

Extract from Batavia's Graveyard by Mike Dash.

Sailing under the command of Francisco Pelsaert, a cultured, sensuous but weak-willed merchant, and her able but drunken skipper, Ariaen Jacobsz, the Batavia reaches the doldrums off the coast off Africa. There temperatures rise, the wind drops, and conditions on board rapidly deteriorate.

In these circumstances, food quickly became a subject of consuming importance for the inhabitants of the *Batavia*. The passage of time was marked by the hot meals that were served three times a day: at eight in the morning, noon and 6pm. These could be grand occasions; Pelsaert and Jacobsz. ate in the Great Cabin, usually with the ship's senior officers and the most distinguished passengers as guests. Claas Gerritsz. the upper steersman would have been there too, along with his deputies, the watchkeepers Jacob Jansz. Hollert and Gillis Fransz. – whose nickname, somewhat unnervingly, was 'Half-Awake'. Further down the table sat the provost, Pieter Jansz., who was responsible for discipline on board, and perhaps some of the junior merchants: young VOC assistants such as Pelsaert's favourite clerk, Salomon Deschamps of Amsterdam, who had been with him in India. But even these privileged people could not take an invitation to the merchant's table entirely for granted, and there was another well-stocked table in the passenger accommodation at the stern to which they might occasionally be relegated and where the likes of the *predikant's* children and the less favoured merchants and officers ate. Here and in the Great Cabin there were napkins and tablecloths, pewter plates and tin spoons, cabin boys to bring the food and the steward to serve wine. The sailors and soldiers, on the other hand, dined where they slept, sitting on their sea chests and eating from wooden dishes with wooden spoons. There were no servants before the mast. Instead the men were grouped into messes of seven or eight, and one man from each mess acted as orderly to his shipmates in weekly rotation, fetching food from the galley in pails and washing the dishes afterwards. The cook and his mates ate last of all, standing watch while the rest of the crew had their meals.

The quality of the food varied considerably, officers eating better than the men and all on board enduring a progressively more offensive diet as the voyage progressed. Some effort was made to provide fresh food to supplement the preserved meats in the hold: as well as the live chickens, goats and pigs carried in pens on the gun deck, the topmost cabin in the stern – a low-roofed little hutch known as the *bovenhut* – served as a sort of greenhouse in which Jan Gerritsz., the ship's gardener, grew vegetables. It was rare for these limited supplies to find their way into the hands of the men. On calm days fish were sometimes caught, but the tradition of the service dictated that no matter who reeled them in, the first landed each day went to the skipper, the next dozen or so to the merchants and the officers, and so on down the established lines of precedence. Again, it was uncommon for much to reach the ordinary sailors and soldiers.

The men lived almost entirely on cask meat, legumes and ship's biscuit, a sort of bone-dry bread more often known as hard tack. Although it was possible, in the first half of the seventeenth century, to preserve some foods fairly well, the VOC was not renowned for the high standard of its stores. On land, meat was cured by carefully rubbing it with salt (which drew out moisture), or hung for a while and then pickled by being repeatedly immersed in boiling brine or vinegar. Both processes killed bacteria and flavoured the meat, and could produce surprisingly palatable results when done well. But such methods were time consuming, and Jan Company balked at the expense. For a lesser consideration, its suppliers took freshly-slaughtered pigs and cows and dunked whole sides of meat into seething cauldrons full of seawater without even draining off the blood, which seeped out later to sour the pickle. Meat preserved in this way was cheap but extremely salty. It needed to be soaked in fresh water before being cooked, but at sea it was generally boiled in brine, to preserve the limited supplies of drinking water on board, and emerged from the pot snow-white with encrusted salt. Served, as it was, in an equally salty broth, it could burn the lips and induce a raging thirst.

Retourschipen also carried preserved fish, which was dried, not salted. The Vikings had crucified the cod they caught in their longboats' rigging; Netherlanders impaled theirs, and called them *stokvisch* after the Dutch word for the stick on which they threaded up to 30 split and gutted cod for air-drying. The drying process produced bone-hard slabs of white fish that had to be softened up for cooking by being soaked, or beaten with mallets. Like salt pork and beef, stockfish was generally served in a stew with dried peas or beans (potatoes were hardly eaten in Europe before the middle of the century). But fish was relatively difficult to preserve, and – at least according to the later records of the Royal Navy – it tended to go off more quickly than preserved meats and was probably among the first stores to be consumed. The chances are that stockfish featured heavily in the meals served on the *Batavia* at this early stage in the voyage.

