



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

From Golden Rock to Historic Gem: a historical archaeological analysis of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean
Stelten, R.J.G.

Citation

Stelten, R. J. G. (2019, March 21). *From Golden Rock to Historic Gem: a historical archaeological analysis of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean*. Sidestone Press, Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/70210>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/70210>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/70210> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Stelten, R.J.G.

Title: From Golden Rock to Historic Gem: a historical archaeological analysis of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean

Issue Date: 2019-03-21

Theoretical Framework

For nearly half a century, the majority of archaeological and historical studies dealing with St. Eustatius have lacked a systematic analytical framework informed by theoretical innovations in broader archaeological and anthropological inquiries. They have instead focused heavily on describing historical narratives and trade networks, sites, structures, features, shipwrecks, and artifacts. This is particularly true for maritime and underwater research. Moreover, particularistic studies constitute the bulk of research results for St. Eustatius, which tend to focus on one or a few sites without placing these in a larger social context (For example Barka 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1996; Bequette 1992, Nagelkerken 1985. There are some exceptions, such as Gilmore 2013, Miller 2011, Paonessa 1990, and Stelten 2009). The exact reasons for the lack of a theoretical framework are unknown, but it is clear that this approach has greatly impeded archaeological and historical research on St. Eustatius to move beyond the mere description of sites and address issues on an island-wide or regional scale. The focus of this chapter is to establish such a theoretical framework, which can serve as the foundation for conducting archaeological and historical research on the island and beyond. It centers on the concept of the maritime cultural landscape, which, on a small island where historically nearly everyone and everything was connected to the maritime world in one way or another, is exceptionally fitting.

Moreover, the study of the maritime cultural landscape becomes particularly relevant when dealing with a time period in which globalization played an increasingly important role in peoples' lives. Orser even defines historical archaeology as the study of the global nature of modern life (Wurst 2006:199). In one of his recent works, he stresses the need to think on at least two scales when studying modern-world archaeology: the local and the global scale, or, in other words, to "dig locally and think globally," the reason being that modern-world archaeology inherently concerns trans-regional history (Orser 2016:318). It should be noted that globalization never encompasses the entire world at once, neither does it constitute a rapid, complete cultural change. Rather, globalization is a process with the following characteristics: networks of interdependence at multi-continental distances; connections based on the complex flow of currency, goods, information, ideas, and people; an overarching structure defined by capitalist social relations (Orser 2016:317). The best way to fully understand the impact globalization – and all its characteristics – had on a small Caribbean island is by applying the maritime cultural landscape approach which, by definition, includes and even emphasizes outside influences in regional and global contexts. This framework is

needed to integrate the findings on St. Eustatius into broader archaeological discussions on topics such as trade networks, capitalism, war and conflict, maritime slavery, and the plantation system.

The maritime cultural landscape approach has been adopted by archaeologists in many different regions, most notably by Christer Westerdahl for prehistoric Scandinavia. More recent use of this theoretical framework is presented in studies dealing with the Age of European expansion. Examples include Borelli's analysis of risk management in the harbor of Cape Town, Ford's work on Lake Ontario, and Duncan's study of an Australian coastal community at Queenscliffe (Borelli 2016, Ford 2009, Duncan 2006). While all these studies focus on maritime cultural landscapes in a continental setting, this dissertation will be the first study to adopt this approach in the analysis of a Caribbean island. As will be shown, this work builds on Westerdahl's initial notion and division of the maritime cultural landscape and adapts it to suit the context of St. Eustatius. Before examining the concept of the maritime cultural landscape, its origins and significance for the field of maritime archaeology will be explored briefly.

2.1 The development of theory in maritime archaeology

The discipline of maritime archaeology has seen tremendous changes over the past century. Starting in the early twentieth century, the first underwater archaeological endeavors were aimed at recovering objects of art by people lacking any archaeological training and experience. As the first half of the twentieth century progressed, more scientific underwater archaeological projects started to be carried out. These were often problematic in the sense that divers involved were not trained archaeologists – they stayed on the surface – and their methodology was one of a generally unsystematic recovery of objects from the sea floor (Meide 2013:2). The introduction of SCUBA after the Second World War popularized underwater treasure hunting enormously by providing people easier access to sites.

It was not until the late 1950s that archaeologists themselves started to dive and participate in underwater archaeological fieldwork. Several large underwater projects were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, including the excavation and recovery of large shipwrecks such as the *Vasa* and the *Mary Rose*. It was around this time that the discipline became more organized: several maritime archaeological organizations were formed, communication and cooperation between maritime archaeologists around the world increased, and in 1972 the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* was first published (Meide 2013:6).

