

Dutch South African Literature

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The only statue for the Dutch language is situated approximately ten thousand kilometres from the Netherlands and Belgium in Burgersdorp, in the Eastern Cape Province. This is how it came about. The enfranchised voters of Albert, a border district of the Cape Colony with Burgersdorp as its administrative centre, were fervent zealots for the Dutch language. Due to their efforts, amongst other things, Dutch was permitted in the Parliament of the British Cape Colony in 1882, after it had lacked every form of official recognition since 1822. In celebration of this event, a statue for the Dutch language was erected in Burgersdorp in 1893: a marble woman on a granite pedestal. With her right hand's index finger she pointed to a tablet in her left arm on which was written: 'The Victory of the Dutch Language'. On the pedestal were some distichs, among which the following, which describes the extent of the recognition of Dutch:

*Erkend is nu de moedertaal
in raad, kantoor en schoollokaal.*

The mother tongue is now recognised
in council-, office- and classroom.

The inauguration of the statue took place in 1893 on a grand scale for this sparsely populated region. There was a cavalcade of five hundred mounted farmers under the leadership of Oom Daantjie van den Heever, one of the initiators. The two leaders of the Afrikaans Nationalist Movement, 'Onze Jan' Hofmeyr and the reverend S.J. du Toit, came all the way from the Western Cape to give festival addresses. 'Onze Jan', leader of the Afrikaner Bond, toasted 'Onze Taal', under which he understood the language of 'Hooft and Vondel, Helmers and Tollens, Bilderdijk and Da Costa ... Van der Palm and Oosterzee' and 'Afrikaans-Dutch', the special variety spoken in South Africa. He concluded his speech with: 'Long live the Language!' (Hofmeyr 1913:492)¹.

¹ Hooft and Vondel are well-known Dutch poets from the seventeenth century, the others are popular Dutch writers of the nineteenth century.

The marble lady couldn't point to victory for very long. The Boer War broke out in 1899 and in the following year the statue was destroyed by British troops. The Dutch language thereby lost her head and arms, and naturally also the tablet bearing the triumphant text. Not long after the vandalism, the rest of the statue was removed from Burgersdorp to an unknown destination. It was thought that the English had thrown it into the sea.

After the war, in 1907, the British government presented Burgersdorp with a replica of the statue as a gesture of reconciliation. Years later, in 1939, the remains of the original statue were accidentally unearthed in King William's Town, a few hundred kilometres from Burgersdorp. The headless and armless statue was subsequently returned to Burgersdorp and erected behind the replica². It is still standing like that, together with the replica the most important sight in town.

The history of this statue occurred during what might be called the end of the reign of Dutch in South Africa. This reign commenced in 1652 and was soon confined to the church, education, correspondence, civil service, and polite conversation. On the farmyards and in the veld, an early version of Afrikaans was presumably already spoken at the end of the seventeenth century.

Although the importance of Dutch as a spoken language was soon limited, its meaning as a written language remained significant until the twentieth century. In the 270 years during which Dutch was used as a written language in South Africa, a vast collection of written material, mostly in forms not usually regarded as literature, came into being: diaries, travel journals, letters, articles in newspapers and magazines, historical treatises, as well as novels, drama and poetry.

In South African literary histories of the last few years, little attention has been paid to this Dutch South African literature. Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures*, published in 1996, is an example of this tendency. The history of the Dutch South African literature—a period of some 270 years—is reduced to two pages (Chapman 1996:77-78). This essay is aimed at focusing more attention on the vast corpus of texts—which include the oldest texts written in South Africa—at present neglected in the writing of South African literary history.

Dutch South African literature has not always evoked so little interest. Especially in the thirties, the situation was different. Then, the first Afrikaans literary historians were being confronted with the question of where, from a nationalist point of view, the boundaries between foreign and local should be drawn. Where did Afrikaans literature, and consequently the work of the Afrikaans literary historian, begin? At the start of the written Dutch literature, or in 1652? Or in 1795 ('Lied ter ere van de

² The information on the history of the language monument was taken from: De Wet s.d.; Cilliers (1982); Dreyer (1916).

