Is the bird a Dodo? The wildlife of a mid-seventeenth century drawing of Dutch Mauritius.

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ABSTRACT: A claim is investigated that an early Dutch drawing of settlers in a Mauritian forest was done in 1677 by Governor Lamotius and portrayed a Dodo in its natural habitat. The sketch is from 1670, by or for Governor Wreeden, and the bird portrayed is the extinct endemic sheldgoose.

KEYWORDS: Rhaphus cucullatus – sheldgoose – Alopochen mauritianus

Recent studies suggest that the last eye-witness account of the Dodo, Rhaphus cucullatus, a large flightless bird endemic to Mauritius, was by Volkert Everts, one of 86 shipwrecked sailors from the Arnhem, in 1662 on an islet in the lagoon; they were probably extinct by 1640 on the Mauritian mainland (Cheke, 1985, 1987; van Wissen, 1995; Zischler, 1996). The commonly cited last date, 1681, when “dodos” were mentioned by British seaman Benjamin Harry, was based on a misidentification due to the name “dodo” having transferred by 1668 to another Mauritian flightless bird, the Red Rail, Aphanapteryx bonasia (Cheke, 1987).

In a book relating western colonisation of oceanic islands to the development of conservationist perspectives, Grove (1995:139; see Cheke, 1997) published a previously unknown seventeenth-century drawing with the following caption:

Ebony cutting in progress on the east coast of Mauritius in 1677. This drawing, now in the Netherlands State Archives, is one of the earliest portrayals of colonial deforestation in the tropics. At least one of the birds depicted is a Dodo and represents the only known illustration of the species in its natural lowland ebony-forest habitat.

Grove claimed that the drawing was done in 1677 by Isaac Lamotius, commandant of the then Dutch colony from 1677 to 1692. Grove made inferences, but gave no unambiguous evidence of Lamotius referring to dodos; according to Pitot (1905, 1914) Lamotius nowhere mentioned dodos in his writings. Nonetheless, Grove (1995: 146, 148) asserted that “the changing status of the Dodo would, it seems, have been well-known to him” and “Lamotius’s drawing of 1677 appears to be the last extant representation of the Dodo actually drawn from life”. Grove also used the drawing to support his view that Lamotius was a kind of proto-conservationist, and had sent the drawing to the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) to illustrate over-exploitation of ebony forest – although elsewhere Grove (1995:148) stated that he only made representations about this in 1690. My reading of Lamotius’s dispatches (see Pitot, 1905; Barnwell, 1948) suggests the kind of conservation he was most interested in was preserving game animals from being poached by sailors from visiting ships – thus depriving him of income (Cheke, 1997). Grove offered no documentary or ornithological evidence for his identification of the bird in the drawing.

Having worked at some length on the Dodo’s history (Cheke, 1987), I was puzzled by this apparent contradiction. The “Lamotius” drawing is poorly reproduced in Grove’s
book, and it was impossible to make any reliable inference from the published plate. I therefore contacted the Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague, and established the picture was originally sent with a batch of letters from Mauritius to the VOC.2 The drawing itself is unsigned, but the accompanying letter describing the drawing3 was written, not by Lamotius, but by G. F. van Wreden and H. Klingenberg and dated 20 December 1670 (not 1677). Wreden was commandant of the settlement from 1665 to 1672, when he was drowned; Lamotius was appointed governor in 1676, but only reached Mauritius to take up the post in September 1677 (Pitot, 1914; Moree, 1998). The drawing is entitled “No. 22 afftebeckening van ’t bouwant in de Vuijle bocht” (drawing No. 22 of the farm at Foul Bay)4. There is no mention of any wildlife in the short description in the letter. Indeed it refers only to planting of beans and other crops5, and, far from decrying rampant forest destruction, it was clearly intended solely as a record of agricultural clearance.

According to Pitot (1905, 1914), who made a thorough search of the Dutch archives, the only Dutchman to refer to the Dodo in the period following the establishment of a settlement in 1638 was Hubert Hugo, Lamotius’s predecessor. In 1674 Hugo, having seen no dodos himself, made enquiries amongst those who had been on the island for some time. He had no luck apart from one maroon slave recaptured after eleven years in the forest. This man claimed to have seen dodos in “very secluded places”, but only twice in eleven years (Pitot, 1905, 1914; Cheke, 1987).6 Due to the increasing rarity of Rhaphus, the name “dodo” had generally transferred by 1668 to the Red Rail (Cheke, 1987). However given that red rails were still fairly common in the 1670s, it does seem that Hugo and the slave were discussing real dodos (Cheke, 1987). This hearsay evidence stretches the Dodo’s existence on the mainland to somewhere in the period 1663–1674. Apart from Everts on the islet, no traveller or Dutch resident after 1640 mentioned seeing dodos, so they must, if surviving at all, have been extremely rare and confined to remote areas (Cheke, 1987). The new date of 1670 for the Rijksarchief drawing brings it into this 1663–1674 period, but it depicts the mystery bird near a settlement, and must have been drawn by an artist who, not being the aforementioned slave, could not have seen a Dodo himself.

The drawing (Figures 1 and 2) shows two pigs in a pen, a stag, and a goat: these were introduced by the Dutch to provide food for visiting sailors and later, settlers; the deer is Cervus timorensis from Java (Cheke, 1987). Four birds are shown: two waterfowl (and an elephant) swimming in the river, the “dodo”, and a crow-like bird on a tree-stump. Of the three species native to Mauritius, the largest, often commented on in old reports and probably the one illustrated, is Anguilla marmorata (Staub, 1993).