Despite these developments, there were still very few maritime archaeologists well acquainted with archaeological theory. This was partly due to the fact that maritime archaeologists organized their own conferences and formed their own specialized journals and societies and were therefore not well integrated into the greater archaeological community. Perhaps more importantly, the majority of maritime archaeologists at the time had their origins as avocational archaeologists or had joined the field from other, non-archaeological disciplines. This resulted in a community less conversant with current anthropological debates (Meide 2013:7). Furthermore, the emphasis in the mid-twentieth century lay on the development of sound research techniques and

methods in order to establish proper protocols for maritime archaeological research and to discard the long-held views of maritime archaeologists as treasure hunters.

Maritime archaeological theory took a giant leap forward with the ideas introduced by Keith Muckelroy during the late 1970s, whose approach emphasized a more systematic understanding of underwater site formation processes and a three-part interpretive framework for better understanding the ship in its original social context (Muckelroy 1978). According to Muckelroy, maritime archaeology is concerned with all aspects of maritime culture; not just technical matters, but also social, economic, political, religious, and a host of other aspects (Muckelroy 1978:4). He also stressed the fact that maritime archaeology is first and foremost concerned with people, and not with the material culture in itself with which the researcher is immediately confronted (Muckelroy 1978:4).

Some scholars, such as George Bass, were strongly opposed to Muckelroy's ideas, and emphasized the need for a highly detailed and particularistic approach focusing more on sites (usually shipwrecks) or events themselves rather than their social contexts (Bass 1983). Bass questioned some of the basic tenets of processual archaeology, such as the use of formal research designs, and stressed the need for highly detailed particularistic studies, even if it meant "almost blind and thoughtless cataloguing of types of artifacts (Bass 1983:98). Bass' ideas were countered most notably by Christer Westerdahl, who introduced the term *maritime cultural landscape*, which became widespread in the English language and thus to a large group of scholars after an article published in 1992. Building upon Muckelroy's use of the term *maritime archaeology* in favour of *underwater*, *nautical* and *marine archaeology*, Westerdahl broadened Muckelroy's definition to include not only all traces of human activities on the sea but also those on land and in lakes and rivers that can contribute to the study of maritime lifeways in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the subject (Westerdahl 1992). Cognitive aspects of the landscape such as place names played an important role in the study of this new concept. The introduction of the concept called attention to the need to study maritime spaces in a larger context through the multiplicity of elements related to navigation and other human occupation of coastlines (Freire 2014:145). The notion of a maritime cultural landscape signifies the enormous amount and range of data available to archaeologists studying the human relation to the marine environment. Westerdahl's work was a reaction against particularism and has influenced maritime archaeology tremendously (Meide 2013:12). His ideas and definitions are now used in regional surveys which are becoming more common than major excavations of individual sites, and a greater emphasis is being placed on the landscape than ever before.

Not long after Westerdahl's ideas gained in popularity, Anthony Firth addressed the opportunities which the concept of the maritime cultural landscape offered historical archaeologists in studying post-medieval colonialism, capitalism, globalization, and industrialization (Firth 1995). According to Firth, each of these processes has a maritime component that may be susceptible to a landscape approach. At the beginning of the new millennium, several maritime archaeological works dealing with post-medieval colonialism have used the study of specific sites and events to interpret processes on a large, even global, scale (Staniforth 2003; Dellino-Musgrave 2006). In this way, maritime archaeologists are trying to find a middle ground between the generalistic and particularistic approaches and use both to reconstruct the maritime past in a more

comprehensive way. A good example in this regard is the work by Richard Gould, who recognized that a particularistic approach is not necessarily wrong. All maritime and underwater archaeologists need to achieve a “thick” historical view of their material in the same way historians do. But Gould did view the strictly particularistic approach as inadequate, especially when it comes to evaluating archaeological results. Gould states that “in underwater archaeology, generalized hypothesis-testing and the search for general principles and historical particularism are complementary” (Gould 20011:4). Moreover, Gould recognized the wider implications for the combination of approaches, as, for example, fine-grained studies of shipping practices tested against the physical evidence of ancient wrecks can provide a picture of what happened that goes beyond the immediate circumstances of the event to connect with the socioeconomic conditions that surrounded them (Gould 2011:4).

