Geertje Grietje Aeltje VISSER Grof

Background

When I first reached the VISSER progenitor couple for verification of sources in my own family tree in 2021, I discovered that there remained some disagreement in online trees and forums about whether Jan Coenraad VISSER had one or two European wives, and what her or their names were. Thanks to the excellent record-keeping of the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church at the Cape, we have ample primary source documents that mention VISSER and his wife (or wives) spanning the years 1662 to 1692. For Jan Coenraad these leave relatively few secrets, showing amongst others that he was from the town of Ommen, but also exposing his reputation at one point for being a lazy farmer, his involvement in the odd minor crime, his hunting exploits, the children he fathered with at lest one slave, and the potentially unflattering name used for him *in de wandeling* (popularly): Jan Grof.

For his wife (or wives), however, we run into three main issues:.

- 1. Names: VISSER is variously recorded with a wife named Geertje(n) or Grietje(n) GERRITS van Hardenberg (with some exceptions and variation) in the records, with a clear pattern of switching from the former to the latter around 1665. She is recorded as variations of Geertje(n) in only four documents I could find between 1662 and 1666, and as variations of Grietje(n) in at least 20 different documents from 1665 to 1692, with both names being used in 1665. Geertje(n) and Grietje(n) are diminutive/familiar forms of the more formal equivalents Geertruida and Margaretha respectively, and although phonetically close in some of these forms, unlikely to be confused by native Dutch speakers. This has, justifiably, led many researchers to speculate that there could have been a second wife. The fact that both are recorded with the same patronymic (GERRITS) and as hailing from Hardenberg, has further led many to surmise that the two women were likely sisters. Unfortunately, it appears that such speculation has made its way into many online trees where the careless repetition of such guesswork can easily gain critical mass and become harder and harder to separate from fact.
- 2. **Grandchildren:** Before the murder of whoever VISSER's wife was in 1692, at least 23 known granddaughters were baptised, but not a single one of them was officially named Geertje(n). Only one was named Anna Margaretha (a weak but valid link to Griet or Grietje(n)), but no fewer than five of them were named Aeltje or Alida. Aeltje was indeed used for first or second daughters most often, which would ordinarily make a fairly solid case for a grandmother being named Aeltje or Alida. However, of the 25 primary sources referenced in this document that show the name of VISSER's wife, the name **Aeltje** is mentioned only once in a muster roll of 1672, where she is recorded as Grietje Aeltjes.
- 3. **Age:** Finally, in records relating to her murder trial in 1692, VISSER's wife's age is given as older than 80. Given that her two youngest children were baptised in 1665 and 1667, this would imply she gave birth to at least one during her late fifties, which is of course highly unlikely. This age discrepancy has further muddled the waters around VISSER's wife.

Disclaimer

When I started researching this couple, I very quickly discovered that these issues have led to a variety of different proposed scenarios based on subjective interpretation of the available data, and I this document will simply add to that. Without actual baptism and marriage records for a second wife, we are left with educated guesses and the weighing of probabilities based on our best knowledge and understanding of the context. Other, much more experienced and respected researchers have spent a lot of time researching this couple, and judged the probabilities for certain explanations to be different than I do in this document. This is by no means intended to impugn their research or knowledge, and I have no desire for comparative critiques. I am an amateur with genealogy as a hobby, but I have nevertheless invested a fair amount of time and effort into researching this couple. This was as much to cut my teeth on some of the oldest available documents we have and learn to navigate the sources (in particular the collection of scans related to the Dutch East India Company held in the Nationaal Archief in The Haque), as to clarify my own thoughts on the details of this couple's lives. As such, I present this document as simply that: a list of the sources I found, interspersed with my own subjective interpretation of them. I do not claim that any of my conclusions are supposed to be facts - that would be ridiculously arrogant, and I caution everyone to follow all verifiable facts and draw their own conclusions. I share this because it took some time and effort to collate all the original sources in one place, and if someone else can stand on this rough pile of bricks and see a little further than I have, then the whole South African genealogy community benefits.

