



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

Conclusion

The maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius was influenced by an infinite number of factors. This dissertation has outlined its major themes and the ways in which people and nature shaped the island's history through time. It has also demonstrated that many aspects of the island's past transcend the division between land and sea, and therefore need to be studied thematically instead of geographically. The diachronic and regional scope of the present study, coupled with a multi-disciplinary approach, has resulted in a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius. Furthermore, this is the first time a maritime cultural landscape approach has been applied to a Caribbean island. It has been demonstrated that the concept of the maritime cultural landscape is dynamic and needs to be analyzed differently depending on which area and time period one is studying. This work has set a paradigm for the Caribbean, and therefore the case study of St. Eustatius can be used as a model for maritime cultural landscape studies on other islands in the region. It has become clear that to fully understand and appreciate the complex interplay of various components of the maritime cultural landscape, land and sea need to be studied in relation to each other, and the best way to do so is through a multi-disciplinary approach using various lines of evidence. Most notably, the documentary and archaeological records have been shown to be highly complementary, in that documentary data often provides the historical framework and archaeological data provides insights into specific situations and the lives of specific actors in specific places.

While historians have often tried to answer questions of *why* certain things happened the way they did, this dissertation's main concern has been to analyze *how* things happened in a certain way. For example, from historical studies much is known about the island's volume, nature, and extent of overseas trade and the reasons *why* this trade came about, but until now, very little was known about *how* this trade was carried out exactly, such as what kind of port facilities there were on the island and what the state of the anchorage area was. Moreover, historical studies have often dealt with questions of slavery in terms of numbers of slaves traded, numbers of slaves per plantation, and *why*, from an economic perspective, slavery existed in the Caribbean. The present study has attempted to complement these insights by asking *how* slavery existed on the island – where enslaved people lived, where they worked, what they did in their free time.

In addition to these advances, a new and more comprehensive method for studying historical anchorage areas has been introduced. The only way to gain a better

understanding of historical anchorages is by studying the archaeological record in conjunction with documentary sources, the natural environment, and geomorphological processes. These concluding remarks aim to summarize the dissertation and answer the main research question by outlining how the complex interplay of local, regional, and global social, economic, political, and natural forces shaped the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius through time.

A multitude of local factors have shaped Statia's maritime cultural landscape. On an economic level, this was achieved by constructing one of the greatest emporiums in the Caribbean. When the volume of trade on the island reached proportions beyond anyone's imagination, large numbers of merchants and transient visitors were attracted and Lower Town became the focus of commercial activities on the island. Through extensive archaeological research in the area, it is now clear that many other, non-commercial activities took place in Lower Town as well. The plantations in the countryside played an equally important role. Here, illegally imported sugar was refined and provisioning grounds ensured that the dietary needs of a growing insular population were met. To facilitate the movement of large numbers of people and vast quantities of goods, a network of roads was constructed that linked Lower Town to every corner of the island. The link with ships on the roadstead was provided by canoes operated by enslaved workers who shuttled people and goods between ships and shore. Thousands of ships dropped anchor on Statia's roadstead in its heyday. It has been demonstrated that the roadstead comprised an area much larger than previously thought and that archaeological remains in this area are abundant. Shipwrecks are one type of site that is present in the anchorage zone. To date, five shipwrecks have been discovered, but there are undoubtedly more to be found underneath the shifting sands on the sea floor. The cargo of blue beads from one of the wrecks has become an important element in modern Statian society and provides a direct link to people's ancestry.

On a social level, people from different classes of society experienced varying types of civic environments. The island's wealthiest merchant-planter class resided in Great Houses on the plantations or large mansions in Upper and Lower Town. Many enslaved people lived on the plantations in small huts, but a sizeable group also resided in town. In addition, thousands of sailors lived their lives on the roadstead. Living conditions were completely different depending on where one lived. Islanders and sailors engaged in all types of vices imaginable which often led to disturbances. Some used the countryside and the Quill to escape the hustle and bustle of town. The crater of the Quill constituted a separate world, an island within an island, where people experienced a very different environment from what they were used to. The built environment and natural world were not only composed of tangible aspects; the cognitive component played an equally important role in the maritime cultural landscape. Place names, cemeteries, religious buildings, and oral history occupied prominent places in people's minds and were used to construct cognitive maps of the physical world in which they lived.

On a political level, the expression of power and wealth, which resulted from the island's flourishing economy, has shaped the maritime cultural landscape in profound ways. The richest Statians displayed their wealth and the status this generated in various ways, from minting their own coins to erecting impressive mansions and commissioning elaborate gravestones. Due to opportunities for economic and social upward

mobility among even the lowest classes of society, the enslaved population participated in the power component as well. Through specialized skills and the use of expensive objects, both enslaved and free people of color resisted the power relations which the merchant-planter elite tried so hard to establish and maintain. The power component entailed more than just personal glorification, it was also concerned with the protection of the island and the ships that visited. The island's works of defense, however, could never have prevented the frequent changes of flag the island experienced. They were important nonetheless, as they provided protection to the ships that made Statia rich.

