been confirmed as authentic.

In February 1935, for example, the *Sunday Times* reported on a possible Dutch shipwreck in Victoria Harbour, near Esperance, based on a rock inscription reading ‘1600’ (Anon. 1937; Douglas 1937; WJB 1935; see also Henderson 1980:11–12). In a 1937 letter to *The West Australian* (24 February 1937b:14), Alfred Douglas claimed to have seen the inscription in 1884 (‘53 years ago’ to the month), when Campbell Taylor had led him and three other



Figure 16 Inscription left by crew of VOC ship *Ter Veere* in 1632, Nosy Mangabé, Madagascar (photograph by Mark E. Polzer).



Figure 17 Inscription left by crew of VOC ship *Amsterdam* in 1635, Cape of Good Hope, South Africa (photograph by Jaco J. Boshoff, courtesy Iziko Museums of South Africa).



Figure 18 Postal stone inscription left by the crews of VOC ships *Nassau*, *Wezel* and *Galiasse* in 1632, scale = 19 cm (photograph by Jaco J. Boshoff, courtesy Iziko Museums of South Africa).

men to the site. Apparently, some local Indigenous residents had shown the inscription to Taylor years earlier, and shared with him their story of a large ship that sank a long time ago in the area (Douglas 1937; WJB 1935; see also Henderson 1980:11–12). Douglas claimed that the only part of the inscription they could make out was the date, but that there was more, possibly a name, that was rendered indistinguishable by erosion. A Dutch man in their group believed that the worn part was the name of a ship, possibly Dutch. The only Dutch ship known to have sunk in the area is *Batoe Bassi* in 1880. As Henderson (1980:12) aptly noted, '[t]he rock carvings, when considered in isolation, cannot be taken as substantive evidence of any shipwreck.'

In February 1971, a schoolteacher and journalist from Carnarvon, Anthony Bell, reported finding 'an interesting rock pile, with unusually fine hand carved lettering upon them [and a date that] appears to be iether [sic] 1630 or 1680, but the lettering is not well defined, being weatherd [sic] away', and drew a map locating the feature south of Point Cloates (WAM Archive MA-209/80 as cited in McCarthy 2011:53). The inscription included the name of a vessel and the names and ages of two participants in the *Batavia* mutiny. At the behest of the WAM, maritime historian Frank Broeze, who was fluent in Dutch, examined the sketches. He found no spelling of any discernible word to be inconsistent with 17th century Dutch, although he could not be certain about several words. As for names of individuals, all were consistent with the events that had transpired in the Abrolhos Islands. Broeze noted,



Figure 19 Letters from the inscription left by the crew of VOC ship *Amsterdam* in 1635 (a) V and (b) U (photograph by Jaco J. Boshoff, courtesy Iziko Museums of South Africa).

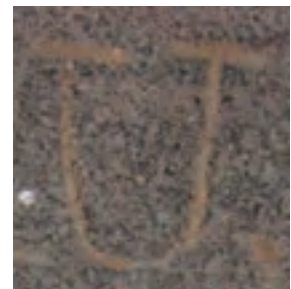


Figure 20 Letters (a) V and (b) U from the inscriptions left by the crews of VOC ships *Nassau*, *Wezel* and *Galiasse* in 1632. Note the guidelines used to ensure an even size of letters (photograph by Jaco J. Boshoff, courtesy Iziko Museums of South Africa).

however, that all of this information was readily accessible in the literature. He also called attention to the similarities with a 'bushman's tale' discussed by Drake-Brockman (2006:285), 'that on the cliffs above or near Yardie Creek an inscription on a rock had been seen', although Drake-Brockman linked it to the 'unknown and rather uncertain voyage of Jacob Remmessens 1615–1616' (McCarthy 2011:53). In the end, Broeze could find no compelling reason, based on the information provided, to either discredit or confirm the inscription's authenticity, concluding only that it warranted further investigation.

