

Greate Pier (abt 1480 – 28 Oct 1520)

Family Relations of *Grutte Pier*:

- *Fourth great grandson of Haring Donia
- *First cousin three times removed of Ygo Gales Galama
- *Third cousin once removed of Jancko Douwama
- *Eleventh great grand uncle of *Nieskje (Jikke) Feenstra* (1912 -1994)



Copy of an etching of Grutte Pier from a book titled 'Chronycke ofte Historische Geschiedenis van Vrieslant'. Written by Frisian historian Pierius Winsemius (1586 - 1644) and published in 1622.

Grutte Pier, his life for the most part is shrouded by legends, but there is no doubt the Grutte Pier or Pier Gerlofs Donia really did exist. He was for a time a wealthy farmer in Western Friesland at the beginning of the sixteenth century near the terp village of Kimsward. Piers homestead Doniastate, was a short distance east of Kimsward along the Arumerdijk, between Kimsward and Arum. According to the annals a tower of a fellow as strong as an ox, of dark complexion, broad shouldered, with a long black beard. A natural rough humorist, who through unfortunate circumstances was recast into an awful brute. Out of personal revenge for the bloody injustice that befell him with the killing of kinsfolk and destruction of his property he became a freedom fighter of legendary standing. Although he was feared for his rough and merciless behavior he was admired for his love of freedom and justice. Nicknamed 'Grutte Pier' he regarded that the subjects of German Emperor Charles V (Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Germany, and grandson of Emperor Maximilian I) were his lawful prey to their life and possessions. Grutte Pier allotted himself many titles including; King of Frisia, Duke of Sneek,

Count of Sloten, Free-Lord of Hindeloopen and Admiral of the Zuiderzee.

Grutte Pier or Pierius Magnus was born Pier Gerlofs Donia (Pier Gerlofs), born about 1470 in Kimsward, Wonseradeel in Friesland. In about 1495 he married Rintze (Rintsje) Syrtsema (Rints Siersma), born about 1470 in Friesland. Pier and Rintz had two children: Wobble, born about 1500 and Gerlof, born 1506 and who died young.



Pier Gerlofs was one of at least four children born to Gerlofs Pier, born about 1440 and Fokel Sybrants Bonga, born about 1440. Piers sister Tijdt Gerlofs (Gerlofs-Annes-Gerlofs-Piers-Siercks-Gerlsma-Bangma-Feenstra-Langenberg descendants), born about 1474, married Anne Pijbes, born about 1470. Anne Pijbes, brother in-law of Grutte Pier, was partner in the property of Meylsmastate to Kimswert, and guardian of the children of Grutte Pier. Tijdt and Anne's son Pijbe Annes was to become 'Boargemaster fan Bolsward, skeepen en rintmaster' (mayor of Bolsward, sheriff and bailiff).

Pier Gerlofs was also known as Grutte Pier, Greate Pier (Friesian), Grote Pier and Pierius Magnus (Latin: Giant Pier). A Friesian folk hero he mainly fought the Hollanders and the Burgundians. Pier joined the 'vrijbuitersscharen' (a piracy group) and allied himself with Hertog



Hertog Karel van Gelre 1467 -1538

(Duke) Karel van Gelre to fight for Friesian freedom in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Karel van Gelre (1492 – 1538) was at the time trying to regain his Duchy from Filip the Handsome (Filip de Schone).

In 1515 Pier's village of birth Kimswerd was raided by Saxon mercenaries called the De Zwarte Bende (the Black band) who had mutinied because they had not received their pay. Pier's wife was raped and murdered and his village church and many homesteads including Pier's were destroyed by fire. Seeking revenge, Pier formed an army, the 'Arumer Zwarte

Hoop, the Arumer Black Heap (as in mass of individuals), to drive the Saxons out of Friesland and restore Friesian independence. The Saxon mercenaries were hired at a time when two Friesian parties, the Vetkopers and Schieringers were embroiled in a one hundred year civil war, the later having looked to the Saxons for aid. This conflict was a conflict between two monastic orders: The name Schieringer is possibly derived from 'Schiere Monniken' (grey monks) and the name Vetkopers derived from 'Fat Buyers' or traders in farming produce. The conflict led to the separation of Groningen and its surroundings from Friesland. Friesland came under the governance of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. in 1498 Emperor Maximilian dispatched one of his military commanders Duke Albrecht of Saxony as Governor of Friesland. In 1515 Albrecht died and was replaced by Duke George of Saxony.