What I will say is that, to the best of my knowledge, what I present and speculate about in the <u>Grandchildren</u> section below has not been done before in the same way I do here. If it has and I am reinventing your wheel, then please accept my apologies and see it as a confirmation that at least one other person on the planet managed to wrestle their way to the same thoughts.

At the time of writing, there are online trees (on Geni and FamilySearch, for example) that include parents and/or a sister for Geertje(n) or Grietje(n) VISSER (some with specific birth dates). However, none of these cite any sources at all, and as such I remain unconvinced.

-Ivan Meyer Edinburgh, November 2022

Names

For the remainder of this document, I will use

- Geertje as preferred form of Geertje(n), Geertruij, Geertruida, etc.
- Griet as preferred form of Grietje(n), Grietie, Grieta, Margarita, Margaretha, etc.
- Aeltje as preferred form of Alida, Aeltie, Aelte, etc.

Whenever I state (in **bold italics**) that one of these names was used in a particular record, it should be seen as meaning an equivalent version of that name was used. The actual names can be seen in Appendix A, as well as at the original source images where I am able to link to them.

1661

In a letter from Amsterdam dated 19 Sept 1661¹, the V.O.C. informed their first Commander at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, of the following:

At your request we have granted a passage to one or two wives whose husbands are at the Cape, subject to the usual condition to remain there fifteen years. The wife of Jan Coenraetsz we have given f. 25 for her outfit, which you may recover there. P.S. These three vessels (Malacca, &c.) take back to you the three stowaways whom you are to treat according to the sentences passed on them by the court here.

1662

V.O.C. shipping records² show that the three ships in the little fleet were the *Malacca*, the *Amersfoort*, and *Wapen van Amsterdam*, and van Riebeeck's journal³ reports them all arriving between 30 January and 13 February 1662. The only ship in that fleet that had passengers who got off at the Cape, was the *Wapen van Amsterdam* with four such (unnamed) passengers. Van Riebeeck's journal reports the *Wapen van Amsterdam* arriving at the Cape on 30 January 1662, although he makes no mention of any passengers:

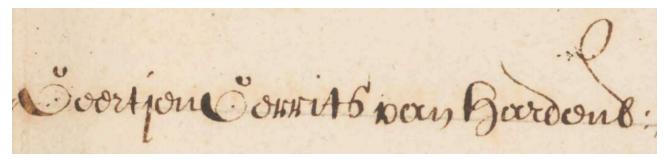
About the same time the skipper Jan van Campen and the junior merchant Casper van Dalen also landed and reported their vessel to be the Wapen van Amsterdam, which had left the Vlie on the 27th September, 1661, in company of the Amersfoort, with 350 men, of whom only three had died and 2 been drowned. The rest were in good health. She had called nowhere and had lost sight of the Amersfoort the same day that she left. The Malacca was then also ready to leave the Vlie.

The original instructions about the financial advance to VISSER's wife were duly followed and reported in a letter from van Riebeeck to his employers dated 9 April 1662⁴, where we also learn Jan Coenraad's surname, as opposed to the 'son of Coenraet' patronymic used by the V.O.C. authorities in their initial letter:

And in order fully to reply to everything contained in your letter of the 19th September, 1661, and the despatch of the 17, dated the 23rd August last, we may mention that for the present we have debited Jan Coenraet VISSER for the f25 advanced to his wife by your Chamber, that he may afterwards pay it off with grain, which is as easy as it is pleasant to him, as cash as yet but little overflows him.

Thus VISSER's wife joined him at the Cape on 30 January 1662, with three children. This is confirmed in the 1662 muster roll⁵, where she is recorded as **Geertje** GERRITS van Hardenb: with her husband, three

children, and one slave. Hardenberg is a town in the Netherlands, about 20km from Ommen where her husband hailed from.



