

I Pointed AI at 400 Years of Historical Archives. It Found a Forgotten Meteorite, Lost Rhinos, and Unrecorded Volcanic Eruptions.

October 8, 2026

How I used AI to investigate millions of historical records and surfaced a forgotten meteorite report, three lost rhinos, and unrecorded volcano eruptions.

Last week, on October 1st, 2026, the historian Benjamin Breen published a post called [*Using Opus 5.5 to discover a new eyewitness account of the dodo*](#). He used AI to search digitized records from the Dutch East India Company. The Company dominated the spice trade and ran a string of ports across Asia from 1602 until it collapsed under its debts and was dissolved in 1799.

A project called GLOBALISE has turned millions of the Company's handwritten pages into searchable text. Searching those transcriptions with AI, Breen found a 1615 ship's journal in which sailors on Mauritius "caught many tortoises, dodos". A new eyewitness record of the extinct dodo, sitting in plain sight for four hundred years.

I read the article and immediately thought, I can do this.

Not because I'm a historian, but because I'm a software engineer who happens to be very adept at piloting AI agents and creating agentic workflows. Breen's post was the inspiration, and I wanted to extend the approach: I could search for many different historical mysteries in parallel, and I could chain together a few different AI models to filter

results and automate a few of the cumbersome, time consuming manual steps.

But the appeal went beyond the technical challenge. I think there's something honorable about adding to what we know. Adding even one new data point to a couple of niche fields felt like a small but worthwhile contribution to make. I thought it would be really cool if I could do that.

I powered on my small but capable home AI lab and got to work.

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The Plan

I started by asking an AI “Deep Research” assistant a question: which open historical questions are most likely to be solvable with data that already exists online? It came back with thirteen candidates, ranked by how complete and accessible the data was, how much AI could help, whether anyone had already done it, and, most importantly, whether an answer could be checked against an original page. AI models can be confidently wrong, so every claim had to end at a real document: a scan of the actual handwritten letter or the actual printed newspaper, with an archive reference that anyone can look up and read for themselves. The list included animals in the Dutch East India Company archives, a giant volcanic eruption from 1808 that nobody has ever located, felt earthquakes in old Dutch newspapers, unrecorded meteorite falls, and ships that completely vanished.

Then I teamed up with Claude Code, Anthropic's AI tool, and we invented this research pipeline together.

Archive4.35M pagesSearch5.7M passagesFilterJevReadClaude
HaikuVerifyScans + cataloguesNovel discoveryA new finding!
01 Archive02 Search03 Filter04 Read05 Verify06 Novel discovery

A candidate discovery supported by the original documents and absent from the catalogues Jesse checked. The evidence is verified; specialist review is still next.

First came the reading material: the GLOBALISE transcriptions of the Dutch East India Company archive (4.35 million pages, from the 1600s to the 1790s), the Dutch national library's digitized newspapers, two centuries of American newspapers, and a few ship logbooks for good measure.

If I sat down to read just the Dutch East India Company pages myself, at two minutes a page, eight hours a day, five days a week, it would take me about 70 years. And that's before the newspapers. My homebrew AI lab got through the entire archive in a single twelve-hour overnight run.

The trouble with old documents is that nobody spelled anything the same way twice. Handwriting and old print come out of text recognition full of errors, and 17th-century Dutch spells "rhinoceros" about fifteen different ways. A plain keyword search would miss most of what I was looking for. That overnight run was my graphics card turning every passage into a mathematical fingerprint of its meaning, 5.7 million passages from the Dutch East India Company archive alone. That let me search for what a passage was about, not just which words it happened to use.

Even then, a single search could return tens of thousands of hits, far too many for a person, or even a big AI model, to read affordably. Instead, the first read went to a tiny, fast "System One" decision model called Jev, which answers only narrow questions: Is this a real animal? Is it wild? Where is it? It costs a few cents per million words. Having it read 59,000 mentions of elephants cost me about \$3 USD. I could have simplified the pipeline and read them all with Haiku instead, but that would have cost

significantly more money and taken much more time than the combined Jev + Haiku approach, where Jev gates which passages the more powerful Haiku model should read.