Even salt meat was difficult to store in the sort of conditions that confronted the little fleet as it neared the coast of West Africa under a tropical sun. In the absence of any form of refrigeration, conditions down in the hold quickly became unbearable. Ventilating the nether reaches of the ship was practically impossible, and lowest decks became so stifling that it was not unknown for seamen sent into the storerooms to suffocate. Casks burst open in the heat, scattering their contents and providing food for the multitude of vermin that scurried and swarmed down below. When it rained and water seeped down into the stores, dried food rotted or became mouldy and infested too.

Hard tack was the worst affected. This twice-baked bread contained no fats or moisture and would keep indefinitely in normal conditions, though it was so dry it cracked teeth and had to be dunked in stew to make it edible. Damp, it was easier to eat but became a perfect larder for the weevils that laid their eggs within and turned each piece into a honeycomb of tunnels and chambers full of larvae. Every sailor who

made the passage to the Indies learned to tap his ration of bread against the sides of the ship before he ate it, to dislodge the insect life within. Any that remained within the hard tack were eaten anyway. Novice seamen learned to distinguish the flavours of the different species: weevils tasted bitter, cockroaches of sausage; maggots were unpleasantly spongy, and cold to bite into.

On board ship, as on land, the officers and men not only ate differently but drank differently as well. Pelsaert and Cornelisz. and the other senior officers were permitted to carry their own supplies of wine and spirits, in quantities proportionate to their rank; those who had reached the rank of boatswain or above were also accorded double rations of the water and weak beer that was shipped for general use. The men were allowed spirits only as a prophylactic against disease, and their water and beer was prone to turn green with algae in the tropics. Water from the island of Texel was highly favoured by the VOC, because its mineral content helped to keep marine growth at bay, but by the time the *Batavia* reached Africa her drinking water was slimy and stinking. It had become heavily infested with tiny worms, which the sailors sieved with their teeth, and the daily three-pint ration was brought up from the hold 'about as hot as if it were boiling'.

Unfortunately for the people on board, the deterioration in the *Batavia*'s supplies of water and beer coincided with the onset of blazing weather, which caused both passengers and crew – many of them still dressed in the thick cloth suited to a northern winter – to sweat profusely and develop thirsts which were only heightened by the salty diet. Rationing was necessary to conserve the precious supply of beer and water, however undrinkable it became. Almost every sailor, no matter how poor, possessed a cup in which to receive his ration; serving the men beer or water in a common jug inevitably led to violent disputes over who had received more than his fair share of precious liquid.

For all this, the men of the *Batavia* ate and drank well by the standards of the day. Their food was laden with sufficient calories to keep them working, and at a time when it was usual for peasants and artisans to taste meat more than three or four times a month, a *retourschip*'s crew enjoyed it three or four times a week. Nicolaes de Graaf, a surgeon who made five voyages to the Indies between the years 1639 and 1687, observed that 'each mess gets every morning a full dish of hot groats, cooked with prunes and covered with butter or some other fat; at midday they get a dish of white peas and a dish of stockfish, with butter and mustard; save on Sundays and Thursday when they get at midday a dish of grey peas and a dish of meat or bacon. Each man gets 4lbs of bread (or usually biscuit) weekly, and a can of beer daily, as long as this lasts. They are also supplied with as much olive-oil, vinegar, butter, French and Spanish brandy, as they need to keep themselves reasonably healthy and fit.'

At the captain's table, there was no rationing. Pelsaert and Jacobsz., Cornelisz. and Creesje ate meat or fish three times a day, and on special occasions 11- or 12-course feasts were served the Great Cabin. It was a way to pass the time.

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Boredom tested the patience of everyone on board during the long voyage south towards the Cape. In between meals, the passengers and crew passed the time with gossip and games. There was singing and sometimes the crew staged amateur theatricals. Gambling with dice was popular, though technically illegal, and draughts and tick-tack – a form of backgammon – were widely played. A few, chiefly among the officers, read for recreation, though most of the books available were the religious texts which the VOC, in a rare moment of piety, had determined to supply to all its ships. (Sir Francis Drake himself, on his voyage around the world, is known to have whiled away the hours by colouring in the pictures in his copy of Foxe's *Book of*

Martyrs.) The handful of women on board knitted or wove lace; on some voyages, old records attest, they even took over in the galley on occasion, fed up with a diet of bread ‘which lay like a stone in their stomachs’. The sailors enjoyed rougher sports. Fist-fights were tolerated as an amusing diversion, and when they could the men played the ‘execution game’, a contest involving forfeits which included being smeared with pitch and tar. This game was so dangerous that it could only be played with the express permission of the skipper.