In response, WAM sent two expeditions to search for the rock pile and inspect the inscription. On each occasion, Bell was contacted and asked to guide the team, but both times he was unable to do so. The expeditions made a thorough search of the area between Point Cloates and Maud Landing, inspecting every rock pile, 'whether there was a track to it or not', but found nothing matching Bell's report, nor any inscription (McCarthy

2011:53). In the end, it was concluded that the rock inscription did not exist, or was located in a different area, and that nothing more could be done until more positive evidence was provided. Perhaps most tellingly, it was determined later that Bell was involved in several other shipwreck-related hoaxes and illegalities (McCarthy 2011:53).

In 1977, Ronald Winterton informed WAM that he had found an inscribed circle of stones on private property at Wannamal, some 115 km north of Perth and 50 km inland. In association with the stones he found a piece of iron, a corroded axe-head and a well, and he believed that the *Vergulde Draak* logbook and perhaps a treasure chest were buried under the stones (WAM Archive MA9/79/4, 10 and 16 January 1978). On two occasions shortly thereafter, WAM staff inspected the site, accompanied by Winterton and the property owner. Winterton was unable to produce any inscription on the rocks, although he continued to maintain that there was one, but that it was visible only in photographs. After investigation by WAM staff, it turned out that the rock pile was one of two heaps of earth and granite rubble left in 1969 or 1970 by Telecom work crews when they laid co-axial cable through the area and piled up the rubble blasted from the cable trench. Some of the rocks preserved remains of drilled blasting holes, while the ground around the pile still bore the marks of heavy machinery. There are several old wells on the property, which are either Benedictine or from early settlers. The iron scrap could not be dated, but likely also was from early settlers (WAM Archive MA9/79/4, 10 and 16 January 1978, 7 February 1978).

Discussion

The ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’, ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ and other similar inscriptions share a common association with ‘tales of treasure’ and early Dutch shipwrecking events. They were reported by local amateurs or enthusiasts at a time when many people were captivated by the mystery and excitement surrounding the Dutch shipwrecks and their survivors (Henderson 2002:156–162). Major (1859:45–74, 77–96, 179–186) detailed the shipwrecking events of *Batavia*, *Vergulde Draak* and *Zeewijk* and provided the public with accessible historical accounts of the 17th and 18th centuries, leading to more than a few obsessions held by individuals. For over a century, numerous people exhausted time, effort and money searching for clues and treasure left by the *Vergulde Draak* survivors (Henderson 2002:157–158). Occasional finds, such as the silver coins and iron hinges stumbled upon in 1931 by the Edwards brothers near modern-day Guilderton, kept the flames of enthusiasm burning brightly with dreams of riches from buried treasure (Henderson 2002:158–159).

The public’s captivation continued after the shipwrecks were located in the 1960s and still looms large today, focused mainly on: (a) searches for additional VOC shipwreck sites; (b) on the fate of the two *Batavia* shipwreck mutineers who were sentenced and marooned on the WA mainland; and (c) on the fate of the *Vergulde Draak* and *Zuytdorp* shipwreck survivors (Amalfi 2012; Anon. 2012; Coulthart 2012a, 2012b; Gerritsen 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012; Playford 2006:200–232; Van Zanden 2012). Enthusiasts propose hypotheses based predominantly on selective circumstantial evidence and folklore, and none have taken a scholarly research approach, nor provided empirical data

to support their claims. Virtually any exciting theory relevant to these matters is guaranteed to find an eager audience and willing outlets in local newspapers or other media (Amalfi 2012; Anon. 2012; Coulthart 2012a, 2012b; Pownall 2012; Weber 2013).

The inscriptions, inauthentic or not, are part of the broader story linked to the survivors of the *Vergulde Draak* and *Zuytdorp* shipwrecking events. Public interest fuels the appetite to pursue legends and solve mysteries, and the need for resolution of these mysteries creates a ready supply of ‘researchers’ and writers prepared to provide them, often by proposing highly speculative interpretations of real data or, in the extreme, through outright fraud.