That's the part of this project I'm proudest of, and it was my idea, not the AI's. When I proposed using Jev as a filtering mechanism, Claude Code's Fable model didn't yet know what a System One type decision model was; I had to explain the idea before we could build the pipeline around it. In most research like this, the bottleneck is a person reading candidate passages one by one and deciding which are worth a closer look. Putting a cheap, fast judge in that seat automated the initial screening and freed me to focus on the strongest candidates and the direction of the investigation. The pages I examined closely had already survived two rounds of machine reading.

Only the passages Jev flagged moved on. Claude Haiku, a bigger model, read those few dozen closely, translated them and pulled out the dates and places. Then the Claude Code agent opened the scan of each original handwritten page to check the transcription against the original. Before calling anything new, I checked it against the catalogues the specialists themselves use.

A quick note on how AI was used in this project: I stayed actively involved in the process throughout and piloted the AI through the course of the entire project. I steered the investigation toward new questions and sources, decided which leads were worth pursuing, and recognized when I was grasping at straws and needed to move on. The systems could search and read at a scale I couldn't, but deciding where to go next, or when to stop, still took my judgment. This was AI-assisted research, not a completely autonomous investigation.

There was one more rule, and it mattered most. Before you trust a search that finds nothing, you have to prove it can find something you already know is there. So before I went looking for anything new, the pipeline had to find Breen's dodo, the Laki eruption of 1783, Tambora in 1815 and a dozen other known events.

It's like testing a metal detector by burying your own wristwatch in the front yard. **You know it's there.** If the detector can't find it, you know you have a problem with your detector to address before sweeping elsewhere for real treasure. These known historical events were my buried wristwatch: a way to check that the pipeline could find something before taking its failures to find anything seriously.

The controls passed, and I began the real search, working through the list the deep research agent generated. Shortly thereafter, my custom-built AI research pipeline started surfacing pages that may not have been read by anyone since the clerk who originally wrote them filed them away, stories that human eyes may not have read in hundreds of years.

The Meteorite History Forgot

The first real find of the project came from somewhere I didn't expect: a newspaper printed in Batavia (today's Jakarta) in the year 1812. Batavia sits on Java, the large island in what is now Indonesia that was the centre of Dutch power in Asia for nearly two centuries, and the newspaper was printed there during the few years (1811–1816) when Britain, not the Netherlands, ran the island.

On 19 December 1812 the English-language *Java Government Gazette* reprinted a letter from the *Bombay Gazette* of 26 August. An officer with a British force camped near Pandharpur, in what is now Maharashtra, wrote home:

“Captain M— is in possession of a great curiosity viz. a stone precipitated from a Thunder-cloud near the village of Cokurrgaum three days ago (the 6th August). It weighs I should think four pounds at least, is very heavy for its size, being greatly impregnated with iron, and coated with a

The thunder was heard “like a rustling fire of Musquetry for about half a minute.” The stone had buried itself a foot deep in open ground. And it was recovered “with some difficulty, as the Pattell [the village headman], conceiving the stone of Heavenly fabrication, had determined to say his prayers to it, with due regularity.”