Disputes flared rapidly amid the boredom and the heat. Those not about the rations generally concerned the living space, or lack of it. With more than 330 people crammed into a ship only 160 feet long, privacy was almost impossible to come by. The men fought over space to lay their sleeping mats, and so disruptive was the problem of theft that stealing was punished almost as severely as murder. The temptation was great, however; most of the sailors and soldiers on board were almost destitute – they would hardly have been risking their lives in the Indies otherwise – and minor theft was a continual problem on every Dutch ship.

It was during this period of indolence and tedium that Jeronimus Cornelisz. first revealed his heterodox views to the people of the *Batavia*. Talk in the Great Cabin in the stern turned quite frequently to matters of religion, and from time to time – far now from the grasp of the Reformed Church – the under-merchant enjoyed shocking the assembled company with his thoughts on some item of dogma. He was an unusually eloquent man, and talked so persuasively that even his more inflammatory beliefs were somehow rendered almost palatable; Jacobsz. and his officers, who seldom encountered educated men, found his smooth tongue almost hypnotic. The merchant was, in any case, careful not to stray too far into outright heresy. ‘He often showed his wrong-headedness by Godless proposals,’ the *predikant* recalled, much later on, ‘but I did not know he was Godless to such an extent.’

In time, Cornelisz.'s practised charm seems to have made a great impression on the skipper, and somewhere off the coast of Africa the two men became friends. The two men had a number of interests in common, and the many hours all East Indiamen spent becalmed in the tropics provided them with ample opportunity to become better acquainted. It is safe to assume they touched on two subjects more than once: the fortunes to be made out in the spiceries, and the beauty of Lucretia Jans.

Creesje, it is certain, commanded the attention of many of the officers in the stern. With the exception of the provost's wife, who seems to have been considerably older, she was the only woman of any rank on board the *Batavia*. That alone would have been enough to engage the interest of men denied much female company for several months on end. Her remarkable beauty, which is attested to in the records of the voyage, merely enhanced this allure. There can be no doubt Cornelisz. had noticed it. By the time the *Batavia* neared the West African coast, it would seem that the skipper and the *commandeur* – who both greatly enjoyed the company of women – were well aware of Creesje too.

By the last days of December the ship had reached the southern limit of the Horse Latitudes, which lay at 25 degrees North. By then, it would appear, the ship was short of either food or, more likely, drinking water, since Pelsaert took the decision to put in at Sierra Leone. Doing so was a violation of the *seynbrief*, which had, since 1616, designated the Cape of Good Hope as the sole permissible port of call on the voyage to Java, and by putting in to port, Pelsaert made himself liable not only a fine but to the condemnation of his employers. Moreover, even at this early date Sierra Leone – infested as it was with malaria and yellow fever – was so rotten with disease that it had earned a deserved reputation as a 'white man's grave'. To sail into port there was to take a risk, and although it was not unheard-of for VOC ships to visit the African coast in the years before the Dutch built a permanent base at the Cape, those that called there generally did so for a reason.

The first westerners to visit Sierra Leone had been the Portuguese, who made contact with the local tribes as early as the fifteenth century. The people who lived along the coast were members of the Temne clan, which controlled much of the commerce with the interior. They lived on fish, supplementing their diet with rice, yams and millet, and they traded food for swords, household utensils and other metal goods when they could. By 1628 the Portuguese had also begun to purchase slaves in Sierra Leone.

Pelsaert had no interest in slaves, and was interested only in revictualling his ship, but, to general surprise, the *Batavia* did make one addition to her crew in the port. Rowing ashore to purchase supplies, Pelsaert's men noticed a single white face among the people waiting on the waterfront. It belonged to a 15 year old boy from Amsterdam named Abraham Gerritsz., who had deserted from another Dutch East Indiaman, the *Leyden*, at the beginning of October and was by now just as anxious to leave the settlement. Pelsaert, who had been forced to transfer several of his own men to other ships in the flotilla at the beginning of the voyage, agreed to allow the boy to work his passage to the Indies on board the *Batavia*.

