

# Tasman revalued

## A note on Gilsemans' drawings

GRAHAME ANDERSON

The essential details of the Dutch visit to New Zealand in 1642-3 were worked out in 1640 by three men, Tasman, Visscher and Gilsemans, in a tiny fishing port called Hirado on an island off Honshu in southern Japan. The three were employees of the Dutch East India Company, the organisation which represented Dutch trading interests in Japan and elsewhere in the East. Each came from very modest backgrounds, but by the time they met together for the voyage each had established himself in the eyes of the Company as an experienced enthusiast for expeditions of discovery and each had demonstrated his ability to cope with and survive the rigours of long and hazardous periods at sea. Tasman had commanded ships on several such voyages, and a number of his officers rejoined him for the 1642 expedition. Visscher worked as a pilot for Japanese, Chinese and Dutch vessels for some 20 years prior to 1642, and Gilsemans, though the youngest of the three, had used his wide knowledge of cartography, bookkeeping, draftsmanship and Latin, at sea and ashore, in the service of the Company since leaving the Netherlands for Batavia in 1634.

Abel Janszoon Tasman, the future commander of the expedition, arrived in Hirado in August 1640, with a flotilla of four trading vessels. Francoijs Jacobszoon Visscher, its chief navigator, had been working there for a year or so as a freelance pilot, and Isaac Gilsemans, the merchant in charge of the trade goods taken on the voyage, and the presumed author of the coastal illustrations in its journal, was manager of the Dutch foundry there, making mortar guns to sell to the Japanese. By January 1641 the whole Dutch settlement in Hirado had been obliterated, and their trading post transferred to Nagasaki where they were confined to a reclamation built like an island in the harbour.

Tasman continued his Company trading in 1641, suffering near shipwreck off Formosa, Visscher returned to Batavia (now Jakarta), the Company's headquarters in the East Indies, and Gilsemans went to Nagasaki where he re-surveyed its harbour in July that year. Their plan for the voyage appeared as a *Memoir Concerning the Discovery of the Southland*, under Visscher's name, in January 1642. Following a brief voyage to Palembang, Tasman joined Visscher in Batavia, and Gilsemans must have gone there some time after completing his work in Nagasaki Bay. The expedition left Batavia in August 1642 and sailed to Mauritius from where, after repairs and provisioning were carried out, it began the voyage proper in October.

Knowing no more about Tasman's voyage than do most New Zealanders, I became aware of the illustrations attributed to Gilsemans when I used one of them in 1984 in *Fresh About Cook Strait*, a book about Wellington Harbour. In a chapter devoted to near misses - explorers who had failed to enter the harbour - I had joined the long-fashionable criticism of Tasman and pointed out his even greater shortcoming in missing the strait itself. The illustration I chose was a strange spherical perspective drawn at their December 1642 stormbound anchorage (see overleaf), said to be "somewhere east of D'Urville Island," but unable to be pinpointed, according to Andrew Sharp in his book *The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman*. The location is quite fully described in the journal of the voyage, and Gilsemans' drawing is more detailed than most of the others on the New Zealand coast, but nobody seemed to have gone there to compare it with the modern scene.

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*"Thus appears the Three Kings Island when you Being to the North West lie at anchor in 40 fathoms to this Island have given the name of Three Kings Island because we came to anchor there on Three Kings Eve and on Three Kings Day sailed again from it."*





