

In the spirit of Linnaeus and the footsteps of Thunberg: The last research voyage

C. F. Hornstedt
Brev från Batavia:
En resa till Ostindien
1782–1786

[Letters from Batavia: A Journey to the East Indies, 1782–1786]. Christina Granroth, editor, in collaboration with Patricia Berg and Maren Jonasson. Helsinki & Stockholm, the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland, and Atlantis, 2008. 418 pages, illustrated.



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Editor-in-Chief of *Baltic Worlds*. Published the book *Palatset som Finland räddade* [The Palace that Finland Saved] in the spring of 2009—a book about a noble palace in Stockholm that Charles de Geer, entomologist and friend of Linnaeus, had built in the 1770s and which, since 1942, has been the ambassadorial residence of the Republic of Finland.



Hornstedts teckning av *Melaleuca leucadendra* (L.) L., kajeputträd, ibland kallat teträd (fam. Myrtaceae, myrtensväxter). Arten benämndes «Cayputi» i Rumphius Herbarium amboinense, vol. 2 från 1741. Tab. 56. Caju Buti s. Cajodouti: Batavia.

THE BALTIC SEA MAY be an inland sea, but it is not an introverted sea. It has been crossed by merchants and skippers, and the people who have lived among its archipelagos and skerries and along its coasts have also made their way out upon the oceans of the world. In an unforgettable novel trilogy, Ulla-Lena Lundberg depicted the rise of the Åland “bondeseglation”¹ to ocean-going traffic, and its subsequent decline in the era of the large steamer. This is literature that should be published in the great languages of the world!

Travelers of other temperaments have also burst forth from the proximity of these northerly waters. One of the town sons of Helsinki, Peter Forsskål (1732–1763) – whose *Tankar om borgerliga friheten* [Thoughts on Civic Freedom] came out 250 years ago – traveled to the Near East at the encouragement of his mentor Linnaeus, and died during his research trip in what is now Yemen. (His

adventures, too, have been depicted in novel form, in the Dane Thorkild Hansen’s *Det lykkelige Arabien* [The Happy Arabia/*Arabia felix*].) Others were more fortunate, including Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828), the founder of Japanese botany and the successor to Linnaeus’ chair in Uppsala (after an interlude during which it was occupied by Linnaeus’ son and namesake Carl).

THUNBERG ALSO SENT trainees to foreign lands. The last to undertake a truly great journey to another part of the world was Clas Fredrik Hornstedt (1758–1809). In 1783, he boarded one of the Swedish East India Company’s ships in Göteborg, “Sophia Magdalena”, and ended up in the large commercial station Batavia on the island of Java, the capital of the Dutch colonial empire. It was also the last time that the company was involved in sending naturalists on expeditions. Hornstedt stayed no more than a year or so on Java, though he did not see his native soil again for several years, because he remained on the European continent after his journey to Java in order to take a doctor’s degree in medicine in Greifswald in 1786.

Hornstedt made no academic career to speak of. At the age of thirty, he received a post as a senior master

at the secondary school in his native town of Linköping and in 1796 he was appointed medicus at the Fortress of Suomenlinna (known previously as Viapori in Finnish, or Sveaborg in Swedish) in the Gulf of Finland. When the fortress fell to the superior Russian forces in 1808, Hornstedt chose to enter into imperial service. (His wife had roots in what was to be the Finnish capital.) In 1809, he acquired the title of Russian Court Councillor, and in May of the same year he died after having caught a serious cold on the ice outside Helsinki.

HORNSTEDT FOLLOWED THE Linnaean tradition of keeping one’s eyes open and noting everything that crossed his path. He kept a diary, a kind of working journal, and wrote letters to his teacher, Thunberg, which were to form the backbone of a printed scientific travel report. No such book ever came out – until nearly two hundred years after his passing. In a beautiful, scientifically edited volume in Swedish, Hornstedt’s tale has been recounted with expert commentary and explanatory notes. Several essays on the historical development of his work frame the research report, and the volume is also rich with illustrations, including drawings of animals and plants by Hornstedt himself, and illustrations for a never completed textbook on Japanese acupuncture.

Hornstedt has gone down in the history of science primarily as an expert on plants, although there are those who hold him in higher regard as a zoologist. In the book, Bertil Nordenstam conducts a thorough review of Hornstedt’s botanical collections. His name is linked to a large genus in the Ginger family, *Zingiberaceae*. No fewer than 60 species of *Hornstedtia* are known, from Malaysia to Australia.

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REFERENCE

- ¹ *Bondeseglation* (Swedish definite form: *Bondeseglationen*) is a remarkable term, and remarkably difficult to translate. It refers very broadly to the merchant activities of peasants and small farmers, mostly in today’s Sweden (but also in the southwestern parts of today’s Finland), that began as early as in the Age of the Vikings, but which blossomed into a large-scale enterprise encompassing many communities along the Baltic Sea during the early 19th century. Literally, the word means “the taking to the seas of peasants and farmers”.