Her name written as Geertjen in the 1662 muster roll.

1663

The next mention of VISSER's wife is an indirect one in the letters of the *sieckentrooster* Pieter van der Stael, dated 8 April 1663, which mentions the baptism of a child of VISSER's but with no name for the mother⁶.

Den 8:en d:o heeft dom:e De Metre een predikatie gedaen, ende gedoopt dese vier navolgende kinderen, ..., een van Jan Coenraetsz Visscher, en is genaemt Coenraet, de getuigen sijn Jacob Kloeten, mede vrij lant bouwer ende sijn huisvrou, ...

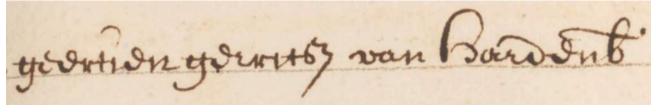
The same baptism is recorded by Zacharias Wagenaer, the recently-appointed new commander of the Cape^Z.

Sondagh, 8den do. (dws. April): Des voormiddaghs zijn na gedane predicatie door den predicant De Meter verscheijde kinderen (die hier aan de Caep gebooren zijn gedoopt is.

In die voetnota word beweer dat "Dit was die kind van Abraham Gabbema en sy vrou Petronella Does, asook Albert Dircx Diemer se dogtertjie Christina, Jan Coenraat VISSER se seun Coenraet en Louwijs, die kind van 'n slavin.

Now, since VISSER's wife had arrived on 30 January 1662, this baptism date leaves ample time for the child (later known as Coenraad Janse) to have been conceived and born at the Cape. This is also confirmed in his will⁸ from 1710, so he was not one of the children who arrived from Europe, contradicting several user-generated online family trees and other sources at the time of writing this.

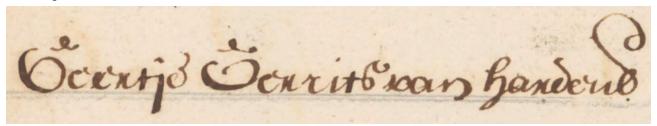
Also in 1663, VISSER's wife is again recorded in the muster roll⁹ as *Geertje* with her husband, four children and one slave, matching our assumptions about the number of children so far.



Her name written as Geertjen in the 1663 muster roll.

The following year, in the 1664 muster roll¹⁰, VISSER's wife is again recorded as *Geertje* with her husband, three children, and possibly one slave (assuming the partially visible first column was a count of slaves, as it was in previous muster rolls).

The reason for the reduction in the number of children appears in the same muster roll, two lines below the entry for the VISSER couple: One Willem Willemsz van Deventer who was single in the previous year's muster roll, now appears with a wife Maria Jansz van Ommen in his household, giving us a name for one of the three children who had travelled to the Cape with VISSER's wife. During the 17th century, the use of Dutch patronymics and surnames was relatively loose and inconsistent before it settled on a system of surnames, to the point where successive children from the same family could be known by either surnames, patronymics, or a combination. In this case, Maria Jans van Ommen indicates Maria, daughter of Jan, from Ommen. While there were other men at the Cape with the (very popular) first name Jan at the time, both the origin (Ommen) and details we have about Maria's later life confirm that she was the daughter of Jan Coenraad VISSER.

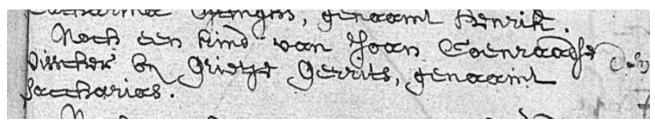


Her name written as Geertje in the 1664 muster roll.