Captain M's meteorite account, reprinted from the *Bombay Gazette* of 26 August 1812 in the *Java Government Gazette*, 19 December 1812, p. 3. Detail from the second column. [View the full newspaper scan on Delpher](#)

Booming, a heavy iron-rich stone, a thin black crust, a crater in a field: that's a textbook meteorite fall. Notice what the letter never says: the word "meteorite" appears nowhere in it. To the officer it was a "great curiosity", a stone "precipitated from a Thunder-cloud". He had no better word for it: in 1812 "meteorite" barely existed in English, its earliest recorded uses date from the 1820s, and science itself had only accepted that stones fall from the sky a decade earlier. **A keyword search for meteorites would have sailed straight past it.** It surfaced because the pipeline searched by meaning: the mathematical fingerprint of a heavy, iron-rich stone falling from the sky with a bang sits close to every other meteorite report ever written, whatever words the writer happened to use. And it isn't in any catalogue. I checked six of them, from Chladni's pioneering list of 1819 through the British Museum's catalogues and the 1933 *List of Indian Meteorites* to today's Meteoritical Bulletin. I used AI to search a hundred digitized periodicals from 1812–1817 for a follow-up, but found none. The stone isn't in the Natural History Museum's collection either.

Once confirmed, this meteorite fall I uncovered will represent the earliest recorded meteorite fall in Maharashtra, predating the current earliest record by 26 years.

I love how fragile the chain is. A stone falls in the Deccan. An officer writes a letter. A Bombay paper prints it. A ship carries the paper to Java, which happens to be British for five years, where an editor needs to fill a column. Copies end up in a Dutch library, which digitizes them and releases them for free. Two centuries later a GPU in my office rediscovers it. Take away any one of those links and the meteorite is forever vanished from history.

The Rhinos That Never Reached the King

In 1738, somewhere in the forests outside Batavia (today's Jakarta), men working for the Dutch East India Company caught a live Javan rhinoceros. It was meant as a present. Every year the Company sent an embassy with gifts to the King of Kandy, the ruler of Sri Lanka's highland kingdom, whose goodwill kept the cinnamon flowing. The king loved large, impressive animals. So Batavia's letter to the Netherlands that year lists, among the rarities sent to the king, "yet another rhinoceros which one has had caught here in the forests, and likewise sent over." The rhino made it across the Indian Ocean to Colombo. It never made it up the mountains to Kandy. In the Company's accounts, under the heading *De Paardenstal*, "the horse stable", there is a line written off in 1740: "1 rhinoceros short, died in the horse stable in the year 1738." In March 1739 the governor in Colombo wrote to Batavia, a little sheepishly, that the rhinoceros "died very suddenly". To make up for it, he had added a fine Persian riding horse to the king's gifts, "to please the King's so often shown fiery desire for such large and stout horses." Batavia tried again. On 5 July 1740 the ship *Loverendaal* sailed from Batavia for Ceylon with two rhinoceroses aboard, a male and a female. Three days out, the officers, boatswain and gunner gathered before the ship's bookkeeper and swore a statement: despite "all trouble and diligence" to keep the two rhinoceroses alive, the male had died that morning, "at about eight

o'clock." Ten days later they swore a second statement. The last of the two, the female, *'t wijffe*, had died too. The crew's statements were read back to them before the court in Colombo, and they "persisted in them without wishing the least change." Then the governor had to tell Kandy. His instructions to the envoys at the king's court, dated 16 September 1740, are almost touching. He had found the king some Dutch pigs, "a boar and two sows, all still young animals that will surely grow considerably, especially the little boar." He would gladly have met the king's request for dogs, had any been obtainable. And the envoys should let the court officials know, "so that they can answer if asked", that the two rhinoceroses sent from Batavia on the *Loverendaal* had both died on the voyage, "to our particular regret." The king, it seems, had been expecting them. Three years later, Dutch envoys at the court of Ramnad in southern India were asked, in a tone they found impertinent, to arrange for "a young rhinoceros to be sent, as was done for the King of Kandy." The gift that never arrived had become something other rulers wanted.