Swellendamse en diverse ander helden', written in Dutch with an Afrikaans tone), or about 1830 when Afrikaans was being used for comic effect in some newspaper articles and plays, or, again, in 1875 when the Genootschap van Regte Afrikaners (Association of Real Afrikaners) was founded and the struggle for the recognition of Afrikaans began? The proper beginning of the historical narrative is subject to discussion for the Afrikaans literary historian; it is not a given, as it is for the Dutch literary historian who can start with the fragment of a poem from 1150, 'Hebban olla vogala ...', because nothing older has been handed down.

The main topic under discussion is in most cases the corpus of Dutch writings which originated in South Africa. Its status is, after all, dubious, to a nationalistically oriented Afrikaans literary historian. The texts were written by 'ancestors' sharing the same territory as the historians and in many cases already using Afrikaans as a spoken language. The historian is being directly confronted with the question whether this was indigenous, whether these Dutch writings belonged to the cultural heritage of the Afrikaners and thus to their history (Conradie 1934:87). The *communis opinio* was eventually that Dutch writings of South Africa could only be considered as belonging to Afrikaans literature if an Afrikaans national spirit could be discovered in them. The methods used to divine this national spirit were perfectly arbitrary. When the historian found something in the Dutch tradition that agreed with his own concepts of Afrikaans thinking or feeling, the text in question received a stamp of approval and was labelled 'Afrikaans'. In other cases, for example when the author revealed himself a 'negrophile', the texts were labelled as being 'Dutch'. In most cases it boiled down to the projection of ethnic conceptions of selfhood upon texts that originated within an entirely other historical context (Huigen 1996a:4-12).

The development of the Dutch South African literature cannot easily be contained in a brief review. The insufficient state of present research leaves us only a rough historical framework, which I would like to relate to the production and reception of texts. To that purpose I will pay special attention to factors influencing the written communication: by whom were the texts written, printed and read (the conditions of the written communication) and which factors determined this. The political developments, the nature of the written language (Dutch or Afrikaans), the presence or absence of a printing press and the relations between South Africa and the Netherlands are important, from this point of view. Due to the present inadequacy of supporting research, this method promises to be the safest approach. The resulting construct, however, can be no more than a superficial sketch³.

³ For this attempt at periodising, the information had to be compiled from studies of which some are already obsolete: Kannemeyer (1978); Conradie (1934); Antonissen s.d.; Besselaar (1914); Nienaber and Nienaber (1941); Malherbe (1925); Coetzee (1941); (1963); Mansvelt (1902); De Villiers 1936; Ploeger (1952); Scholtz n.d.; Steyn (1980); Muller (1990); Ponelis (1993); Zietsman (1992). Du Toit and Giliomee (1983); Du Toit (1985).

While bearing the above-mentioned limitations in mind, I wish to distinguish between three phases:

1. The period from approximately 1596 to 1652;
2. from 1652 to 1800; and
3. from 1800 to 1925.

The language—Afrikaans or Dutch—does play a role in this periodisation, but is not all-determining. Issues concerning the production and reception of texts, as well as political factors, are equally important.

1596-1652

The oldest Dutch publication in which attention is paid to Southern Africa—not specifically South Africa—is that of Jan Huygen van Linschoten (the *Itinerario*) which appeared in Amsterdam in 1596 (Kern 1955). Jan Huygen wanted specifically to inform the home front about the route to the treasures of the East. But on the occasion of a visit to the Portuguese colony on the island of Mozambique (near Maputo), he included some observations on the 'empire' of Monomotapa, rich in gold, in the interior of South Africa. This had consequences. Jan Huygen's mention saw to it that the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) investigated the interior of the Cape of Good Hope in the years following 1652⁴.

The limited attention to South Africa in the *'Itinerario'* is typical of the majority of representations in this period. Any mention was merely incidental. People were underway to the East Indies or home, and went ashore in South Africa only for fresh water. In the travel literature, this led to some remarks on the country and its inhabitants. Whereas Jan Huygen established the image of the rich, urbanised interior of southern Africa, other short visits to the coastal regions of South Africa accounted for the stereotyped image of the dirty, stinking, ugly Hottentots on the coast, 'clockende ghelijck als Calkoensche-Hanen' (gobbling like turkeys), that remained current even after 1652⁵.

