The Curious Death of Peter Artedi

A Mystery in the History of Science

Theodore W. Pietsch

Scott & Nix, Inc.
Contents

ix  Preface

1  Prologue: The Death of Peter Artedi

5  Early Years

19  My Most Intimate Friend

35  Our Friendly Rivalry

49  Artedi’s Fishes

61  My Sexual System

79  Our Respective Travels

93  Our Time in Holland

105  My System of Nature

123  Supper with Seba

143  St. Anthony’s Churchyard

159  Gratification

175  Walking in the Steps of God

183  Epilogue: Memories of Linnaeus and Artedi

187  Chronology

191  Biographical Notes

215  Bibliography

221  Acknowledgments
Preface

This is a story based on fact—nearly all of it true and well documented, taken largely from Carl Linnaeus’s autobiographies of which he left no less than five. The small part that is fictionalized twists and augments the known facts to give another side to a history that might have been. There really was a brilliant young naturalist named Peter Artedi who drowned in an Amsterdam canal on the very early morning of 28 September 1735, under mysterious circumstances. And of course there really was a Carl Linnaeus. It is true also that Artedi and Linnaeus, during the very brief time that was available to them—only six and a half years, from March 1729 through September 1735—took a fervent liking for each other. But, more than just a strong affection, they formed an intense intellectual bond, sharing among other things their revolutionary ideas about order and hierarchy in nature. While Artedi has been long forgotten, his friend and fellow naturalist is to this day a historical figure of huge proportion, credited with revolutionizing systematic botany and establishing the Binomial System of Biological Nomenclature. Characterized in nearly all writings as god-like, a person of great kindness and benevolence, Linnaeus had another side that is little talked about. He had from an early age a most favorable opinion of himself. He was selfish and conceited, unable to tolerate disloyalty or criticism of any kind and always uncomfortable when attention was not directed toward him. “All my youthful powers, both of mind and body, conspired to make me an excellent natural historian—besides my remarkable retentiveness of memory, I had an extraordinary energy and ability of concentration, coupled with a brilliant intelligence and an astonishing quickness of sight.” These superlatives and the many others that appear throughout this book in reference to Linnaeus—as he himself narrates the story of Artedi from the vantage of old age—are not my exaggerations intended to turn the reader toward an unfavorable opinion, but rather Linnaeus’s own words. His writings are replete with statements of preposterous self-assurance:
“The Lord Himself hath led me with His own Almighty hand. He hath caused me to spring from a trunk without root, and planted me again in a distant and more delightful spot, and caused me to rise up to a considerable tree. He hath permitted me to see more of the creation than any mortal before me. He hath given me greater knowledge of natural history than any one had hitherto acquired. No person has ever proved himself a greater botanist or zoologist. No person has ever written more works in a more precise and methodical manner, and from his own observation. No person has ever so completely reformed a whole science, and created therein a new era.”

Delusions of self-worth on a scale of this magnitude may well have elevated Linnaeus so far above the rest of humanity in his own mind that he might easily rationalize any inhuman act that he might commit, leaving him feeling blameless no matter how evil and self-serving. After all, he and science had much to gain by Artedi’s early demise.
The Death of Peter Artedi

Death threatens from behind, stealing everything away.

—Linnaeus, *Nemesis Divina* (Divine Vengeance)

Word of the tragic event reached me the next day. I was at Hartekamp at the time, having just recently been employed there to tend to the plants in George Clifford’s gardens—a work which you might recall was culminated in 1737 with publication of *Hortus Clifortianus* (Clifford’s Garden)—when my friend and traveling companion Claes Sohlberg, who had just that very hour returned from Amsterdam, called upon me in late afternoon. For reasons that might be surmised, his approach was not an unexpected reappearance—he had been with me at the Clifford country estate only on Tuesday last—but it immediately filled me nevertheless with a cold apprehension.

Accompanied by Carl Tersmeeden—and while neither of these good gentlemen was witness to the fact, or so it was said—they together described in some detail what others had seen. The body was found at daybreak by passers-by, floating face up in the Singel at the Nieuwe Haarlemmersluis, about one-third distance between the house of our mutual colleague Albertus Seba and Artedi’s own quarters in a lodging house in the Warmoesstraat, near the Nieuwebrugsteeg, in the dock area on the waterfront of Amsterdam. Artedi had been that evening before enjoying the pleasure of food and drink with friends at the house of Seba on the Haarlemmerdijk, as, of course, I well knew beforehand. I myself had been invited to join this gathering, but had excused myself for need of botanical work at Hartekamp, having removed myself to that place some days before—in fact, as I recall, my departure from Amsterdam was on 24 September 1735.

As Sohlberg and Tersmeeden told it to me, and others confirmed some time later, the guests stayed late, absorbed in congenial conversation, and did not end their revelry until well past midnight. Artedi was said to have left the house at one o’clock, on foot, the distance being
small and he unwilling to pay the cost of a carriage, the latter, in any case, near impossible to come by at that late hour. A clear sky, but no moon that night to help guide the way amid the poorly lighted and unfenced waterways of the town, Artedi, full of drink, lost his way or so they say. While progressing along the Haarlemmerdijk just past the fish market at the Nieuwe Haarlemmersluis, expecting to find a bridge, he apparently tripped and fell into the cold black waters, most likely drowning quickly—thanks be to God—never quite knowing what had happened to him.

It was called an accident from the start, no evidence of foul play detected. He was fully clothed, in shirt and breeches, with simple dress-coat, hat and wig, it being yet mild for late September. Walking stick floating nearby, his sword and sheath were still at his side, one shoe on, the other missing, his pockets not turned out, a golden double guinea in the one, nine pennies and four farthings in the other. The constable having been summoned, the body and its belongings were retrieved and taken to the City Hospital. There, a superficial examination confirmed the ample consumption of food and wine. A large swelling on the left side of his head was attributed to the fall, against the heavy stone embankment of the canal.

Expressing my most profound grief, I thanked Sohlberg and Tersmeeden for delivering this sad news and immediately prepared to depart for Amsterdam. Clifford’s horses were available to me, as they always were; and there was the stagecoach, but I chose to go by towboat, thinking it faster, for the roads were coarse and muddy from autumn rains.

Arriving there the next day by mid-morning—it was in fact 30 September, a Friday—I went directly to view what remained of God’s gift to natural history so early denied his place in posterity. When I beheld his lifeless body, stiff and stark, and saw his livid lips, pale and filmy with the frost of death; when I thought of the unhappy fate and loss of so old and excellent a friend and recalled to mind the innumerable sleepless nights, the laborious days, the wearisome and perilous journeys, the countless midnight hours of exhausting study that the man now lying dead before me had been fain to undergo, and which had preceded
his attainment of that standard of learning in which he had no rival to
fear—then I burst into tears. And when I foresaw that all the scholarship
he had acquired—which, in the fullness of time, should have earned
undying immortality for him, reflected unfading glory for his country,
and rendered the scientific world untold services—would perish with
his death, then the love and devotion that I felt for my friend com-
manded that the pledge we had once so solemnly made to each other
must be honored. I would carry out this promise to be sure, but it was
then at that moment that my guilt began to weigh heavily upon my soul.