

Chapter 2

The *Vlissingen*

A Dutch East India Company ship that perished along the Namibian shore in 1747

On 9 January 1747, the United Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship *Vlissingen* left the Rammekens roads, near the town of Vlissingen in the province of Zeeland, for its fifth journey. Unfortunately for the Company and the crew aboard, the vessel was never to return. Ship and people perished some time after departure -under circumstances that remain a mystery to this day- and nothing was heard of them any more. Nobody at the time could imagine that more than 250 years later, the *Vlissingen* would become the subject for a new search.

This article describes some of the results of preliminary archival research that focused on the history of the fateful ship and her unlucky crew. This information provides an historical framework that is essential for a future maritime archaeological investigation. The article will also briefly touch on preliminary field work that was undertaken during September 2001 in Meob Bay, Namibia, the place where the vessel in all probability found its last resting place.



Bruno E.J.S. Werz

Dr Bruno Werz studied history at the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands and received his PhD at the University of Groningen for a study on theoretical aspects of maritime archeology. In 1988 he moved to Cape Town and is currently permanent resident of South Africa. He is an internationally acclaimed authority in the field of maritime archeology and specializes on the inter-disciplinary approach to the study of shipwrecks, with an emphasis on Dutch East India Company ships. He lectures and publishes widely.



A VOC ship

This is an engraving of a Dutch East India Company ship of the class of the "Vlissingen". It's length was about 36.4 metres with a width of about 9.10 metres. A ship of this class carried often more than 200 persons (seafarers, military personnel and craftsmen) and measured about 650 tons. Source: Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague. Archief Radermacher, RAD 98: Gedrukte en geschreven ladinglijsten van de retourschepen (...) 1737-1796.

The Vlissingen, historical background

Information pertaining to the construction of the *Vlissingen*, is scanty. A first reference to the ship can be found in the resolutions of meetings of *Heren XVII*, the directors of the Dutch East India Company. During the morning of Saturday 1 March 1732, it was decided that eleven new ships had to be constructed for that year, including the *Vlissingen* of 130 feet.

Five-and-a-half months later, it was recorded that the ship was under construction under the supervision of the regional VOC office of Zeeland. It measured 130 feet, with a displacement of 100 *last* or 200 tons. One week later, it seemed that the ship was nearing completion and the *Vlissingen* was earmarked to leave the Dutch Republic as part of an outward-bound fleet in the months to come.

During the course of the eighteenth century, the VOC generally built four classes of ships. The *Vlissingen* measured approximately 650 tons and, according to this classification, was therefore a ship of the third rate (500-800 tons). Its length, from stem to stern but excluding the bow sprit, was about 130 Amsterdam feet. From this information it can be deduced that its metric length was approximately 36.40 metres, with a width of approximately 9.10m and a holte of about 3.65m. This last measurement was the height between the keel and the underside of the main deck.

Previous journeys, 1734-1745.

The first outward-bound journey started from the roadstead of Rammekens under the command of Levinus de Heere on 21 January 1734. The ship arrived at Batavia (Djakarta) on 25 July 1734 and 123 seafarers, 51 military personnel and seven craftsmen were aboard. Already two-and-a-half months later, on 7 October 1734, the *Vlissingen* left Batavia under command of Jan de Roper. More than nine months later, on 17 July 1735, Rammekens was reached with a cargo to the value of F111, 574.

The second journey started on 3 January 1736, when the ship left under the command of Pieter Bruis with

116 seafarers, 63 military personnel and 15 craftsmen. Batavia was reached on 11 September 1736. The vessel left this place on 2 November 1737 and arrived in *patria* on 6 June 1738. The merchandise that was transported amounted to a value of F153, 214.

On 29 September 1738, Rammekens was left once again. This time, the *Vlissingen* was under the command of Anthonie Uiterschouw. The ship arrived at Batavia seven months later, on 2 May 1739. As during all of its voyages, the ship sailed for the Zeeland office of the VOC and carried cargo for the same. After arrival, the *Vlissingen* was dispatched to Bengal, as she left this place on 25 November 1739. The ship arrived on 10 July 1740, with 85 people on board. The estimated value of the cargo was F417, 182.

The fourth and last successful journey of the *Vlissingen* started on 22 May 1741, under command of Huibert Tiebout. This time, the journey to Batavia took more than a year. On 12 June 1742, the ship reached the headquarters of the VOC in the Dutch East Indies. Obviously, she was engaged in inter-Asiatic shipping soon thereafter, as the vessel departed from Bengal on 1 February 1745, still under the command of Tiebout. After a journey of nearly nine months, the roads were reached on 22 October 1745. On this last homeward-bound voyage, the *Vlissingen* carried cargo to the value of F642, 945.