2.2 The maritime cultural landscape

The maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius is at the core of this study. It is defined by Westerdahl as:

“The whole network of sailing routes, old as well as new, with ports and harbors along the coast, and its related constructions and remains of human activity, underwater as well as terrestrial”

The maritime cultural landscape signifies the human utilization of maritime space (Westerdahl 1992:6). Shipwrecks and other submerged archaeological remains do not exist in a vacuum; they are closely linked to each other and to terrestrial sites. Therefore, in order to gain a more complete understanding of the context and nature of submerged archaeological sites, these have to be studied as part of a wider cultural landscape which encompasses both marine and terrestrial areas. This is a key difference with Muckelroy’s approach, whose definition of maritime archaeology does not include a concern with coastal communities and sites (Muckelroy 1978:6). The reasoning for his omission is due to the fact that Muckelroy believed that “being primarily terrestrial settlements, they will be more closely related to their surrounding communities in their material culture, and will display their maritime connections only marginally” (Muckelroy 1978:6). Throughout this work, it will be shown that Muckelroy’s view does not hold up for insular communities such as St. Eustatius.

Before elaborating further on the maritime cultural landscape, it is useful to explore how and when a landscape is or can be culturally significant in order to fully understand and appreciate the importance of the use of this concept in studies dealing with past human behavior. The landscape exists at the intersection between culture (physical and cognitive) and space. The latter is a medium for human activity and does not have cultural significance apart from that activity. Space is always present, but until humans use or acknowledge a particular space and make it a place, it does not exist anthropologically (Ford 2011:1). In other words, a landscape only becomes ‘cultural’ when people utilize it, give purpose and meaning to it, or are being influenced by it. The landscape is culturally dynamic in that it is constantly altered, both physically and in people’s minds. It includes multiple environmental features such as the space a person can

perceive, but also less tangible aspects such as the weather, noises, and smells. Cultures and spaces change through time as they influence each other, constantly creating culturally distinct and frequently overlapping landscapes. These are best understood in the contexts of their neighbors and the landscapes that preceded them and are expected to follow (Ford 2011:2). A cultural landscape can be formed by different processes and the accumulation of years, centuries, or even millennia of human influences. Time thus plays an important role in the study of the cultural landscape.

In this study, the maritime cultural landscape will be addressed using Fernand Braudel's three durations of time: short term (days, weeks, months, a few years), medium length conjunctures (years, decades, portions of centuries), and long-term structures (centuries and millennia). The last duration is called the *longue durée*.⁷ At the center of this model is the idea that to understand historical developments and to explain their causes and dynamics, one must know their temporal and geographic scale; one must know what happened at their edges and their center, why they occurred, changed and faded away (Ames 1991:935). This can be achieved by continually assessing different temporal and geographical scales in the study of a particular site, topic, or development. Besides assessing different temporal and geographic scales, the maritime cultural landscape itself needs to be broken down into various elements as well in order to try to understand it to the fullest.

The maritime cultural landscape is composed of several main categories of material and immaterial aspects of maritime human life. The first is underwater archaeological remains, which include shipwrecks and their cargo, submerged settlements, harbors, piers, docks, ballast sites, breakwaters and other anthropomorphic modifications to the underwater landscape, anchorages, and moveable artifacts and ecofacts. The second is terrestrial archaeological remains, which include coastal settlements, ports, docks, piers, breakwaters, slipways, boat yards, lighthouses, industrial sites, warehouses, taverns, stores, weighing houses, military installations, roads, resource procurement sites, anthropomorphic modifications to the landscape, and moveable artifacts and ecofacts. The third aspect is the natural world. Human behaviour can be greatly influenced by the natural environment. This includes underwater and terrestrial topography, sedimentation and erosion processes, the type of soil and sea floor, flora and fauna, weather, and aspects of the ocean such as currents, tides, waves and swells. Taking the natural world into consideration enhances our view of the maritime cultural landscape and elucidates human agency in it. Fourth is what Westerdahl calls *tradition of usage*, meaning the mental map of coastal people (Westerdahl 1992:8). This aspect is almost completely immaterial, but is very much reflected throughout the material world. Cultural landscapes include an entire suite of cognitive perceptions intrinsically tied to physical landscape construction and expression (Duncan & Gibbs 2015:10). Maritime knowledge often lies at the basis of the division and use of space within the maritime cultural landscape. The location and layout of a coastal settlement is nearly always a result of people's extensive knowledge of the maritime environment. For example,

7 Certain researchers have worked with these scales in a different way. For example, within the short term, Sewell distinguishes an event as "sequences of occurrences that result in transformation of structures," as opposed to happenings, which simply reproduce existing social structures without significant change (Bolender 2010:5).

coastal settlements in the Caribbean are almost exclusively located on the islands' leeward sides where environmental conditions are most favorable for maritime traffic. The last aspect concerns place names. These can hold a lot of information about the maritime cultural landscape, and any study into this subject should take into account the names of towns, roads, islands, harbors, lakes, rivers, waterways, bays, mountains, buildings, and other natural and cultural places. They are often clues to the cognitive aspects of a landscape; they transform the physical world of people into something that is culturally recognizable.