From Sierra Leone, the little fleet put back out into the Atlantic and headed south towards the Equator. Here the winds grew less predictable again, and the *seynbrief* contained instructions that skippers should stay within the confines of what the Dutch called the *wagenspoor* – the 'cart-track', two parallel lines running from north-east to south-west all the way from the Cape Verde Islands down to the Equator. The *wagenspoor* was sketched in on VOC charts and marked the boundaries of the safest route. If a ship sailed east out of the cart-track, she risked becoming becalmed in the Gulf of Guinea. If she ventured too far west, she would rot in windless seas off the coast of Brazil.

Ariaen Jacobsz. kept the convoy within the *wagenspoor* as it limped across the unpredictable doldrums around the Equator. There was little wind and the weather was blisteringly hot now, so much so that it became all but impossible to sleep below and the crew sought the sanctuary of the deck at night. Planking withered in the heat, and the sun softened the tar that had been used to caulk gaps between the timbers, trapping animals that had been unwary enough to fall asleep along the cracks. Wax melted below decks, causing the candles to ooze and run until they hardened into weird, squat shapes in the cooler evening air. The men wore only loincloths when they had to go below; passengers who had never experienced such unbearable temperatures wrote that the sun had ‘dried the faeces within the body’; and in an era before the invention of effective balms and creams, even veterans of the Indies passage suffered agonies from sunburn. Cooling these burns in brine brought only temporary relief, and the salt in the water caused rashes that itched unbearably. The latter problem must have been exacerbated by the fact that, in the absence of fresh water, sailors traditionally washed their filthy clothes in urine.

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Down in the abandoned hold was the empire of the rats. Bloated rodents scurried between the supplies, gnawing their way into the barrels of meat and nesting in the linen trade-goods. Having learned that wooden walls concealed huge quantities of food, they sometimes attacked the sides of the ships in error. Given time, rats could chew their way through the layers of oak planking in the hull, springing leaks that tested the pumps and kept the *Batavia*'s sweating gang of caulkers busy.

Nevertheless, the biggest irritants on the voyage were undoubtedly the insects that swarmed through every crevice of the ship. Lice were a plague from which even the most senior of those on board were not immune. They lived and multiplied in clothing and could cause terrible epidemics of typhus. Many an East Indiaman lost a quarter or

a third of her crew to the disease, and though the *Batavia* seems to have escaped its ravages, there is no doubt that lice would have infested every article of clothing on board the ship. Even Creesje and Cornelisz. were required to join the other passengers and crew and delouse themselves each week on a special 'louse-deck' by the latrines in the bows. Determined hunting would have afforded them some relief, but as numerous contemporary letters and memoirs attest, such measures were at best only temporarily effective.

Nor were lice the only insects on board. Bedbugs lurked in the bunks and sleeping mats, and new ships such as the *Batavia* could be quickly overrun with cockroaches. The few days that Pelsaert's fleet spent at Sierra Leone would have been time enough to allow a few big African insects to find their way down below, where they would have multiplied with astonishing rapidity. The captain of one Danish East Indiaman was so maddened by the plague of scuttling vermin on board his ship that he offered his sailors the bounty of a tot of brandy for every thousand cockroaches they killed. Within days, the crushed bodies of 38,250 insects had been presented for his inspection.

Tormented by the vermin and the heat, some Dutchmen were driven insane. By the late 1620s, the VOC had already become well-acquainted with a variety of mental illnesses caused by the long passage east. Depression was not uncommon in the early weeks of any voyage, as those on board realised the magnitude of the ordeal they faced, and in some cases it was so severe that the victims refused to talk or even eat. Becalmed in the oppressive airs of the Equator, others went mad as they waited days and sometimes weeks for winds that never came. The archives of the East India Company contain many records of men who jumped overboard to end this suffering.

Even so, most voyagers enjoyed some good times, too. Surviving accounts tell of swimming in calm weather, skipping games and storytelling on sultry evenings. When

the opportunity arose, there were wild celebrations of signal events such as the skipper's birthday. *Predikanten* such as Gijsbert Bastiaensz. frowned on the unrestrained revelry that traditionally marked the crossing of the line, but not even the VOC could ban the singing of bawdy sea-shanties, nor the taking of tobacco in long, thin Gouda pipes. The danger of fire being very great, however – matches had yet to be invented, and pipes were lit with red-hot coals fetched from a glowing brazier with brass tongs – smoking was permitted only before the mast, and then only during the hours of daylight.

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