To be successful, archaeological frauds ordinarily need not be clever, well conceived, or convincing—indeed, they may be transparently unconvincing to professional scientists and yet still be successful. What is key to the success of an archaeological fraud—in fact, it is at the core of much of pseudoarchaeology—is that it fulfils a need, it meets an expectation, it provides a desired solution, or it supports a preconceived notion about the human past (Feder 2008:1896–1897).

The ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscriptions may appear clumsy and unconvincing to scholars, but such scientific scepticism is irrelevant to members of the public who embrace the notion that they are evidence of the survival of Dutch shipwreck survivors (cf. Dive-Oz 2009; Lucky Eddie 2010).⁵ The public’s zeal to authenticate these inscriptions energises the greater quest to prove that shipwreck survivors established themselves in WA centuries before official European colonisation, and built relationships with the local Indigenous populations.

The locating of the *Vergulde Draak* and *Batavia* shipwreck sites in 1963 led to legislation in 1964 protecting historic shipwrecks, and eventually to the *WA Maritime Archaeology Act 1973* and the *Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. Prior to legislative protection of the shipwreck sites and their survivor camps, discovery and ownership of wreck material was contested and possibly the ‘Vergulde Draeck 1656’ and ‘Zuytdorp 1712’ inscriptions may be seen as provocations to, or motivated by, political concerns (Pendal 1994; Robinson 1980).

As aptly stated by Lovata (2007:9), dismissal of pseudoarchaeology or inauthentic archaeology, in this case the inscriptions, as merely pseudoscientific is a ‘failure to recognise their social roles. The inauthentic can still be meaningful to people engaging with the past’. When viewed from a public context, the inscriptions touch upon the aspirations of people to find anything associated with early European shipwrecks and their survivors. They reinforce the folklore that has developed around archaeological ‘evidence’ that predates official European settlement of the continent in 1788. They also are embedded in a profound yearning (by some) for belonging and the desire for corroboration that Europeans have been living and co-existing with Australia’s Indigenous populations for much longer than traditionally accepted.

⁵ It should be noted that seamen and soldiers aboard VOC ships were not exclusively Dutch, but also included Danes, Norwegians, Poles, Jut Landers, Swedes and people from modern-day Germany (Gaastra 2003:88).

It is likely that most perpetrators of these imaginary inscriptions and related hoaxes are keen to make a significant contribution to historic knowledge and have a great passion for history, science and adventure. Their motivations also may be attributable to the need to explain certain historical situations regarding local Indigenous populations. According to Feder (2008:1902):

Underpinning much of pseudoarchaeology is an underestimation of the capabilities of ancient people, particularly in terms of their ability to develop, by themselves, complex technologies, especially those that require the application of sophisticated mathematical concepts, engineering principles, and architectural skills. Pseudoarchaeological claims, in fact, flourish in instances where the archaeological record clearly reflects great achievements in antiquity in construction, metallurgy, writing, calendrics and astronomy.

The unchronicled arrival and settlement of Dutch shipwreck survivors have been claimed as the 'true' explanation of several cultural observations of local Aboriginal peoples, such as the supposed introduction of a native yam (*Dioscorea hastifolia*), sophisticated huts and town-like settlements, and blonde-haired Indigenous people in the central west coast region of WA (Gerritsen 2002, 2006; Playford 2006:200–232; Van Zanden 2012:169–178). Likewise, fairness, tallness, baldness and genetic diseases in local Indigenous populations are attributed directly to the Dutch shipwreck survivors (Playford 2006:227–232; Van Zanden 2012:189–195, 207–216). Additional claims include a Dutch influence on the language of the Nhanda people (Gerritsen 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006; Van Zanden 2012:197–206). Many of these assertions are based on 19th century newspaper articles, accounts of explorers and folklore (Gerritsen 2002, 2006; Playford 2006:200–232; Van Zanden 2012), and some, at least, may reflect European scepticism towards Indigenous capabilities. Undoubtedly, these assertions are attributable to the attempt to strengthen European antiquity in Australia, and almost always are based on selective evidence.