The last journey of the Vlissingen, 1747.

During the course of 1746, an inventory was compiled of the ships that were available for the fleets that had to be dispatched in the months to come. This included the *Vlissingen*, as part of the so-called 141st. *equipage*. The various tasks necessary to prepare the ship were executed under the overall supervision of Director Schorer of the Zeeland office of the VOC. Parallel to the preparations that were necessary to equip the vessels of the outward-bound fleet, other tasks were also executed. These included the engagement of officers and crew. Already on 3 February of that year, the master of the *Vlissingen* was signed on by Director Matthias: "Voorts sijn aangesteld de volgende schippers als [...] Adriaan Cakelaar van Middelburg op [de] *Vlissingen*..."



The VOC shipyard in Middelburg

This engraving from 1778 depicts the shipyard at Middelburg, the seat of the Zeeland Chamber of the VOC. This was probably the place where the Vlissingen was constructed in 1732. From Middelburg the ship was towed to the roadstead at Rammekens, a few kilometers away, where its first voyage to the East started on 21st January 1734. Collection Bodel Nijenhuis, University Library, Leiden

Only shortly before the planned departure, the crew was engaged in order to reduce wages and to prevent desertion. During a meeting on Thursday 15 December, it was approved to select prospective seamen the week following. Nevertheless, there were some problems as far as personnel were concerned. In the case of the *Vlissingen*, no senior sail maker could be found to travel with the ship. Finally, a suitable candidate was selected, but this person had to return immediately to the Dutch Republic after arrival in Batavia. In another case, a person who travelled with the vessel, only to start working in Ceylon as an assayer, applied to the directors for permission to transport extra personal belongings. This was unanimously declined. A rather critical comment in the minutes of the meeting of 2 January 1747 reads that this person, Loijs Herze, acted: "... as if he was a junior-merchant".

In the meantime, the *Vlissingen* had already been towed from Middelburg to the roadstead. Permission for this was granted on Monday 31 October 1746. On the roadstead, the crew was taken aboard, together with additional equipment and money for the East. For security reasons, this was only done shortly before departure. In the minutes of the meetings it is recorded that on Thursday 29 December 1746, the treasurers were allowed to dispatch F50,000 with the *Vlissingen*. This money may have been used as part payment for the deficit that the Zeeland office had in contributing to the so-called *Eijsch der contanten*. This was an annual request from the Asiatic offices of the VOC that indicated the shortfall of currency during specific periods. The resolutions of the meetings of the *Heren XVII*, of 13 March, 28 August and 1 September 1747, indicate that especially Zeeland had a serious shortfall. It is therefore not illogical to assume that the *Vlissingen* may have carried a substantial amount of coinage, and this can explain the reason why large quantities of copper *duiten* have been found in the Meob Bay area over the years.

Exactly one week later, final preparations for departure were approved. The pilot Pieter Joossen had been selected to guide the *Vlissingen* through the English Channel, and some of the directors of the Zeeland chamber had been chosen to bid farewell to the officers and crew of the vessel. At 08.00hrs during the morn-

ing of 9 January 1747, the ship finally raised anchor and headed for the open sea.

Two days after departure, the *Vlissingen* had passed the English Channel and was sailing in the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean. On that day, Master Adriaan Kakeelaar wrote to the directors of the Zeeland office to report that after the ship had left the roads, he had found that two able seamen, or *bosschieters*, were missing. He had therefore entered three new crew members on the muster roll as replacements. It was also reported that pilot Pieter Joossen had left the ship near the Scilly Isles. Kakeelaar concluded his letter with: "... all is well...".

Some time after this message, fate struck although it is not clear what exactly happened to the *Vlissingen* and its crew. An anonymous and undated reference in one of the shipping lists states that the ship, while outward-bound, "sprang" in the English Channel. This indicates that material damage was done to the vessel, possibly due to its age or as a result of collision with a sand bank. The poor state of ship and crew was confirmed in a letter from the officers on board, who wrote to the Zeeland chamber on 13 March. At the time, not much progress had been made and the *Vlissingen* was still in the North Atlantic.