On water Piers army was said to be unbeatable. Like true pirates his army would attack and board any ship of the enemy. An entire fleet of eleven Anglo-Saxon

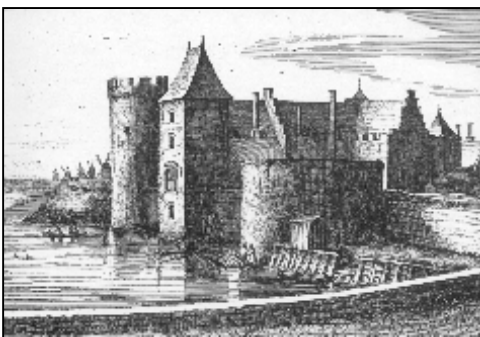
ships was beaten and the vessels captured. A Dutch fleet of war ships was also beaten in 1515 in the southern sea. From a fleet of thirty-six ships twenty-eight ships and a total crew of 400 men were captured. The victory led to his nickname 'the Cross of the Hollanders' (Het Kruis der Hollanders). In between fights with the enemy he also captured numerous merchant ships. Most of these he fitted out for battle. Pier's fleet consisted of so called 'Signal ships', small maneuverable ships of about 30 men that operated from the harbors of Workum and Makkum.



The helmet of legendary freedom fighter Greate Pier is on display at Stadhuis, Sneek, Friesland.

Pier played a great role fighting the ships who traveled the Zuiderzee (today it is called het IJsselmeer) and was very active in 1517 when he used his 'signal ships' to attack ships in the region of the West Friese coast and put the Gelderse forces on land at Medemblik. Pier had a great hate for Medemblik and its inhabitants. In earlier years

soldiers from Medemblik collaborated with the army of Holland then under the command of Charles v of Habsburg. On June 24, 1517, Grote Pier and his army the 'Zwarte Hoop' consisting of some 4,000 soldiers from Frisia and Gelre sailed to West Frisia, passing Enkhuizen, landing near Wevershoof and advancing to Medemblik. In no time Medemblik was captured. Many inhabitants were killed and many taken prisoner, while some were released on payment of a high ransom. Some of the towns inhabitants, fled to Medemblik Castle where they found safety. The castellan, Joost van Buren, succeeded in keeping the aggressors outside the castle gate. Realizing they would be unable to capture the castle the Zwarte Hoop plundered the town and set it on fire. Because most houses were made of wood, the town including the church, monastery and town hall were completely raised.



Medemblik Castle

With this partial victory Pier and his army stormed Nieuwburg castle and Middleburg Castle where they plundered and set them on fire. This destruction was the end of these mighty castles, only the ruins were left.

On the 11th of August 1517, in a fight on the sea near Hoorn he overtook an entire fleet of 11 Dutch ships, took possession and plundered Hoorn, followed by Texel, Wieringen and Emerink. In 1517 Pier Donia

with his mercenary stormed what was in the fifteenth century the strategically important fortified city of Asperen located on the inland edge of the province of South Holland (now of the province of Gelderland). Killing many of the

inhabitants the Zwarte Hoop used the fortified city as a base until driven out by Holland's Stadhouder.

Pier fought with a passion but never obtained freedom for the people of Friesland. In 1519 disillusioned, Pier discontinued his friendship with Karel van Gelre for he believed Karel would not bring freedom to Friesland and was acting in his own interests. Karel's aim was to rule Friesland and impose high taxes.

Pier's nephew Grutte Weird took over the command of Pier's forces. Pier left the fight in 1519 and died on the 28th of October 1520 in Sneek as a passive citizen and was buried in the Sneek Grote Kerk.

According to legend, Pier forced his captives to repeat the following shibboleth to distinguish Frisians from Dutch and Low Germans:

'butter, brea en griene tsiis
Hwa dat net sizze ken, I nin rjuichte Fries'

Translated: Butter, bread and green cheese, who not can say that, is no right Frisian.

Captured ships whose crew could not pronounce this shibboleth properly were plundered. Legend has it that if Pier was not satisfied with the reply he would decapitate his unfortunate victim with his immense two-handed sword, which was 2.13 metres long and weighed 6.6 kilograms. The sword, now in the museum of Leeuwarden, is believed to have been made in Passau, Southern Germany in the 15th century. Such two-handed swords were used by the elite soldiers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to beat a bres in the hostile lines.

The sword has the inscription INRI; an abbreviation for the Latin words 'Iesus Nazarenvs Rex Ivdæorvm' (i.e. 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews').



Grotte Pier was also credited for making the remark 'Better dead than slave'.

Although regarded by some as a pirate, pier is regarded by most Friesians as an honest farmer treated badly by the Hollanders, Geldersen and Germans, and is regarded as Friesland's greatest freedom-fighter.

A statue of Pier Gerlofs Donia in Kimswerd, Friesland. The caption on the foot of statue reads "Grutte Pier".

Above text compiled by Eric Langenberg

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