1652-1800

The Dutch interest in South African affairs made a qualitative and quantitative leap

⁴ The earliest visit to the Cape was the expedition under the leadership of Cornelis de Houtman from 5 to 10 August 1599, as described by William Lodewycksz in *D'Eerste Boeck* (Amsterdam 1598) (G.P. Rouffaer and IJzerman 1915; 1925).

⁵ *De reis van Joris van Spilbergen naar Ceylon, Atjeh en Bantam 1601-1604*, 18.

after the establishment of a refreshment station in 1652. The consequences, however, extended further still. The beginning of the Dutch colonial government at the Cape was an event of great importance for modern South African history. In 1652 the (forced) integration of South Africa and its inhabitants into Western European culture—initially its Dutch colonial variant—began, and the country was received into the world economy.

This also had important consequences for the production of texts. The colonial settlement led to the opening up of the interior. In addition to the continuing casual references to South Africa in itineraries, locally produced descriptions of land and travel with more to offer than the obligatory stereotypical depictions of 'Hottentotten' began to emerge. The Dutch language and written Dutch culture were established at the Cape. The foundations were laid for a South African literary circuit⁶.

Initially, the extent of the local South African circuit, founded in 1652, was limited and strongly oriented towards the Netherlands. By far the majority of texts created during this period in South Africa was produced by the VOC-bureaucracy for internal use. These texts were mainly intended to keep the overseas rulers informed. What was produced outside the sphere of the VOC pales into insignificance compared to these texts. Since there was no printing press at the Cape during the time of the VOC, and no literary societies, it was difficult for anything written at the Cape to be disseminated outside the circles of family and friends. A regional literary culture comparable to those which then existed in Europe was impossible. Poetry about South Africa published during this period, for example, was written exclusively by visitors, authors who had stopped at the Cape in the employ of the VOC, and were published in the Netherlands. All the printed matter in South Africa had to be imported.

The absence of a local printing press, coupled with subordination to the authority of the VOC, also meant that public political actions by inhabitants of the Cape had to take place via the Netherlands. The highest authority was there, as well as the means for the reproduction of texts. This happened twice in the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century, with the petitions against the government of Willem Adriaan van der Stel (with the subsequent reaction of the governor) and, at the end of the century, the pamphlets of the Cape patriots (Dominicus 1928; Schutte 1974).

1800-1925

Roundabout 1800 two changes took place which deeply influenced the cultural situation at the Cape. In 1795 the English occupied the Cape. It was only ever to be gov-

⁶ By literary circuit I mean a system within which texts are produced (written) and read. Before 1652, no literary circuit existed in South Africa. There were, however, oral circuits. These (the 'orature'), I disregard in the following.

erned by the Dutch again for a short period (1803-1806). Additionally, a printing press was installed in Cape Town sometime before 1796. With this, the conditions for the real unfolding of a local literary circuit were fulfilled.

The end of Dutch government led to the Cape colonists' gradual estrangement from Dutch culture. So it seems that during the nineteenth century, people at the Cape lost their loyalty towards the Netherlands. Although the slaves still called out 'there go *vaderlanders*' upon seeing a Dutchman, according to the Dutch East Indian official Teenstra in 1825, in South African glossaries toward the end of the nineteenth century the word 'vaderlanders' in the meaning of 'someone from Holland' was labelled obsolete (cf. Van der Merwe 1971).

In addition to cultural estrangement, the end of Dutch government also caused linguistic alienation. In the colony, English government provided mainly English public education, with Dutch given a subordinate status. The active command of Dutch accordingly diminished under pupils who had Afrikaans as their mother tongue. When the future superintendent of education of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (the Transvaal), N. Mansvelt, taught Dutch in 1874 at the Stellenbosch *gymnasium*, he was even confronted with resistance from his pupils:

So little value was generally attached to the study of Dutch that, during one of the first classes, while I was handing out the other pupils' essays, one of the eldest pupils, a son of a Dutch-Afrikaans minister no less, tore up, without even a glance, an essay which I had meticulously corrected (Mansvelt 1901:505)

Although the rising Afrikaner-nationalism and the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Taalbond*, founded in 1890 to further the Dutch language in South Africa, did succeed in proving the constitutional position of Dutch in the Cape Colony, it did not accomplish an effective equalisation with English. English remained dominant in education and in public discourse. The amount of Dutch published in South Africa did, however, increase, and with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism after 1880, the desire to have a proper command of Dutch also flared up. To have a good command of Dutch appears to have become a sign of Afrikaner ethnicity by the end of the nineteenth century.