The introduced yam and town-like settlement hypotheses have been refuted by Playford (2006:227), who argued cogently that, as the yam species in question is endemic to WA, it 'could therefore not be brought from another country by a Dutch castaway.' Moreover, Aboriginal people certainly were capable of building huts plastered with clay, especially if they had an abundant and renewable food source—the native yam—that allowed them to live a more sedentary life in semi-permanent abodes (Playford 2006:226–227).

A proposed genetic link between shipwrecked VOC crew members and Aboriginal people stems from the presence of genetic disorders, such as variegate porphyria and Ellis-Van Creveld Syndrome, in Indigenous populations in WA (Rossi et al. 2002:446). Porphyria is a rare inherited disorder arising from genetic mutations. Occurrences of the disease are widespread and have been documented in many nations, including Australia, though it is most prevalent in the Afrikaner population of South Africa, where it originated (Rossi et al. 2002:445–446). Genealogical research was able to trace the origin of Afrikaner variegate porphyria to a 17th century Dutch immigrant couple—Gerrit Jansz van Deventer and Ariaantje Jacobs van den Berg—

who married in Cape Town in 1688 (Dean 1971; Playford 2006:228). Notably, in WA, the disorder was manifested in a member of the Mallard family, to which Lurlie Pepper and Ada Drage (mentioned earlier) belonged (Playford 2006:227–229).

The other genetic disorder, Ellis-Van Creveld Syndrome, is rare outside the Amish community in Pennsylvania, USA, but occurs with relatively high frequency amongst Aboriginal people in southwest WA (Playford 2006:227–232) as a result of founder effect and random genetic drift (Goldblatt 1992). Goldblatt (1992) suggested that the responsible gene could have been introduced by a Dutch survivor of the *Zuiddorp* shipwrecking, although this deduction was based solely on reports of survivors from the shipwreck and that they had indeed interacted with local Aboriginal people.

McCarthy (2009) clarified that the historical basis for such research is problematic because of the hundreds of so-called 'Malays'⁶ who came to WA to work in the pearl fishing industry. Many of these labourers remained in the Shark Bay area and became part of a rich Aboriginal-European-Malay there (McCarthy 2009:30). Owing to the large Dutch presence in South East Asia since the late 16th century and their intermingling with the Indigenous populations during that time, we consider that these genetic disorders are more likely to have been introduced to WA via Malay pearlers than Dutch shipwreck survivors. Further, Rossi et al. (2002:445, 449) found no evidence for founder mutation, concluding instead that 'the mutations causing variegate porphyria in the Western Australian Aboriginal population occur sporadically and were not inherited from shipwrecked sailors'.

More recently, Gerritsen (2001, 2002, 2004, 2006) hypothesised that the language and customs of the Nhanda Aborigines were modified under Dutch influence (see also Van Zanden 2012:198–205). However, linguist Blevins (1998, 2001) studied the Nhada language in detail and could not confirm linguistic evidence for any Dutch influence (see also Playford 2006:225–227).

Finally, a ship painting on Walga Rock, located on the upper Sanford River some 325 km northeast of Geraldton, is often attributed to a Dutch castaway and interpreted as representing a VOC ship. The painting depicts a ship with two masts, gunports, standing rigging, shrouds and a smoke stack, although proponents of this theory interpret the stack as a damaged mainmast, despite the fact that it looks completely different to the other two masts (Gerritsen 2002, 2006; Playford 2006:221–224; Van Zanden 2012). McCarthy (2009:31) pointed out that the painting clearly depicts a two-masted steamship with false gunports (a common decorative feature in the 19th century), identifying it as SS *Xantho* or a similar vessel. The Walga Rock painting is not the only known rock art of European ships in WA. Seven similar, but engraved, depictions are known at Inthanoona, east of Cossack, all of which represent 19th century steam or sailing vessels (Paterson and van Duivenvoorde in press).