The identities of the birds are more enigmatic. The swimming birds could be cormorants or ducks, both of which were present in pre-historic Mauritius (evidence from sub-fossil remains; Cheke, 1987; Cowles, 1987). However no visitor ever reported living Reed Cormorants, Phalacrocorax africanus, whereas the small endemic duck, Anas theodori, was still abundant in 1681, becoming extinct around 1696 (Cheke, 1987). The crow-like image does not fit any known Mauritian bird, and cannot be positively identified. The apparent size (given the tree-stump) matches the large, endemic, crested parrot Lophopsittacus mauritianus, known to the Dutch as the Indianische raven, but the bill shape and short tail rule it out. It is more likely to represent one of the larger passerines, such as the ubiquitous and inquisitive endemic bulbul, Hypsipetes olivaceus, exaggerated in size.

This leaves the putative dodo. The drawing shows a largish bird with a short deep bill, webbed feet, normal wings and a very short neat upturned tail; dodos had enormous
Figure 1 (above). “The farm at Foul Bay” – pen and ink drawing (36 x 51cm) accompanying a letter from G. F. van Wreeden and H. Klingenbergh, dated 20 December 1670, and sent from Mauritius via the Cape to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) (Reproduced by permission of the Algemeen Rijksarchief).

Figure 2 (right). Detail of the Wreeden–Klingenbergh drawing, showing various animals; for discussion see text.
bills, fully separate toes, small drooping wings and (usually) conspicuous tufted tails (see Ziswiler (1996) for iconography of Dodos). The Mauritian bird that fits the drawing best is not the Dodo but the extinct, endemic, sheldgoose, *Alopochen mauritianus*, known only from travellers’ accounts and sub-fossil bones (Cheke, 1987; Cowles, 1987). These geese were still common in the early 1680s, but had become extinct by 1698 (Cheke, 1987). Only one observer described them: John Marshall, in 1668, reported “geese, the halfe of their wings towards the end are black, and the other halfe white. They are not large, but fat and good” (Cheke, 1987). Another report, the log of the *President* in 1681, gave their habitat as “in the woods or dry ponds” (Cheke 1987). If my identification is correct, the Wreeden drawing would be the only known picture of this species in life?

I conclude that there is no reason to suppose that any bird in this drawing represents a Dodo, and that the currently accepted dating for its extinction, for the moment, stands.

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NOTES

1 Moree (1998) cited manuscripts by Governor Lamotius held in the Cape Archives, Cape Town, reporting that his men caught “dodarsen” in 1687 and 1688. Moree assumed Lamotius was referring to dodos, and offered no supporting evidence that he was using the term for *Rhaphus* rather than *Aphanapteryx*. I wrote to Dr Moree to seek clarification, but, while re-iterating his belief that the birds were dodos, he was unable to provide any additional corroborative details (P. J. Moree to A. S. Cheke, in litt. 7 May 2000).

2 Algemeen Rijksarchief VEL 1132; M. C. J. C. van Hoof to A. S. Cheke, in litt. 10 July 1997.

3 Algemeen Rijksarchief VOC 4006. The original drawing measures 36 x 51 cm (I. Heidebrink to A. S. Cheke, in litt. 18 February 1998).

4 Vuylje Bocht (or Vuyle Bogt/Boogte) was the Dutch name for the inlet at what is now Poste de Flacq, some 20km north of the main settlement at Fort Hendrik (Grand Port); it is usually translated as Foul Bay, named for the narrow entrance and treacherous reefs (Barnwell, 1948, 1955).

5 ‘T bouwplant inde vuijle bocht, ‘t welck u.ue. in afteijkeningh hier nevens toegesonden wort, begrijpt in zich 65 morgen lants, die wij voor eerst van mijnjahng sijn te beploegen en te besaetien, hopende metter tijt de gewenst vrugten daer van te maaijen, en off’et immers met de taruw quam’t ontschieten, ‘t welck niet willen hopen, sullen ‘t selve lant met turex boomen beplanten, die onses oordels voor ons soo wel te passe sullen kommen (alsobh hier heerlijk willen groeijen ja meer als heerlijk) als onze begeerte sal cunning wenschen, versoecke daerom u.ue. onderdarijst dese afteijkeninge die hier dubbel gaet, haer u.e. in ‘t patria gelieven mede te deelen. (The farmland at the Foul Bay, of which drawings are attached to the present [letter], covers 65 morgen of land which we intend to plough and plant, hoping to reap the desired fruit [i.e. harvest] from it; and if the wheat should turn out to be a failure, which we hope it will not, we will plant Turkish beans on this land, which according to us will suit us as well (and will grow here wonderfully, more than wonderfully) as we could wish, and we therefore request you most humbly to communicate these drawings which are attached in duplicate to ... in the homeland.) A “morgen” is approximately equivalent to 2½ acres or 1 hectare.

6 Hugo had been to Mauritius before. In 1663, working as a privater in the service of the French, he called into the island for refreshment, found survivors of the shipwrecked Arnhem, and rescued 36 of them on his ship the *Zwarte Arend* (Moree, 1998). Everts, who caught dodos on the offshore islets, was not among them (Moree, 1998), so we do not know if Hugo learnt of dodos then. At the same time five slaves escaped from
Hugo’s ship and disappeared into the forests. Moree (1998:46) stated that nothing was heard of them again, but in fact it must have been one of these same slaves, “marooned for eleven years”, that Hugo interrogated about dodos in 1674 (Pitot, 1905).

Moree (1998) reprinted a woodcut from a book by another Arnhem survivor, Andries Strokram, evidently drawn from memory after the author’s return home. It includes a similar goose-like bird in the foreground, and three sailors hiking into the forest, one of which has a pigeon-sized bird riding on his head.

REFERENCES


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