From the above it follows that the maritime cultural landscape is much more than just physical attributes; it is the entirety of physical and cognitive aspects that are linked by human agency and perceptions. This idea transcends simplistic notions of a landscape based on binary oppositions such as land/sea and natural/cultural, which differentiate between sources of data based on physical location and historical research frameworks. Within the context of the maritime cultural landscape, the division between land and sea is in many cases irrelevant, as both are considered essential components of the totality of the landscape or of one of its elementary themes which are outlined below. Moreover, its past users often perceived these 'opposing' elements as collective components of the same landscape.

The physical and cognitive aspects of human life outlined above constitute the maritime cultural landscape – they are its basic building blocks. A comprehensive analysis of maritime cultural landscapes will only be possible by taking into account all of these aspects. In order to analyze each social aspect of St. Eustatius' maritime cultural landscape, it is useful to break the concept down into eight elementary components that together create the perception of it in the human mind:

- The *commercial component*: involves things needed for an economy to exist by means of local production and attracting outsiders, such as plantations, warehouses, markets, shops, customs houses, shipyards, and traded goods.
- The *resource component*: involves the resources necessary for sustaining an insular population, including provisioning grounds, fishing, hunting, and water supply.
- The *transport and communication component*: contains things that facilitate the movement of goods, people, and information such as (sailing) routes, seamarks, pilotage, harbors, roads and portages.
- The *power component*: the landscape of the expression of power and wealth including mansions, plantation residences, and merchant houses.
- The *defense component*: military installations such as forts, batteries, entrenchments, powder houses and barracks.
- The *cognitive component*: the mental map as expressed in oral traditions, stories, and place names, including the ritual and symbolic landscape (Westerdahl 2011:747).
- The *recreative component*: the landscape as a place for leisure with beaches, hiking trails, viewpoints, bars, brothels, and places for picnics and parties.
- The *civic component*: contains elements of areas where people settle and live their everyday life, such as coastal settlements and their associated neighborhoods.

It is important to note that the maritime cultural landscape is usually broken down into other landscapes. In this work, these landscape themes are called *components* as they

are constituent parts of the maritime cultural landscape. By adopting this terminology instead of using many different landscapes as done by, for example, Westerdahl, the fact that different constituent parts of the maritime cultural landscape exist and interact in various ways is emphasized.

Breaking the maritime cultural landscape down into these eight components will facilitate a detailed investigation of each constituent element, show by which influences they were shaped, and specifically how they are related to each other and to other elements in the maritime cultural landscape. These themes are, however, slightly different from those identified by Westerdahl, who in the same chapter recognizes the need to adjust the concept to any specific context (Westerdahl 2011:754). The adjustments are due to the fact that Westerdahl's ideas stem from research carried out in Scandinavia with a heavy focus on prehistory, a very different setting from St. Eustatius in the Age of European expansion. Key differences include Westerdahl's division between an outer and an inner resource landscape, whereby the former is concerned with resources required for shipbuilding and the latter with the necessary surplus for maritime voyages and trade. The resource component as defined for this study is called the economic landscape or landscape of sustenance by Westerdahl. The restructuring of Westerdahl's landscapes into slightly different components is valid and necessary in this study for several reasons. First, with the exception of small canoes, the construction of which hardly requires external resources, shipbuilding did not exist on St. Eustatius. The Statian community was not dependent on shipbuilding as it was at the center of a global trade network. Therefore, Westerdahl's outer resource landscape does not exist on Statia. Second, international trade played such an important role in the history and formation of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius that the economic component of this island is concerned with trading activities. Third, the inner resource landscape (or component in this work) was needed to supply the insular population and sailors from abroad coming to the island to trade. Many of these (food) resources were procured on or around the island itself, but a large amount came from abroad. While these resources were oftentimes trade items themselves, they were also items without which the trading activities occurring on the island, and even the insular community itself, could not exist. For these reasons, food resources can be seen as a separate type of quasi-economic element, and therefore warrant a discussion separate from trading activities that were central to the economic components of the maritime cultural landscape.