In the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (the Transvaal), the more important of the two Boer Republics, the constitutional position of Dutch had always been better than in the Cape Colony. Dutch was the only official language, and due to Mansvelt, who filled the post of superintendent of education, a Dutch public education apparatus for white children was created in the 1890's (Mansvelt 1901). Developments in the Orange Free State were less favourable for the Dutch language. Although Dutch was the official language, English predominated in various official functions.

For this third phase, the installation of printing presses about 1800 was of special importance. The printing press made possible a regional circuit of discourse. Books,

newspapers and magazines produced by local authors and printers could now appear on the local market. Dutch texts coming from South African presses were generally not read abroad. The increasing linguistic and cultural differences with the Netherlands and the Dutch language further necessitated the publication of literature aimed at the local market. Dutch literature, as it appeared around 1900 in South Africa, therefore had to be written preferably in simplified Dutch and had to deal with South African issues. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Afrikaans gradually began to be used. The production of texts in Afrikaans did not, however, outstrip that of Dutch texts before the twentieth century.

The loss of the Cape did not mean that after 1806 publications concerning South Africa ceased in the Netherlands. Initially there weren't that many. This changed shortly after the successful Transvaal rebellion against the British government in 1881. Tales about the Boer successes became a way of redeeming the national self-respect damaged during the nineteenth century. Many of these publications must have reached South Africa via the book trade or by book shipments from the Netherlands. Of great importance for South Africa were Dutch books on South African history. The reception of these works of history also illustrates the difficulty in differentiating the Dutch from the Dutch-South African circuit in this period. The Dutch histories, published in the Netherlands, are even now considered by historians as specimens of Afrikaner historiography (Huigen 1996a: 116-117). Something similar took place regarding Dutch literature. Thus 'Onze Jan' Hofmeyr celebrated the great Dutch writers at the inauguration of the statue for 'onze taal' in Burgersdorp. The Dutch literary circuit overlapped the South African circuit. It is only for the South African Dutch texts that a separate circuit may be identified during this period. These texts were published and read only in South Africa. From this originally Dutch circuit, the Afrikaans one eventually evolved. Publishers, magazines, newspapers and authors who initially published Dutch literature, gradually changed over to the production of Afrikaans texts in the twentieth century. The circuit as such did not change, though.

I regard the increasing use of Afrikaans as written language—accelerated after 1905 with the emergence of the Second Afrikaans Language Movement—to be a decisive factor in the eventual demise of Dutch South African literature at the beginning of this century. As Dutch was increasingly pushed aside by Afrikaans (from the schools in 1914; from Parliament in 1925) it was used less and less as written language. After 1925 only immigrants still used Dutch in South Africa.

In the context of South African literature as a whole, Dutch South African literature in the time of the VOC (1652-1795) might be regarded as the most interesting. These texts are the oldest colonial South African writings. Contrary to other early colonial texts written in other languages, these were mostly written by people who had settled in South Africa.

To a great extent, the texts from this period are products of the VOC: outgoing letters, journals, reports and notices. They were written in the course of the author's official duties, mostly in the VOC's service. Among these texts are also found descriptions of South Africa and its original inhabitants. When these texts are read in their mutual relatedness, it is possible to trace the developments of discourses about the South African reality. As an example of such discourses, I would like to consider the Dutch discourse concerning the northern interior of South Africa in the seventeenth century.

Before the founding of a colony in 1652, there already existed an image of the South African interior, going back to Portuguese sources via Jan Huygen van Linschoten's *Itinerario*. According to that image, Southern Africa was divided into a civilised interior with the 'empire' Monomotapa at its heart and an uncivilised coastal region inhabited by wild 'Hottentots'. The civilised interior was, moreover, economically important. There was a lot of gold in Monomotapa, wrote Jan Huygen van Linschoten. Therefore, quite soon after the founding of the refreshment station, expeditions were sent out to establish trade contacts with Monomotapa. Between 1660 and 1664, seven expeditions were sent out, but none of them succeeded in making any contact with Monomotapa. When news reached the Cape that copper was to be found in the North-West, four more expeditions were sent northwards between 1682 and 1686. Copper was in fact found in the vicinity of today's Springbok, but the means of exploring these reserves were lacking (Huigen 1996a:24).