1665

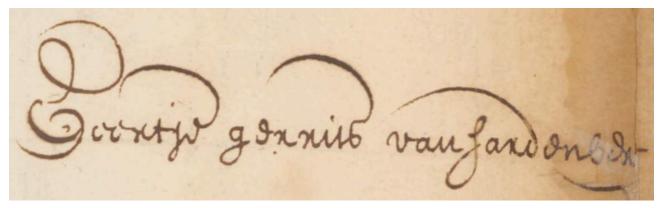
In the following year, we have two records for a wife of VISSER, using two different names, marking a point in time where most future records settle on just one.

On 23 August 1665, she is mentioned as the mother in the baptism¹¹ of a child Zaccharias, with her name recorded as *Griet* for the first time.



"noch een kind van Joan Coenraadsz Visscher by Grietje GERRITS, genaamt Sacharias"

However, in the 1665 muster roll¹², VISSER's wife is (as before) recorded as *Geertje* with her husband and four children (one more than in the previous year).



Her name written as Geertje in the 1665 muster roll.

Now, we don't know the exact date of this muster roll, but of the 20 available rolls for Cape Town between 1657 and 1674, 11 had the month recorded and were taken between January and May¹³, so it is fairly safe to assume it was taken before the August baptism.

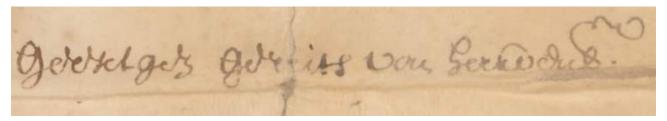
As this fourth child was in all probability the same one baptised in August, we have two potential explanations for the two different names used:

- That there was only one wife *Geertje* and a simple error in recording her name in the baptism record.
- That a new wife *Griet* was the mother and accurately recorded in the baptism, but a deceased wife *Geertje* was incorrectly recorded in at least the 1665 muster roll. This interpretation relies on *Geertje* having died before the baptism, and VISSER also marrying *Griet* before it. For a new wife *Griet* to be the mother, *Geertje* could actually have died months or even years before the baptism (even at or shortly after the birth of the previous child), so the timings are at least plausible for a second marriage to have taken place. However, that no such marriage record has been found, that if *Griet* and *Geertje* were indeed sisters the marriage would have been illegal under laws of the time, and that no record of the arrival of another GERRITS woman at the Cape has been found, all erode my confidence in this explanation.

At this point, I invoked Occam's razor to pick the simplest explanation and say the baptism name *Griet* was clearly just an error by the minister, as she had so far been consistently called *Geertje* in all the records except that one. This is further bolstered by the next record we have of her.

1666

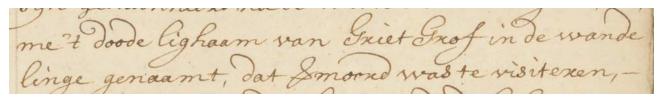
In the 1666 muster roll¹⁴ VISSER's wife is once again recorded as *Geertje*, and I started to feel that all is well again, with the temporary appearance of *Griet* in the baptism discounted as a single erroneous outlier.



Her name written as Geertjen in the 1666 muster roll.

1667-1692

However, we are not that lucky. From 1667 onwards, for 25 years, whenever she is mentioned in any document VISSER's wife is exclusively recorded as *Griet*, with the exception of *Margarita* in 1670¹⁵, but that's still just the formal version of *Griet*. In 1672¹⁶ *Griet* is supplemented with *Aeltje*, and in 1685¹⁷ there appears a different patronymic, with her name recorded as what looks like *Griet Pieters*. In the murder case proceedings of the Council of Justice¹⁸ from March 1692, she is named *Griet* Grof *in de wandeling* (popularly known as).



Her name as Griet Grof in de wandeling from the murder case.

Collating all the different versions gave me the following table, which shows a clear change in the recorded name in 1665.