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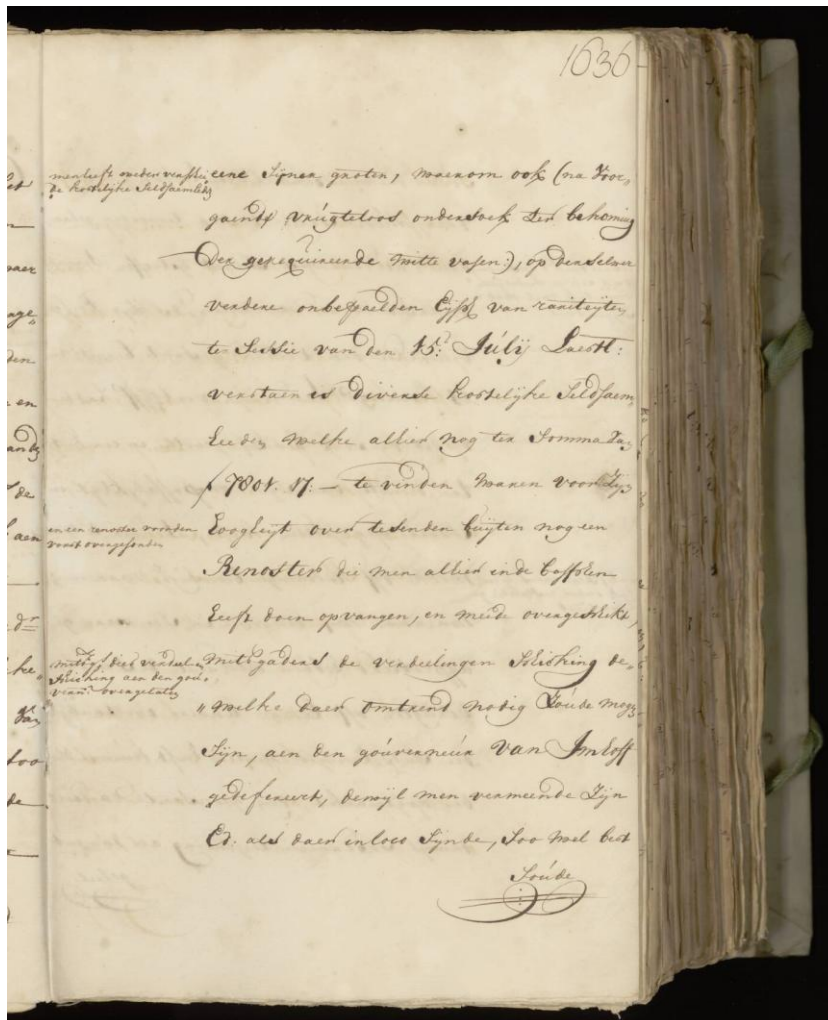
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Today the Javan rhinoceros survives only in Ujung Kulon National Park, at the far western tip of Java. That makes these letters more than a story about a failed present. The historical record of Javan rhinos in captivity is exceptionally small, a few dozen animals in total, and these documents add three of them, with dates, a named ship, sworn testimony and an account of one animal reaching Colombo. In the catalogue I checked, I

found no record of these shipments to Sri Lanka. Whether all three are new to the specialist literature is the next thing to establish.

There is also the landscape behind the story. In just two years, the Company obtained three live rhinos from the forests around its own capital, far beyond the species' surviving refuge. In 1772, officials riding through the Bantam highlands found paths "made by the rhinoceroses, which are found here in great numbers. I saw none, but did smell them, which one can also tell perfectly from the horses: every time one comes into the scent, the horses shy, jump and make capers." Today it reads like a glimpse of the habitat that would soon be gone.



Batavia's 1739 correspondence, including the rhinoceros sent for the King of Kandy. Nationaal Archief, archive 1.04.02, inventory 2422, scan 207. [View the original scan](#)

Forgotten Eruptions

The Dutch East India Company's officials were obsessive letter-writers, and they were living next to some of the most active volcanoes on the planet. So I asked the archive a simple question: which eruptions did Company employees witness that the world's standard volcano list, the Smithsonian's Global Volcanism Program, doesn't have?