As a result of this, the Zeeland office dispatched a vessel to render assistance, but no further reference to this mission could be traced. On 4 May, a letter from the VOC correspondent in England, Gerard Bolwerk, was received. From this, it becomes clear that the ship took over an English pilot, probably because the vessel was having severe problems. The next day, the directors answered to Bolwerk that he was allowed to pay out the pilot, Mr Bowden, the salary that he had requested. It may be assumed that some time before, the *Vlissingen* had entered an English port. This is confirmed by correspondence from the governor at the Cape of Good Hope to the governor-general and council in Batavia, dated 6 October 1747. In this missive, reference is made to the bad condition of the ship: "... after having endured a lot ...".

What happened afterwards is not known, but it is clear that the *Vlissingen* sailed once more. It might be that repairs were undertaken while in port, but at



Archeological excavation at Meob Bay

Marine archeologist Bruno Werz with a member of the Namibian Underwater Federation busy on a beach survey near the place where the “Vlissingen” must have sunk. Photo by Frank Wittneben



Coins found, originating from the Vlissingen

These coins were found on the beach at Meob Bay, most of them at a depth of 2 - 20 cm. From 17th to 21st September 2001 a total of 243 copper coins were found. All these were so-called “duiten” struck in 1746 in Middelburg, the seat of the Zeeland chamber, that owned the “Vlissingen” Photo by Tommy Kellner

some stage her master decided to continue the voyage. Nothing more was heard of the ship and people started becoming worried. Soon, rumours developed and a reference to this is given in correspondence between the governor at the Cape, Hendrik Swellengrebel, to the governor-general and council in Batavia. In this letter, Swellengrebel refers to the fact that he had received news from the arriving ship Baarsande that had left the Netherlands one-and-a-half month after the Vlissingen. He was told that a rumour was spreading in the Dutch Republic that the Vlissingen had exploded.

Other references only make mention of the fact that the Vlissingen was missing. Letters from the Cape of Good Hope to the Heren XVII and the Amsterdam office, as well as to the Zeeland Chamber, refer to this fact. Nearly two years later, the Vlissingen was not yet erased from memory. On 31 December 1748, the governor-general and council in Batavia wrote to the Heren XVII, stating that the ship had not arrived at its destination. Finally, the directors of the VOC gave up all hope that the Vlissingen and its crew would ever be seen again. Although no further references to the vessel were found, other documents provide information that indicate possible reasons for its loss.

On the same day that the ship departed the roadstead at Rammekens, the governor and council at the Cape wrote to the governor-general and council in Batavia. They stated that aboard the ships calling at Table Bay in 1746 were many sick, while a great number of deaths had occurred during the journeys. The same applied to many ships during 1747. An example is the Oud Berkenroode, arriving with 30 sick, while 70 of the crew had died on the way to the Cape. This ship had left two days before the Vlissingen, from the roadstead at Texel. Bearing in mind that the Vlissingen reported that many of its crew were already in a bad shape when still in the North Atlantic, it may be assumed that illness and death played a role in the demise of the vessel, besides the structural damage that the ship had obviously incurred.

Another contributing factor might have been bad weather at the time that the Vlissingen crossed the Atlantic. An indication of this is given in further correspondence from the Cape. In here, it is mentioned that

during the evening of 1 June 1747, a ship was observed near Robben Island. Two days later, the people in the Cape Castle received a letter, informing them that the vessel was the Westhoven. The people aboard had first sighted the African mainland on 3 May and from this observation it turned out that they were close to Cape Agulhas. Shortly thereafter, a storm picked up from the NNE and NNW, as a result of which they set out to sea under a westerly course. The Westhoven had to stay at sea for several weeks before the bad weather conditions abated, and only on 31 May it approached the shore again, this time near Table Bay.

The Vlissingen surfaces again

In January 1993, the author was approached by a Namibian archaeologist, Dr Dieter Noli, who showed him some copper coins. According to Dr Noli, these had been recovered from a stretch of beach near Meob Bay, Namibia, near the high water line. The origin of the coins was unknown and the author was requested to identify them. Preliminary research enabled identification of the coins as copper duiten, minted specifically for the Zeeland Chamber of the Dutch East India Company. The coins were struck in 1746, in the town of Middelburg, and all were identical.