			Baptism as	Baptism as	Council of Justice
The table to the right shows a summary	Year	Muster Roll	mother	witness	Proceedings
timeline of how her name appears in the	1662	Geertjen			
records. Images and links to scans of	1663	Geertjen			
primary sources can be found in Appendix	1664	Geertje			
<u>A</u> .	1665	Geertje	Grietje		
	1666	Geertje			
Versions of	1667	Grietje	Grietjen		
Geertje	1668	Grietje			
Griet	1669				
anet	1670	Margarita			
	1671			Grietje	
	1672	Grietje Aeltje s			
	1673	Grietje x 2			
	1674	Grietje			
	1675	Grietje			
	1676				
	1677	Grietje		Grietje	
	1678	Grietjen			
	1679	Griet			
	1680				
	1681				
	1682	Grietie			
	1683	Grietie			
	1684	Grietie			
	1685	Grietie Pieterse			
	 1692				Griet

At this point, one could be forgiven for thinking that the matter has been setted, at least as far as names are concerned, if not the number of wives.

Those who weigh the probability that there was only one wife higher, can interpret the pattern as supporting the theory that she was called *Griet* and that the first few records showing *Geertje* were simple errors, and that it only got corrected around 1665/1666, after which her true name is consistently used. Alternatively, that *Geertje* simply became known as *Griet*, for reasons unknown.

On the other hand, those who feel the odds favour the existence of two wives, can interpret the pattern as supporting the theory that *Geertje* died some time between the end of 1662 and 1665, with the mentions of her in the records up to 1666 probably just being errors that should have been *Griet*.

Crucially, both interpretations rely on there having been at least one error in recording her name, unless her name actually changed because she started to refer to herself by a new name, or because a misunderstanding of her real name gained critical mass in the community and became permanent. In my opinion, this latter possibility assumes the fewest errors or unusual events like deaths and unrecorded or illegal marriages. When I asked about the names *Geertje* and *Grietje* on a Dutch genealogy forum, at least two people (at the time of writing) claimed to have encountered them used interchangeably in records from that time, but this is anecdotal and remains unverified.

Personally, for a long time I was in the camp believing that there was only one wife named *Griet*, and that the first five muster rolls simply had it wrong. Anything from a scribe hearing it wrong the first time and it being copied over by others without confirmation, to indistinct speech by the person (perhaps her husband) talking to officials could lead to such an error.

That changed when I drew up the following table of VISSER's grandchildren by the children he had with his Dutch wife (or wives). For this I was guided by the excellent First Fifty Years project by Delia Robertson (http://www.e-family.co.za/ffty/).

Grandchildren

				Gerrit			
	Year	Maria Jansz	Geesje	Jansz	Coenraad Janse	Zacharia Jansz	Johannes
	1667	Aeltje					
	1668						
	1669	Jannitjie					
	1670	Hendrick					
	1671	Willem	Gysbert				
	1672						
The table to the right shows the	1673	Cornelis (i)	Jannetjie				
known children of Jan Coenraad	1674						
VISSER and Geertje/Griet along the	1675	Dina (i)					
top, and the columns below show	1676	A 1' -1 -	Willem	Th' - 1			
the names and baptism years of	1677 1678	Alida Pieterte	Maritie	Thieleman Hendrik			
· · ·	1678	Pieterte	Aeltie	Hendrik			
their children, up to 1700. There	1680		Aeitie	Aeltje		Anna Margaretha	
were more, but the names beyond	1681		Willem	Acigo		Aillia Waigaicula	
1700 don't match with the three	1682		VVIIICIII	Johannes			
names that are of interest. The red	1683					Anna Catharina	
line shows the point in time when	1684		Hilletie	Jacomyntie			
Jan Coenraad VISSER's wife was	1685			-		Jannetie	
murdered.	1686		Gerrit	Gesina			
muraerea.	1687						
	1688		Anna	Gijsbert	Jacomijnte	Elsie	
Versions of	1689						
Aeltje	1690		Annatje	Johanna	Alida	Susanna	Jannetie
Geertje	1691				Evert		Saertie
Griet	1692	Simon		Geertruy		Geertruij	
	1693						Johannes
	1694			Femma	Geertie	Aaltje	
	1695	Geertje			Catrijn		
	1696		-			Maria	Willem
	1697		Trijnte	Maria	Johannes	Johannes Lodewijk	
	1698						
	1699		Martie	Johanna			Geertruyd
	1700						