My AI systems found 769 eruption reports in the corpus. The AI's guesses about which volcano were often wrong (it blamed one Java ash fall on a volcano 1,500 kilometres away), so every candidate had to be placed using the letter's own geography, then cross referenced against the known eruption lists. Three survived:

- **Gamkonora, Halmahera, 3 February 1722.** The governor of Ternate reported “a great fire behind a cloud, mixed with lightning, with a great roar” over the mountains across the strait. The next morning, Ternate's streets, roofs and trees were covered in ash “as with a white cloth”, and “the air darkened so that one could not see the sun the whole day.” The mountain was “between Gammaknorra and Sahu”: Gamkonora, whose only listed eruptions are 1564 and 1673. A sergeant-cartographer, Jacob Engels, sailed over to inspect and found the trees on whole hillsides, “several hundred thousand, all dead by the glowing ash.”
- **Ciremai, West Java, early 1712.** Weeks of ash and smoke “without visible flames”, “the whole south-eastern country covered with a thin bluish ash”, crops ruined, cattle refusing the ash-covered grass. The local princes said the same had happened before.
- **Slamet, Central Java, February 1780.** “The formerly burning mountain of Tegal”, burning “so strongly as no one here remembers.”

As a sanity check, the same search found the 1711 eruption of Awu in the Sangihe islands, which killed 138 people. The Smithsonian has it, to the day. The Dutch East India Company's version comes from a letter by the village schoolmaster.

The Ternate letter of 7 July 1722, cited in the Gamkonora eruption account. Nationaal Archief, archive 1.04.02, inventory 8090, scan 72.

[View the original scan](#)

Once confirmed, these will represent three new volcanic eruptions added to the historical record, witnessed and written down at the time but absent from the Smithsonian's list for three centuries.

What Didn't Work

Speaking of volcanoes, the first mystery I attempted to solve with AI, [the great "Unknown" eruption of 1808/09](#), was a bust. Ice core records indicate that it was one of the largest eruptions of the last 500 years, and nobody knows where it happened. I searched American newspapers, Dutch newspapers, ship logbooks, the colonial press of South America, Batavia's first newspaper (all 633 articles, read in full by my machine assistants) and India's news digests. Nothing. The same pipeline picked up every other eruption I tested it on, so I'm fairly confident the reports just aren't there: nobody in those places seems to have written about a strange sky in 1809. My best remaining lead is the handwritten remarks in 1,235 East India Company logbooks that have never been transcribed. That's a project for another day.

A Few Oddities from the Newspapers

While the main search ran, I also asked it to conduct a search on strange things seen in the sky. Most of the 460 reports had ordinary explanations, like meteors, mock suns, and comets. A few were too good to leave out. (I haven't checked these against the original pages, so treat them as stories, not findings.)

- **An "aerial horseman" off the Dutch coast, 23 September 1781.** A skipper named Booy Lourens reported a Luchtruitter, a horseman in the sky, about six miles off the Frisian islands. That same evening an English war fleet was sighted offshore, an earthquake shook the town of Harderwijk, and the northern lights

blazed. My best guess is an aurora seen by a nervous crew in wartime.

- **Phantom crowds at Chimney Rock, North Carolina, 1806.** Witnesses described “glittering white appearances of human kind... of all sizes from men to infants, moving in throngs round a large rock.” The story was reprinted across the country and lives on as local folklore.
- **A stone that fell onto a ship’s deck, 25 January 1812.** A ship’s officer reported stones falling around his ship, one landing on deck: “more than six ounces, iron-coloured.” It isn’t in the meteorite catalogues I checked.
- **A hundred-pound “aerolite” near Bonn, 1816.** A Dutch paper reported stones falling from the clouds in a garden, one weighing 100 pounds. No such fall is on record, so it’s either a lost meteorite or a tall tale.
- **Black and blood-red rings around the Moon, Sweden, winter 1802–03.** A spectacular halo display, described in great detail.
- **A pillar of light over Damascus for three days and nights, 1812,** reported as a sign from heaven.
- **The Lake Ontario sea serpent, 1805,** “coiled in spirals about eighteen feet across.” A classic newspaper monster.