The expeditions were always required to keep travel journals. To ensure that useful information was returned, the expeditions were issued with lists of questions about the economy, forms of government and the appearance of the alien peoples. This methodisation of travel in the seventeenth century was not unique to the Cape. From the sixteenth century onward, the educational travels in Europe were 'scientifically' founded on the *ars apodemica*, the 'art' of travel (Stagl 1979). The VOC also made use of these techniques to ensure that useful information was gathered in foreign regions (Huigen 1996).

An important place in the reports from the northern interior was occupied by the Namaquas. Comparing the varying reports about the Namaquas in Dutch writings yields important insights into the developments of the early modern European representation of South Africa.

The reports concerning the Namaquas were initially extremely favourable. It was supposed that they were in communication with the centre of African civilisation, namely Monomotapa. Indigenous informants such as the interpreter Eva (Krotoa) reinforced these suppositions. According to Eva, the Namaquas lived in stone houses, dressed neatly, went to church and prayed to God, and had black slaves to serve them, 'they themselves being whitish with long hair'. They were moreover eager to trade

their plentiful cattle and large stores of ivory for copper and beads (Boëseken 1957:182).

The third expedition of the VOC was the first to come into contact with the Namaquas. This expedition left the Cape in January 1661. The journal keeper on this journey was the later spouse of Eva, surgeon Pieter van Meerhoff. Unlike many other journal keepers, Van Meerhoff is personally present in his text. His journal contains a personal description, almost cinematographically observed, of the first encounter with the Namaquas:

Toward the evening a fire was lit on the mountain W.S.W. of us. I, Pieter van Meerhoff, took with me two of our Hottentots and went toward it. Halfway there, Donckeman [one of the Khoi guides] started calling: 'Mr. Pieter, Namaqua'. I looked up and counted 23 of them, standing on the rocks and looking at us. I went somewhat further and the Hottentots became so distraught, ... they took their shoes from their feet and wanted to run back, saying: 'Namaqua boeba kros coqua'. I took my glass to see whether this was so; I saw that they were armed with dry skins and were carrying skins over their left arms, bows and arrows on their shoulders and in either hand an assegai. I reassured my Hottentots and said they should not be afraid, the Namaquas wouldn't do us harm (Bosman & Thom III 1952-1957:484).

Van Meerhoff climbed up to visit the Namaquas, coercing his Hottentots to accompany him. Upon reaching the top, they cried that there was tobacco, beads and copper for trade. However, because of the encroaching darkness, no meeting took place on the evening of the 18th February 1661.

The next day, the Namaquas appeared at the camp. The ritual of introduction, in which Van Meerhoff took the starring role, began:

At last one of them came to about a musket shot from us; the others remained sitting in the bush. I let our Hottentots go and meet them; the Namaquas sat down on one side of the morass and our Hottentots on the other side. They called at one another for a long time before they dared to approach us. At last they came over. So I, Pieter van Meerhoff, took a pipe of tobacco in my mouth and likewise approached them, to see whether they too had knowledge of tobacco. Having reached them, one of them immediately came, who took the pipe from my mouth and started to smoke; they had been from time to time with the Cape Hottentots (Bosman & Thom III 1952-1957:485).

During this first encounter, Van Meerhoff was impressed by the imposing presence of the king of the Namaquas and his three sons. They were larger than Cattibou, the largest slave of the Company. In later reports about the Namaquas, this remark was extended to the Namaquas in general. This happens already in the Cape journal where they are described as 'very strong folk, half-giants' (Bosman & Thom III 1952-1957:341).

As an appendix to the journal text, Van Meerhoff gave a description of the Namaquas—the 'Memorandum of their occasions and manner of clothing etc.' In this, he says that the Namaquas resemble the Hottentots of the Cape in their forms of settlement and their hair styles (Bosman & Thom III 1952-1957:487). The first point was repeated in the Cape journal in an afterword to the expedition (Bosman & Thom III 1952-1957:341). All of this made it problematic to retain the association of the Namaquas with the civilised interior. As yet, however, the idea endured unchanged.