Curiously, the name that is most popular for VISSER's wife in the muster rolls and church records (*Griet*), appears just once in the names of the VISSER grandchildren (as a second name Margaretha), while the name *Aeltje* which was only ever recorded for her once in the 1672 muster roll, takes the top spot for the names of no fewer than six grandchildren.

However, what I find most revealing is the pattern that emerges in March of 1692, marked by a red line in the table. On 7 March 1692, VISSER's wife was murdered by a slave, Claes van Malabar. Almost immediately after that, versions of **Geertje** completely dominate the first preference for names of the victim's female grandchildren.

To me at least, the fact that two granddaughters were baptised with variations of *Geertje* within months of the murder, and that variants of *Geertje* then became the first choice of name for female grandchildren in the next few years, can best be justified by these children being named after their murdered grandmother. Even Zaccharia who had avoided calling any of her first five daughters *Aeltje* like her siblings did, suddenly named two daughters *Geertje* and *Aeltje* in succession. Geesje's first husband died before a child could be born shortly after the murder, explaining the gap there.

This, to my mind, almost certainly rules out the possibility that there was a second wife. The second wife narrative relies almost entirely on the pattern of names in the muster rolls and church records implying Geertje died before about 1665 and was replaced by Griet. If this was the case, why did all the children who were able to, suddenly start naming the grandchildren after supposedly long-dead Geertje immediately after Griet's murder? It does not fit with any convincing narrative that I can come up with, although that could just be due to lack of imagination on my part! It is far more likely (at least to my mind) that there was only ever a Geertje, that her name was accurately recorded in the initial muster rolls, and that she gradually became known as **Griet** in the community from some time around 1665. Her children knew that she was not really Griet, which could be why they did not use that name for any of her grandchildren. Instead, they used Aeltje, which could have been a second name. She may therefore have been originally baptised some variation of Geertje Aeltje. Why they did not use Geertje for grandchildren at all before the murder remains a mystery. However, it is worth noting that not a single known grandson was directly named after Jan Coenraad VISSER himself, which (even without knowing the reason) at least shows that customary naming patterns were not strictly followed by this family. It could even be that Aeltje was someone completely different or simply a very popular name at the time, and that it was only after the murder that the children felt compelled to suddenly honour their mother with the naming tradition. Most of the above is just wild speculation on my part, but I am in no doubt that the murder victim was known as Geertje to her children, and that matches with the initial muster rolls from 30 years prior when VISSER's wife was still new at the Cape.

In the court transcripts of her murder case, her name is given as *Griet* Grof *in de wandeling*, meaning 'popularly known as' *Griet* Grof. It is easy to assume that it simply refers to the Grof part, which was also her husband's alternative surname *in de wandeling* but could it not also have referred to her first name? Was *Griet* also unofficial, and known as such to the members of the Council of Justice?

This still begs the question, though: Why did Geertje become Griet, in de wandeling?

To answer this I am going to double down to commit the genealogist's ultimate sin, which I have so far (compared to what I'm about to do) only been lightly flirting with: speculate. I suspect that it could have been a simple matter of alliteration: *Griet* Grof flows off the tongue slightly easier than *Geertje* Grof. I think she was *Geertje* initially, but as her husband became known as Jan Grof, she became known as [something-that-starts-with-a-g] Grof, and that something evolved from *Geertje* into *Griet* because it

alliterated better with Grof.

It is of course pure speculation, but even without the *why*, I believe the *what* points to there only ever being one *Geertje*, and that she became known as *Griet*.