Where This Stands

The main findings are still candidates: checked against the original pages and the catalogues I could access, but not yet reviewed by the specialists who maintain those catalogues. The newspaper oddities are separate, unchecked leads. I’ve contacted the meteorite curators, Kees Rookmaaker, and the volcanologists, and I’m waiting for their replies. The searches have given me good reasons to pursue these leads. The specialists can help establish whether they add something new. If they tell me something is already known, I’ll update this post, but I am confident these are all novel rediscoveries.

The sheer volume of untapped knowledge sitting in public archives is staggering. Over just a few days, a single GPU and a tailored AI pipeline surfaced a forgotten meteorite, three lost rhinos, and several unrecorded eruptions. To make this kind of research accessible, I'm open-sourcing the workflow I created for this investigation as a small toolkit, [Antiquity](#), enabling anyone with a question and a coding agent to conduct similar historical archival investigations.

Breen and I searched the same archive. He went looking for dodos and found a dodo. I went looking for meteorites and lost eruptions, and found those. The pages had been sitting there the whole time, for anyone to read. An archive doesn't give anything up on its own; it only answers the questions someone thinks to ask.

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Sources

The quotes in this post come from the original documents below. Each link opens a scan of the actual page. The Dutch East India Company papers are held by the National Archives of the Netherlands (archive 1.04.02); the transcriptions searched were made by the [GLOBALISE](#) project. The newspapers are from [Delpher](#), the Dutch national library's archive.

The meteorite

- The *Java Government Gazette*, 19 December 1812, p. 3, reprinting the *Bombay Gazette* of 26 August 1812: [Delpher](#)

The rhinos

- Batavia's letter of 1739 listing the rhinoceros sent for the King of Kandy: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2422, scan 207](#)
- Colombo's letter of 23 March 1739: the rhinoceros "died very suddenly" and a Persian horse was sent instead: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2472, scan 61](#)
- Colombo's accounts, "De Paardenstal": "1 rhinoceros short, died in the horse stable in the year 1738": [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2540, scan 412](#)
- Ships leaving Batavia in July 1740, including the *Loverendaal* on the 5th: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2482, scan 113](#)
- The crew's sworn statements on the deaths of the two rhinoceroses aboard the *Loverendaal*: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2540, scan 624, with scans 623 and 625](#)
- Instructions to the envoys at Kandy, 16 September 1740 (the pigs, the dogs, the news of the rhinos): [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2492, scan 796](#)
- Report of the envoys to the court of Ramnad, 1743 ("as was done for the King of Kandy"): [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2599, scan 209](#)
- The rhinoceros paths and the shying horses, Bantam highlands, 1772: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 3363, scan 40](#)
- "Places of rest and pleasure for people", the Jakarta hills, 1749: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 2729, scan 362](#)
- Kees Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros in Captivity* (1998)

The eruptions

- Gamkonora, 3 February 1722: the governor of Ternate's letter of 7 July 1722: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 8090, scan 72, with scan 71](#)
- Sergeant Jacob Engels' inspection of the burst mountain, 1722: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 8090, scan 272](#)
- Ciremai, Cheribon, 15 March 1712: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 7733, scan 20](#)

- Slamet (“the mountain of Tegal”), Cheribon, 20 February 1780: [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 7768, scan 349, with scan 350](#)
- Awu, 10 December 1711 (the schoolmaster’s letter): [National Archives, 1.04.02, inv. 8081, scan 103](#)
- The Smithsonian’s [Global Volcanism Program](#), for the list of known eruptions

The rhino model

- [Rhinoceros](#) by Poly by Google [[CC-BY](#)] via Poly Pizza