



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

# Summary

This dissertation contains a study of the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius, a small island in the northeastern Lesser Antilles. After a long indigenous occupation, the island was first colonized by Europeans in the early seventeenth century. In the following two centuries, the island changed hands 22 times between the Dutch, English, and French, until it became permanently Dutch in 1816. In the eighteenth century, the island became a free port for goods from around the world, causing it to develop into a bustling entrepot and one of the busiest transit harbors in the world. Due to the lack of urban development on the island in modern times, archaeological sites are relatively pristine, earning the island its nickname “The Pompeii of the New World”. Besides terrestrial sites such as warehouses, fortifications, and plantations, the waters surrounding the island house a large number of shipwrecks and other submerged archaeological remains.

The maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius is the entire network of sailing routes, harbors, and related structures and remains of past human activities, on land as well as under water; it encompasses the human use of maritime space. In this study, the maritime cultural landscape will be analyzed using documentary data in conjunction with archaeological remains. The maritime cultural landscape is divided into eight components: commercial, transport and communication, natural resources, civic, cognitive, recreative, defense, and power.

The maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius has been influenced by a large number of factors. In this study, the most important ones are analyzed, including the ways in which people and the natural environment have shaped the history of the island. The present study shows that many aspects of the island’s history transcend the division between land and sea, and should therefore be studied thematically instead of geographically. Historians often try to answer questions relating to *why* something happened; this dissertation focuses on *how* something happened.

At an economic level, St. Eustatius was developed into one of the largest emporiums in the Caribbean. In the late eighteenth century, trade on the island grew exponentially, attracting a large number of people including sailors and merchants. Archaeological research in the historic port district has shown that many non-commercial activities were carried out in this part of the island as well. The plantations in the countryside played an important role as well: here, illegally imported sugar was processed and crops were grown to feed the island’s population. An extensive road network was built to connect the port district to the rest of the island. Goods were moved by slaves in

canoes between shore and the thousands of ships anchoring on Statia's roadstead every year. Of particular importance in this study is the research conducted into the historic roadstead of St. Eustatius. Using a multidisciplinary approach, including documentary data, archaeological remains, and a study of the natural environment, it is shown that the roadstead was much larger than previously thought. So far, five shipwrecks have been found in this area, but documentary sources indicate that many more wrecks are present around the island. The blue glass beads that are found at one of the wreck sites have become important artifacts in modern-day Statian culture.

People of different social classes lived and worked in varying urban and rural environments. Merchants and planters lived in mansions on the plantations or in town. Many slaves lived in small huts, either in town or on the plantations. Thousands of sailors lived on ships in the roadstead for days, weeks, or sometimes even months at a time. Besides the visible environment, the cognitive component played an important role on the island, for example in place names and oral history.

At a political level, power and wealth were important values that were expressed in different ways. The richest merchants built impressive mansions, had marble tombstones, and even minted their own currency. Because of the favorable economic climate on the island in the eighteenth century, even slaves were able to climb the social and economic ladders. They expressed their power and wealth through expensive objects and by specializing in certain tasks that were key to the economic development of the island. Power was also conveyed through the many works of defense on the island. Despite the fact that these could never prevent a hostile takeover, they were effective in providing protection to ships that were coming to trade on the island.

The natural environment played a large role in the development of the maritime cultural landscape and the life of the Statian people. Because St. Eustatius is relatively dry and not well suited for growing sugar cane, the Dutch chose to turn the island into a trading center. The island's steep topography was used in many different ways, for example to express power and authority on the plantations. The crater of the dormant volcano the Quill was a place where people could relax during a picnic, but also served as a hideout for runaway slaves. Perhaps the most important element of the natural environment was the underwater topography. The large, sandy roadstead on the island's leeward side could house hundreds of ships eager to trade. There was, however, a high risk involved: St. Eustatius is located in the Atlantic hurricane belt. In the colonial period, hurricanes regularly wreaked havoc on the island, destroying many buildings and sinking countless ships.

Because of the large number of ships that came to trade on Statia each year, there was a constant supply of new people, goods, and ideas. People from all around the world lived and worked on the island, including Sephardic Jews, enslaved Africans, and merchants from all corners of the Atlantic World. When the island's economic position weakened in the late eighteenth century, many people left for other centers of trade in the region. Perhaps the most important connection St. Eustatius had was the one with the North American colonies. During the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), large amounts of gunpowder, arms, and ammunitions were sent to the North American rebels through St. Eustatius. This caused the English to sack the island in 1781. Statia's economic position weakened as the nineteenth century progressed, particularly after the abolition of slavery in 1863. However, history has repeated itself on St. Eustatius.

Due to its central location, the island is an international trade hub once again, this time for petroleum products.

This study has shown that the maritime cultural landscape of St. Eustatius is the result of a complex interplay of numerous elements and actors, that each shaped the island in their own way. There is, however, much more to be discovered and learned about the island's fascinating history. This study has formed a starting point and theoretical framework in which this can be done.