

# Willem Piso (1611 – 1678)

Willem Piso (in Dutch Willem Pies, in Latin Guilielmus Piso), the son of Hermann Pies, a church organist, and Cornelia van Liesvelt, was born in 1610 in Leiden, in the Dutch province of South Holland. He studied medicine at the University of Leiden and then at Caen in France, graduating in 1633. Returning to the Netherlands, he practised medicine in Amsterdam for four years. In 1637 the Dutch West India Company appointed him personal physician to Count Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, governor of the colony of Dutch Brazil in South America. During his tenure from 1636 to 1644, the count governed with skill, wisdom and tolerance, irrespective of race or religion. He was aware of the value of scientific investigation of the territory, and Piso became part of the undertaking.



## *Pisonia brunoniana*

*Pisonia* is a genus of 35–40 species of shrubs or trees with opposite to slightly whorled leaves, found mainly in Australia, and one species in New Zealand. *Pisonia brunoniana*, parapara, is a quick-growing, spreading, multi-trunked and freely coppicing tree up to 6 metres or more tall, its large, thin, glossy green leaves tending to hang down. Panicles of small greenish flowers appear throughout the year, the five calyx lobes, joined with the appearance of petals, containing fruit. These turn black and sticky as they ripen and sometimes trap small birds, hence the name, bird-catcher tree. In New Zealand, the species grows in coastal forest on the offshore islands of the Auckland coast and scattered along mainland shores as far south as the Bay of Plenty.

He arrived in Brazil early in 1638 with other scientists, including astronomer Georg Markgraf (1610–1644), who had studied at universities in Germany, Switzerland and then Leiden in the Netherlands. Both men had medical practices in Recife and Markgraf also had an observatory. They accompanied the count on his military campaigns against the Portuguese, served as surgeons to the Dutch troops and investigated the natural riches of the country. Piso's interest was mainly in the medicinal plants, and he later completed four books on the subject (*De Medicina Brasiliense*) for *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae*, while Markgraf worked on a further eight books on the region's botany and zoology, and also prepared data for a large map of Brazil (published posthumously in 1647). The scientists were part of the count's inner circle until his return to the Netherlands in 1644. Piso went back with him, but Markgraf was sent by the West India Company to Angola, and died there shortly after his arrival.

Back in the Netherlands Piso settled first in Leiden and then Amsterdam, where he became an important member of the scientific community. *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* was published in 1648 after Markgraf's contribution had been edited by Johannes de Laet (1593–1649). Piso's four books, which included descriptions of diseases and their native remedies, and physical problems resulting from dietary deficiencies, established him as one of the earliest authorities on tropical medicine. He was also an early advocate of eating citrus fruit to prevent scurvy. In 1655 Willem Piso was appointed Inspector of the Amsterdam Medical School and he later became its dean. He published in 1658, under his own name and with a new title, a second edition of the *Historia*, but tarnished his reputation with his careless and inaccurate treatment of Markgraf's writings. Nevertheless he established a highly successful medical practice, amassed a large personal fortune, and after his death in Amsterdam on 28 November 1678 was buried in the city's historic Westerkerk.

The plant genus name *Pisonia* was first used in 1703 by Father Plumier "in honour of Dr Piso, who published a natural history of Brazil", and was validated by Carl Linnaeus in 1753.

[See also "Robert Brown (1773 – 1858)" in *Common Ground: who's who in New Zealand botanical names*, Val Smith (2015), p. 57]