After Van Riebeeck's time, however, the Namaquas came to be shown in an ill light. Apparently because of a changed policy toward the Dutch, the sixth and seventh expeditions encountered resistance from the Namaquas. The sixth expedition was confronted with open hostility from the Namaquas: 'they said that unless we turned around, they would fight against us' (Godée Molsbergen 1916 I:91-93). Commander Wagenaar, in a letter to the Lords Seventeen, interpreted this as the Namaquas' distrust of the Dutch (Godée Molsbergen 1916 I:113).

During the next phase of expeditions northward (1682-1686) the hostile policy of the Namaquas against the Dutch was sustained. The expedition under Oloff Bergh (1682) felt that it was betrayed and mocked, and found itself forced to return. During Van der Stel's journey (1685-6) similar problems cropped up. The Dutch had to listen to a recalcitrant tribal leader telling them that although at the Cape they needed but to say the word, they were now in Namaqualand, and things were different here (Valentyn 1971:282). In the end, this certainly contributed to the disappearance from official papers of the initially favourable image of the Namaquas. Another factor was habits that differed from the Dutch. In the text accompanying a depiction of a Namaqua by Hendrik Claudius (1686), the negative prejudices are itemised:

... living rough without any laws or religion ... seem to fear nothing but the thunder and the lightning, are extremely untruthful and deceitful, eating everything they come across, even rats, dogs, cats, caterpillars, grasshoppers, &c., only for hares do they have aversion and repulsion ... their women they happily loan each other, so they become the more lecherous the less their men are jealous ... (Waterhouse 1979:412/414).

By now the Namaquas have become beings from an inverted world, preferring their own filthy grub to tasty hares. For them, a delicacy would be a green caterpillar to be either grilled over a wood fire after 'the green filth has been squeezed out' or cooked in 'its own green juice' (Waterhouse 1979:414). In short, the Namaquas were 'wild men', as is remarked in a description of the festivities surrounding the birthday of commander Van der Stel in Namaqualand. By now, even the fact that the Namaquas were capable of orderly dancing was considered astonishing (Valentyn 1971:292).

There were both empirical and ontological reasons for moving the Namaquas to the 'wild' category in the official documents of the VOC. Since antiquity, a taxonomic distinction between the self and the other has been operative in the European experience of the unknown. The stranger was a savage, a heathen, wild, the opposite of the self-image of the European (Koselleck 1979). Since the sixteenth century, this self-image has become insinuated in the entire Western European way of life (Van den Boogaart 1982:14). This development is visible also in southern Africa, in confrontations with indigenous populations. The Khoi were considered repulsive because they did not behave themselves according to Dutch and, in general, European standards of civilised behaviour: comprehensible language, acceptable eating habits, neat clothing—the products of the civilizing process that began in the Middle Ages (Elias 1978-1982). The Namaquas, on the other hand, behaved just like the Dutch; at least according to Eva. After all, they did wear neat clothes, live in fine houses, go to church, and so on. Consequently they were attractive representatives of the civilised interior. Experience, however, provided the insight that the Namaquas did not in fact behave like the Dutch. To this was added their apparent 'deceitfulness'. The result was that they were assigned a new place in the taxonomy: in the journal of the last expedition they become 'wild people' like the Cape Khoi were from the beginning.

The demotion of the Namaquas, their textual removal from the civilised interior to the wild peripheral regions, necessitated an adjustment in the Dutch discourse of southern Africa. Although the Namaquas were not yet quite as loathsome in the early sixties as they were later to become, they were also not the suitable trading partners with access to Monomotapa that they were initially presumed to be. In the imaginary discourse of the interior, this resulted in the removal of the border of civilisation further inland. The role of civilised intermediaries to Monomotapa was now ascribed to other peoples: the Brigodys ('Brickje'), the Chobonas or Choboquas, Bri and Gri ('Grienbri') (Mossop 1931:120) all began to take over the role of the Namaquas in representation. The border between wild and civilised was also increasingly identified with the imaginary river Vigiti Magna. It was revealed that the Namaquas were wild and that they lived a few days' journey from the Vigiti Magna. The Namaquas had assured the expeditions that the intervening region was dry. The civilised agriculturists were thus to be sought on the banks of the Vigiti Magna. This river, therefore, became a goal of later expeditions.

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