



Ontdekking

Archeologen ontdekken een zeldzame slavenbegraafplaats op Sint-Eustatius

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Discovery

Archaeologists discover a valuable slave cemetery on St Eustatius



The slave cemetery on St Eustatius can provide a lot of information about the working conditions and origin of the enslaved. Image Secar

Small island, big find. On St. Eustatius, once of world economic importance, archaeologists have discovered a slave cemetery that can tell us a lot about the lives of the enslaved on the island.

Eric Brassem 19 May 2021, 15:43

The airport of St. Eustatius has been attracting an unusual amount of foot traffic lately. State Secretary Raymond Knops (Kingdom Relations) came by on Monday, and a team of twelve archaeological specialists from the Netherlands, the United States, Germany and Finland is digging next to the runway.

The archaeologists dug up a slave cemetery there, near the Golden Rock plantation. It is estimated that around seventy enslaved people are buried there, on the edge of a probable settlement where the slaves lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So far, 32 skeletons have been unearthed.

"This is a very important find," explains project leader Ruud Stelten. The island, only 21 square kilometers in size, was from the eighteenth century a transshipment and transit port of world importance for products such as sugar, cocoa, tobacco and raw cotton. Stelten: "At the end of the eighteenth century, three thousand ships a year passed by. The island had two hundred warehouses, and was of interest to the entire Atlantic world."

The goods were produced by African enslaved people on plantations throughout the region. St Eustatius, now a Dutch municipality, was first colonized by the Dutch in 1636. Until 1816, when it finally came into Dutch hands, the administration of the island constantly changed between French, British and Dutch. Hence the international archaeological interest in the find.

Information about living conditions

Stelten: "Our archaeological specialists examine the physical remains, which can provide a lot of information about the living conditions of the slaves. There is only one similar archaeological site of this magnitude in the Caribbean, in Barbados. That is now one of the most important reference points for archaeological information about enslaved people in the Caribbean. We can now compare and supplement that information."

Everything we knew about those enslaved people so far comes from what white plantation owners, travelers and administrators recorded about them, Stelten says. "These historical sources often paint too rosy a picture about slavery, that enslaved people were often treated well, which was usually not the case at all."

By examining the remains of the enslaved, researchers can gather more unbiased information about their lives. "From wear and tear of the bones, for example, we can deduce that they had to make many repeated movements. Those injuries must have caused a lot of pain and discomfort."



Bone examination provides information about nutrition and any diseases. Image Secar

In the archaeological team there is a specialist who does protein research, from which it can be deduced whether they suffered from certain diseases. Bone analysis can also show what food the slaves received. DNA and isotope research by the team should provide further information about the exact African origin of the enslaved, and when they arrived on St Eustatius.

"Very interesting is that we found filed teeth in the teeth of two bodies," says Stelten. "That was a typical West African custom. Because plantation owners forbade that with their slaves, it is a strong indication that these two belonged to the first generation of enslaved people."



Filed front teeth are an indication that the buried person must have been taken directly from West Africa by slave traders. Image Secar

Stelten and his team work under the flag of a local archaeological institute, St. Eustatius Center for Archaeological Research (Secar), with a grant from the local government. The intention is that the finds will eventually find their way to the St. Eustatius Museum in Oranjestad.



The archaeologists hope to be able to compare their findings with what had so far become known from a similar cemetery in Barbados. Image Secar

Stelten: "In the graves there are objects that have little value in monetary terms, but are symbolically of great value – for example, glass beads and shells, the exact meaning of which we do not yet know. We also found a tobacco pipe as a grave gift, with wear spots where the owner held the pipe with his thumb and forefinger. Something like that brings the past very close."

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The Rijksmuseum put a very diverse team to work to illuminate the subject of [slavery from all sides](#). 'I advise everyone not to snuff out the inconvenience', says Valika Smeulders, head of history at the Rijksmuseum.