Despite the strength of their evidence and cogency of their arguments, Playford's, Blevins' and McCarthy's rebuttals to the dubious lines of reasoning remain excluded from the most

⁶ 'Malay' was a general term used in the 19th century for South East Asian labourers brought to Australia to work in the pearling and pastoral industries. They came from present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor and the Philippines.

recent popular studies and publications seeking justification for the settlement of European shipwreck survivors and their co-existence with Aboriginal people (Coulthart 2012a, 2012b; Vanderveldt 2009, 2010; Van Zanden 2012). Such works also ignore the possibility of other hypotheses, for example, that the shipwreck survivors lingered and eventually died near the coast, or that they attempted a failed voyage to Batavia (Playford 2006:200).

Obviously, there exists a need for inauthentic or pseudo-archaeology related to the Dutch shipwreck survivors. The early European shipwrecks, their survivor camp sites, and the Dirk Hartog and De Vlaming inscription plates provide tangible evidence that Europeans sailed Australian waters and set foot on Australian soil many decades before Cook sailed into Botany Bay in 1770. And yet this is apparently unsatisfactory for some. Perhaps these events are considered too ephemeral, as they did not lead to permanent settlement on the mainland or to long-term cross-cultural contact with the local population. The embellishment of historical knowledge to propose the earlier intervention of outsiders—in this case, Dutch Europeans—in the cultural life of WA Aboriginal people broadly fits within Feder's (2008:1902) parameters of pseudoarchaeology and hoax creation.

Conclusion

Various individuals have touted the authenticity of the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' and 'Zuytdorp 1712' inscriptions, and used them as supporting evidence for the settlement of Dutch shipwreck survivors in the region and their intimate interaction with local Indigenous communities. We documented the 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription and characterised its rock substrate, and also conducted a formal comparative analysis of both inscriptions to evaluate the construction and morphology of the lettering, and the composition of their messages. In all regards, the characteristics of these inscriptions are substantively different from known inscriptions by Dutch seafarers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, photographic records of the *Zuytdorp* site show clearly that its associated inscription did not exist prior to 1954. Based on this body of evidence, we can say with confidence that the inscriptions are hoaxes, created in the recent past.

Viewed in their contemporary social context, we suggest they are associated with the broad folklore of sites and stories relating to the maritime history of WA, and to its Dutch shipwrecks in particular. Nevertheless, they remain significant in that they embody a recent part of the State's history and the public's engagement with that history. These inscriptions and others, whether real or not, play a significant social role in the public imagination. The 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' and 'Zuytdorp 1712' inscriptions may be hoaxes, but they embody a recent part of WA's history—since 1859—and the public's interest in finding physical evidence of the State's much older (European) history, particularly early Dutch contacts with its shores. They are part of the rich and eccentric folklore surrounding the quest to find the Dutch shipwrecks, and deserve to be preserved as significant recent WA cultural heritage. The 'Vergulde Draeck 1656' inscription will certainly be destroyed if the Ocean Reef Marina Development eventuates as planned. We recommend instead that it be relocated and displayed with appropriate signage as a

unique exhibit for the public. These inscriptions are not simply fakes or inauthentic; they are hoaxes that embody social values and are deeply entrenched with the local history relating to the early shipwrecks and the popular culture and folklore of the settlement of possible European survivors in the 17th and 18th centuries, decades before the official first settlement of Australia in 1788.

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⁷ Günter Schilder makes a compelling case that the journal, published in 1701, was written by the Chief Surgeon of the ship *Nijptang*, Mandrop Torst from Amsterdam. Unfortunately, this is not mentioned, nor even considered, in the transcription and translation facilitated by the Royal Library of the Netherlands (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) (see Schilder 1976:100–101).

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