This basic information allowed for some preliminary conclusions. First of all, it was logical to assume that the coins ended up on the beach as a result of a shipping disaster. This was substantiated by Dr Noli's information on the distribution of the coins. It was also possible to establish that the unknown ship had been on its outward-bound voyage, from the Dutch Republic to Table Bay and from there to the Dutch East Indies. Due to the nature of VOC trade, it was common practice that outward-bound vessels carried coins and bar metal that was used as currency to obtain Asiatic goods. Homeward-bound ships carried mainly oriental products, such as spices, textiles and porcelain, and certainly no large quantities of Dutch coins. Another vital clue was presented by the year in which the coins were struck and their quantity. This indicated that they had probably not been in circulation and were shipped out in bulk to supply Dutch trading posts in the East. On the basis of these leads, the author scrutinized rel-

Namibian Treasure Hunters



Mr Gunter von Schumann

Being a direct descendant from the Dutch buccaneer Jacob van Heemskerck, ships and the ocean are in Gunter von Schumann's blood. Throughout the ages his forefathers sailed the world's oceans or build ships making it no surprise that the Namibian with a diploma in marine archeology took a special liking to the mystery of the disappearance of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) merchant vessel Vlissingen.

Reading old diamond mining reports from the early twentieth century he found records of silver and copper coins found scattered along a part of the Namibian coast near Meob Bay. The old coins originated from Mexico when this was still a Spanish colony and were used by the VOC to trade in the East Indies. "I knew then that a Dutch ship must have sunk there, but at that stage in 1970 I didn't know it could be the Vlissingen," Von Schumann remembers.

In March and April of 1993 Von Schumann, in daily life a librarian at the Namibia Scientific Society, and a team of fellow archeologists travelled with 4x4 cars through the desert for two days to reach the research area at Meob Bay. "We divided ourselves into groups for a visual survey and walked along the beach covering 20 kilometers of coastline stretching 200 meters inland. Then we divided the area into ten search grids and searched some grids with metal detectors. Wherever we picked up coins or something else like a shoe buckle we recorded the find." In total the researcher and his team discovered more than a hundred different coins of the more than 100.000 that must have washed ashore when the Vlissingen shipwrecked in 1748.

It was the Dutch historian and marine archeologist Bruno Werz who pointed out the coins might be from the Vlissingen. The Dutch Embassy supported a trip by Werz and Von Schumann to The Netherlands to search the National Archives. There they found evidence linking the coins found on the Namibian shore to the Vlissingen.

Over the years four more survey trips were made to that desolate area and every discovery exhilarated Von Schumann. "We plan another trip in 2006. We would like to do more research, but then we need a sponsor to finance the trip and provide us with sophisticated electronic equipment." The latter is especially important to pinpoint the exact location of the Vlissingen by looking for its cannons. These heavy weapons sink straight to the bottom marking the exact spot.

For Von Schumann finding that spot is important since all evidence points towards the Vlissingen but the real undisputable evidence still hasn't been found yet. "It is a part of Namibian coastal marine history. Who were those people, when did they come here and why? Were there survivors?" It's these remaining questions that inspire the archeologists to return to Meob Bay extending the search area further South. Von Schumann wants to prove once and for all that the Vlissingen has its last resting place near the Namibian coastline and solve the mystery beyond doubt.

Interview and photo by Arjen de Boer

event records that contain information on the shipping movements of the VOC, whereby the focus was on the period 1746 to 1758. Although the records indicated several VOC shipping disasters during this period, by far most of these could be eliminated. Of the ships that foundered during this time, most belonged to other regional VOC offices and the approximate place of many such incidents had been noted. Of others, it was at least recorded that they were either on the homeward-bound voyage, or that they went missing after having called at Table Bay. On the basis of this information, it seemed most likely that the Meob Bay coins originate from the *Vlissingen* and for that reason preliminary archival research focused on this ship.

Besides the archival research, a fieldwork project was undertaken in the Meob Bay area in 2001. This exploration focused on the distribution pattern of VOC coins on the beach. The results of this survey allowed for the identification of an area off-shore that in all probability contains what is left of the wreck of the *Vlissingen*. The project was undertaken with the assistance of the

Namibian National Monuments Council, the Scientific Society, the Namibia Underwater Federation, national museums and others.

The project represents the first scientific exercise in Maritime Archaeology in Namibia and may result in further development of the field.

It can be concluded that many questions related to the shipwreck at Meob Bay are still left unanswered. Further research may well provide some of the answers to the many aspects that are not clear as yet. These relate to the reasons for foundering, the exact location where the incident took place, the items that were transported by the vessel, and what happened to those crew members who might have survived the wrecking. At the moment, it seems highly likely that the shipwreck is that of the *Vlissingen* and no information has been found to dispute this identification. This, together with the information extracted from the documentary sources to date, already signifies a major step forward that will surely enhance the relevance of future fieldwork.