Age

Details of the murder case are recorded in three places:

- 1. The original Council of Justice documents held at the archives in Cape Town;
- 2. The governor's journal;
- 3. Accounts that were sent back to Amsterdam as part of regular reports, currently held by the Nationaal Archief in the Netherlands.

I have only seen scans of the documents held in the Netherlands¹⁹, and as far as I can tell they make no mention of her age. However, Heese²⁰ reports that her age is recorded as 82 in the first two sources (as both numeric digits and written out in words), while Böeseken²¹ reports the age as 87 from the first source. This discrepancy hints at the numerical version being unclear, which could have then informed the age written out in words to duplicate an initial error. If the '2' or '7' could be confused by these two experienced researchers, could the '8' have been a '5' or '6'? However, this is again speculation on my part, and I hope to get my hands on some scans of the other sources to see just how easy (or not) it would be to misread the age.

The witness statements from the third source also tell how the murder victim had walked to visit her daughter at another location that day and that she had picked up a stick or piece of wood to beat Claes with, leading to him atacking her with an axe. While not entirely impossible, both these actions are implausible for someone in their eighties.

Either way, the issue remains (at least to me) open, but was most likely a simple error in either reporting, recording, or transcription.

Appendix A: Names and Images from the Muster Rolls

Year and Source	Image	Name
1662 Muster Roll	Jam Court vissey van Curry 9 7 - Noorford Swirt 6 van Bardon 3	Geertjen
1663 Muster Roll	Jan colouract Miffer van ommen yoursensugsunt van Rawent 4	Geertjen
Jan 1664 Muster Roll	San Cocuract Vistorban Ounney Occups Sources Banderid 3	Geertje
1665 Muster Roll	Law Cornact villets van ommen Derring gravis vanfandones. 9	Geertje
23 Aug 1665 Baptis m as mother	Winder Grish van Yoan Cernicals	Grietje
1666 Muster Roll	Jan Econverest Disheld D. Onny gooding are in our sounds. 1	Geertjen







Sources

- 1. H.C.V. Leibbrandt: Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope, Letters and Documents Received (Including Instructions and Placcaten), 1649-1662, Part II, p.183
- 2. Huygens ING; The Dutch East India Company's shipping between the Netherlands and Asia 1595-1795; Details of voyage 0954.4 from Vlie to Batavia (link)
- 3. H.C.V. Leibbrandt: Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope, January 1659-May 1662. Riebeeck's Journal &c, Part III, p.325
- H.C.V. Leibbrandt: Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope, Letters Despatched from the Cape, 1652-1662, p.228
- 5. V.O.C. 3996, image 1081 (link)
- 6. The letters from Pieter van der Stael (eGGSA [https://www.eggsa.org] Transcribed by Corney Keller)
- 7. A.J. Boeseken: Dagregister en Briewe van Zacharias Wagenaer 1662-1666, p.66
- 8. MOOC 7/1/3, 37 (link) "Coenraad Jansz VISSER gebooren aan Cabo de Goede Hoop"
- 9. V.O.C. 3997, image 1146 (link)
- 10. V.O.C. 3998, image 1548 (link)
- 11. Cape Town Baptisms 1665-1695 (G1/1/1), p.2 (link)
- 12. V.O.C. 3999, image 497 (link)
- 13. eGGSA: Muster Rolls the originals, compiled by Cornel Viljoen (link)
- 14. V.O.C. 4000, image 1612 (link)
- 15. V.O.C. 4004, image 504 (link)
- 16. V.O.C. 4007, image 536 (link)
- 17. V.O.C. 4021, image 51 (link)
- 18. V.O.C. 4030, Testimony of Willem ten Damme, folio 307 (link)
- 19. V.O.C. 4030, image 361 onward (link)
- 20. H.F. Heese: Reg en Onreg. Kaapse Regspraak in die Agtiende Eeu, University of the Western Cape, 1994, p.184
- 21. A.J. Böeseken: Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape 165801700, Tafelberg, 1977, p.42