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WHO WAS STAPHORST, COLLECTOR OF GUINEA PLANTS?*

A. C. Zeeven**

Summary

The Sloane Herbarium includes six West African plant specimens collected by Nicholas Staphorst, son of Nicolaus Staphorst, director of the Chemical Laboratory of the Royal College of Physicians in London. The father was an immigrant from Hamburg, who belonged to an important German family from Staphorst in Low-Saxon. Nicholas, the son, travelled to South Africa, West India and West Africa where he attempted to collect plants for Petiver. He failed in South Africa and in western India he lost his collection during embarkation, and apparently succeeded in collecting only the six specimens in West Africa, probably in 1701.

Introduction

In 1971, the *Regnum Vegetabile* volume, *Plant Collectors in West Africa* (Hepper and Neate, 1971) was published. The book lists the name of Staphorst, but only a few particulars about him could be given: "Late 17th or early 18th cent. collection of specimens in Sloane Herbarium. Ref.: Dandy (1958); Coll.: 'Guinea' (unlocalized); Hb.: BM-SL". Dandy (1958) mentioned: "Staphorst)-. HS 242 ff 146, 148, 169-172, 177. Guinea Plants Mr. Staphorst. Nothing is further known about him; he is not the Nicolaus Staphorst of Sl. Index, 510". No evidence is presented why Nicolaus could not be the collector.

Because the name Staphorst sounded Dutch (there is a village by that name in the northwestern part of the province of Overijssel), I decided to try to provide more data on this collector. Supposing that a Dutchman of that name had stayed on the west coast of Africa, where large parts were administrated by the Dutch, and collected plants, I concluded that these specimens could have reached Sloane through Professor Hermann of Leyden University.

Archival Records

The first step was to have the specimens identified, hoping that their names would give a clue to the precise area of West Africa where they had been collected. F. N. Hepper, Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew kindly identified the specimens as: 147 *Ocimum basilicum* L. (Labiatae); 148 *Commelina* sp. (Commelinaceae); *Aframomum* sp. (Zingiberaceae); 169 *Uvaria chamae* P. Beauv. (Anonaceae); 171 + 172 *Chrysophyllum* sp. (Sapotaceae).

He concluded that "unfortunately most of them are sterile which precludes accurate identification" (F. N. Hepper, letter 27 Oct. 1972).

The second step was to study the letters among the Sloane manuscripts. Dandy (1958) listed them in the Index to these manuscripts (the numbers of the letters are mine):

1. Staphorst (Nicholas), Jun. letters to J. Petiver, 1700. 4063, ff. 39, 51. These number two (nos. 1.1 and 1.2).

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2. Staphorst (Nicolaus), *Aedis Joannitanae Hamburgensis Pastor. Memoria de*, a S. Schellhammer, 17th cent. 2888, f. 144.
- 3.1. Staphorst (Nicolaus), of Hamburg. Director of Chemical Laboratory of the Royal College of Physicians, London. *Tyrocinium chymicum*, circ. 1700. 124 ff. 1-42 b.
- 3.2. -. letters to Sir H. Sloane, 1689, 1701. 4036, f. 54; 4038, f. 269.
- 3.3. -. letter to, from J. Pragestus, 1701. Lat. 4063, f. 127.

From this index it is learnt that there are three persons by the name of Staphorst: 1. Nicholas junior, (letters 1.1 and 1.2), 2. Nicolaus, clergyman in Hamburg (letter 2), and 3. Nicolaus, the director, who came from Hamburg (letter 3.1).

Letter 1.1, addressed to Petiver, is written by Nicholas while he was staying at Cape of Good Hope. It is dated 5.8.1700 and was received on 4.7.1701. In another hand near the signature we find: "No. 1, son to the Chymicall Operator to Apothecaries hall". So Nicholas is a son of Nicolaus, the director. This was apparently the first letter received by Petiver, and he expected more, or he would not have numbered it. Letter 1.2, dated 4.11.1700, was written while his ship berthed at Surat, W. India and received on 30th of June (probably 1701 - the year of receipt is not given). This letter is marked with No. 2. In letter 1.1, Nicholas wrote that he tried to make a collection and that he had asked a Mr. Starenberg to help the addressee, Petiver. It is not stated what kind of collection he was looking for, but, as Petiver could use more or less everything, any collected material would be of interest. Nicholas continues that "during my stay on shore I have not seen above English plants". It is not clear what he meant by "above English plants", but it shows that he did look for plants. In letter 1.2, he reported that he had collected plants and shells at Callient but that during embarkation he lost everything except his life (and the opportunity to become known later as a plant collector of Indian plants). It proves that Nicholas actually collected plants for Petiver. Since the plants from West Africa reached Petiver and since the first letter is from South Africa, Nicholas must have collected the "Guinea" specimens on his way back. This would probably have been in 1701. Because there is no letter referring to these plants, we may assume that Nicholas probably took them in person to Petiver who included them in the Sloane herbarium. No further information about Nicholas is known to me, but I suspect various London archives contain more data.

Nicholas' father

Additional data are available about Nicholas' father Nicolaus. Green (1914) mentioned that Sir Hans Sloane had procured a copy of Rauwolf's work, *Itinerary* - - - -, from the Royal Society and that he had employed Nicolaus to translate it under John Ray's supervision. Nicolaus was well acquainted with Sloane, because he had been Sloane's teacher of chemistry (De Beer, 1953). Nicolaus must have known Petiver, and so Nicholas was also surely acquainted with him. Probably when Petiver heard that Nicholas was going to travel to India, he asked him to collect plants, shells, and other things at every port he visited. Ray's comments on Nicolaus' translation was: "The translator has done his work as well as could be expected from a foreigner"! (Raven, 1942).

Letters 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 do not contain much information on our subject. Letter 2 is unique because it describes in Latin the important background of the clergyman Nicolaus at Hamburg. This Nicolaus appears to belong to an important family originating from Staphorst, near Hoya, Low-Saxon, Western Germany. Members of this family were councillors etc. and several of them are described in German biographical dictionaries. However, in this letter it is stated that the clergyman Nicolaus had seven sons of which six had died. Why this letter among the Sloane manuscripts? The only explanation I am able to give is that Nicolaus, the director is the only surviving son of the clergyman Nicolaus, and that he took this letter with him to present to Sloane as a letter of recommendation.

Conclusion

Nicholas Staphorst is the collector of the "Guinea" plants. He collected them probably on his way back to England in 1701. He is a son of Nicolaus the director of the Chemical Laboratory of the Royal College of Physicians, who came from Hamburg. Both belonged to an important Low-Saxon family Staphorst (Staffhorst and Stafhorst). A genealogy was published by Zeven (1974, in press).

More data may be available in London archives. It must for instance be possible to find the logbook of Nicholas' ship *Taivestock* giving the ports of call in West-Africa.

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NEWS AND NOTES

AN INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BOTANISTS INTERESTED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN FLORA: OPTIMA

The "Organization for the Phyto-Taxonomic Investigation of the Mediterranean Area" was founded in October 1974 and briefly announced in the November issue of *Taxon* (23: 889. 1974). Since then, OPTIMA has obtained the official sponsorship of IAPT.

OPTIMA's origins can be traced back to a private meeting of a group of botanists in Lund, February 1974, where the recently launched idea of writing a "Flora mediterranea" was to be discussed. It was soon realized that such a Flora is not presently feasible, owing to the inadequacy of the available data, to the scarcity of experienced botanists working in the area, and to the lack of a suitable coordinating structure. This insight led to a proposal for constituting an international organization which might, in