The local environment was heavily influenced by the natural world. In the most fundamental way, Statia's dry climate prevented the island from every developing into a successful plantation colony. Left with no commercial agricultural promise, the island was transformed into a trade hub. Lower Town was a particularly difficult place to live and work due to eroding cliffs on one side and rough seas on the other. Nevertheless, the islanders were determined to turn this area into an entrepôt. Elevation differences in the landscape were used to people's advantage as they were utilized to display power and authority over the enslaved population and passing vessels. On the other hand, power relations were constantly contested by covert as well as visible acts. Besides serving a recreational function, the Quill's crater also provided opportunities for enslaved people to escape. The element of the natural environment that has had the most impact on the island's maritime cultural landscape is the underwater topography. Even though the anchorage zone was very exposed and at times dangerous, without a large, sandy roadstead, Statia could never have welcomed as many ships as it did and the island would not have become such a prosperous colony.

Statia's course in history and its maritime cultural landscape were shaped by regional and even global developments and connections as well. The island was the nexus in the Caribbean and Atlantic World trade networks, and as such, the transportation and communication component played a central role in the maritime cultural landscape. Ships from nearly one hundred different ports called at Statia each year in its heyday. This resulted in an enormous influx of people, goods, and ideas, making the island one of the most cosmopolitan places in the world. People from all over the world lived and worked on St. Eustatius. The group of foreigners that was best represented were the Bermudians, of which dozens lived in their own neighborhood in Upper Town called Bermuda Quarter. They imported their own limestone and lime, sold Bermuda sloops on the island, and penetrated all levels of elite society. When the island lost its significance as a transit harbor, merchants moved to other free ports such as St. Thomas and St. Barths where they continued their enterprises using the skills, knowledge, and connections they acquired on the Golden Rock. Perhaps the most important connection St. Eustatius had to the outside world was that with the British North American colonies. Without a constant supply of arms and ammunition from St. Eustatius, the American fight for freedom might have ended differently. The support for the American rebels also caused Statia to be sacked by the British and robbed of all its riches. This, however, did not signal the end of prosperity as the island's economy quickly recovered. Nowadays, history is repeating itself as the global demand for oil has given rise to an oil terminal on Statia, which has become a transshipment center with global significance once more.

Regional and global shipping was heavily influenced by climatic conditions. Shipping activity on St. Eustatius dropped drastically during hurricane seasons. Ships that continued their voyages were often at the mercy of the elements, and tropical storms and hurricanes caused many to founder. The island itself was equally, if not more, affected by the force of Mother Nature. Every few years, houses, churches, fortifications, plantations, and warehouses were destroyed by devastating hurricanes. Many people perished or lost everything they owned, but determined to succeed in life they rebuilt the Golden Rock time and time again.

Statia was at the mercy of other global forces as well on which the island had no bearing. Wars that originated in Europe were often fought in the colonies, causing islands to change hands frequently. Caribbean islands, including St. Eustatius, became bargaining chips when peace needed to be established. Privateering in the West Indies increased during times of war, resulting in the construction of numerous forts and batteries on Statia's coastline. The global sugar market is another example. Statian plantations became less profitable when sugar prices dropped in the early nineteenth century. Planters made impressive improvements to their estates in an attempt to retain their social status. Economically, this was to no avail due to another global issue beyond Statia's sphere of influence. The slave trade was abolished by most nations in the early nineteenth century, but when slavery was abolished in the Dutch colonies in 1863, planters lost access to a cheap work force. This was the decisive blow for the Statian plantations.

What has been outlined here clearly reflects Orser's characteristics of globalization so suitable to a maritime cultural landscape approach. There existed a network of interdependence at multi-continental distances; connections were based on the complex flow of currency, goods, information, ideas, and people; there was an overarching structure defined by capitalist social relations. The Revolutionary War period illustrates this clearly: the Statian economy was largely dependent on trade with the rebels, while the rebels were highly dependent on shipments of arms and ammunition from St. Eustatius. The connections between Statia and North America was based on the flow of money, goods, and information (such as the Founding Fathers' letters). The overarching structure of this relationship, its main goal, was to make money.

This study has aimed to provide new insights into the history of St. Eustatius, with a main focus on the people who lived and worked here throughout the colonial period. Unlike previously-mentioned studies conducted by Enthoven, Klooster, and Jordaan, whose focus is largely on trade and the white elite, the present study is mainly concerned with the physical remains of the island's history and the actors that created the maritime cultural landscape – black, colored, white, enslaved, and free. Having a completely different theme, it is therefore mostly complimentary to these studies and should be viewed as an important contribution to understanding Statian society in light of the island's central role in the history of the Atlantic World.

There is a bright future for Statia's past. Historical awareness is high among the inhabitants of the island which they proudly call the "Historic Gem." Statians wear their blue beads with pride and are happy to inform visitors about their past. The First Salute is commemorated every year on November 16 by gunfire at Fort Oranje. This date is so important to the islanders that it marks Statia Day. Each year, new archaeological and historical research projects are initiated and exciting discoveries are made. Ongoing

research by the St. Eustatius Center for Archaeological Research will continue to teach people from all over the world about the island's fascinating past and prompt some of them to make new discoveries of their own. The island and its surrounding waters are an archaeological treasure trove that will continue to fascinate people for centuries to come. With every new artifact excavated, every new site mapped, and every new document studied, new dimensions are added to our understanding of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius and the ways in which this tiny island struggled and thrived during the past four centuries of colonial history.