Many facets of the past involve more than one type of component. A fort, for example, can be part of the defense component and the power component. A road may be part of all categories. In many instances, components overlap and it is not always clear where one component ends and another begins. This can change through time as people change and adapt their lifeways to permanent or temporary (often seasonal) changes. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the maritime cultural landscape and its components transcend the land/sea divide. The transport component, for example, involves all features that are related to the movement of goods and people. Many times, these movements do not stop on the beach, but continue their way on a different physical terrain that is part of the same landscape. Because of these overlaps, the analysis of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius will be divided into three themes. The first is *economic components*, comprising the transport and com-

munication component, the commercial component, and the resource component. These three components are very much intertwined, as the first enables the second and third to exist, but at the same time is shaped in profound ways by the latter two. The second theme is *social components*, which includes the civic, cognitive, and recreative components. These three components overlap at various points, as the places where people live their lives on a daily basis consist of various cognitive elements. Moreover, there is often a cognitive foundation to the way these places are structured and perceived. The third theme is *political components*, comprising the power component and the defense component. It is concerned with the use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control.

A focus on the maritime cultural landscape provides a record that is informed by Stata's multiple actors, some of which are more poorly documented in the documentary record than others. As such it is a way to move beyond the grand narratives of history – such as master vs. slave, elite vs. non-elite – and better understand the workings of a colonial economy and society.

2.3 The place of shipwrecks in the maritime cultural landscape

The majority of information gathered by maritime archaeologists originates from shipwrecks. Thousands of wrecks have been investigated by archaeologists over the past century, and these sites have produced an exceptional range of artifacts that are usually remarkably well preserved. Moreover, their value is often enhanced by extensive documentary sources that describe their construction, operation, maintenance, utilization, and eventual wrecking. They are often referred to as 'time capsules' – particular events frozen in time.⁸ Ships themselves have been described as the most complex artifact routinely produced prior to the Industrial Revolution, and their crews and material culture as unique manifestations of society as a whole (Gibbins & Adams 2001:280). A vessel's form and design, the processes by which the materials from which it was built were derived and produced, and the detailed anatomy of its construction, are telling indicators of contemporary material achievement (Martin 2001:393). During the Age of European expansion, ships were without a doubt the most technologically advanced artifacts in existence.

In the seventeenth century, ships became the engine of capitalism and commerce, an indispensable part of the maritime empires forged by European powers (Linebaugh & Rediker 2000:150). The growing importance of a capitalist market economy in

8 This view, although popular in the literature, is too simplistic. Shipwreck sites are more often than not influenced by many different site formation processes such as water movement, marine organisms, erosion, sedimentation, degradation and corrosion of materials, etc. Cultural interactions with shipwrecks and associated artifacts, besides being mere site formation processes, are part of a continuum of cultural activities which are often connected to the context in which a ship wrecked. For example, ballast piles can form artificial reefs on which anchors from other ships get hooked, in this way becoming part of the site. Moreover, valuable items (e.g. bronze cannon) were frequently salvaged by divers shortly after wrecking, and sites may have been looted in recent decades by recreational divers and treasure hunters. Gould has coined the term 'ship smears' to indicate locations where wreckage and debris fields overlap and where materials deposited from strandings further complicate the picture (Gould 2011:16).

Europe and the Caribbean colonies at this time meant that a great deal of wealth was transported on board ships (Evans 2007:87). As a result, wrecks may contain valuable cargo that can be an important source of information in the study of regional and global trade networks. Even though the same or similar artifacts that are found in shipwrecks may be found on other (terrestrial) sites, the assemblage on a wreck is usually quite different. The collection of artifacts on a ship can have a particularly high resolution and integrity, and is usually contemporaneous. The diachronic aspect, if present, is usually very small as the nature of a ship was against the retention of significant quantities of redundant materials. The bulk of the assemblage on a ship was usually composed of functional equipment and cargo in transit (Gibbins & Adams 2001:280). An exception to this are the personal belongings of sailors, which may be on a ship for many years and are of paramount importance in the study of shipboard life.

With these characteristics of shipwrecks in mind, it can be very tempting for researchers to adopt an over-particularistic approach in the study of these sites. For a long time, the focus of maritime archaeology has been on events, particularly those relating to the sinking of ships by storms, battles and other unfortunate mishaps. By adopting this approach and viewing shipwrecks merely as 'time capsules,' one ignores the wider context in which these events took place, what processes led to the ships' wrecking, and what impact these may have had on future events. The evidence that a shipwreck site contains does not only relate to the history of the individual ship, its crew and the circumstances of its wrecking, but also to wider aspects of contemporary culture, society, technology, and economy (Martin 2001:383). Shipwrecks, then, are an important element of the maritime cultural landscape, and perhaps one of *the* most important types of sites for understanding the world around them.