

## Slave Site Archaeology on St. Eustatius, Netherlands Antilles

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### Introduction

Archaeological investigations of Colonial Period slave sites in the Americas and Africa have been thorough in answering wide-ranging questions regarding slave life and culture. However, this research has primarily focused on sites in the British, Spanish, French and Danish colonies. No slave occupation sites in Dutch Caribbean Colonies have been excavated until now. While other colonies mainly focused on sugar production, the economy of St. Eustatius, an island in the Netherlands Antilles, was based on trade (Attema 1976). Therefore, slave material culture on St. Eustatius may reflect a greater exchange of values, ideas, and material goods than that found in more restrictive environments. More diverse ceramic assemblages may reflect this exchange process while other items utilized for personal adornment and/or religious purposes might indicate a more complex relationship with the European trade economy. The diversity of items used by slaves for these purposes may have been greater on St. Eustatius than on other islands, which would suggest superior access to European manufactured goods.

Two sugar plantations on St. Eustatius were investigated during the course of this project. Permission to excavate these sites was obtained through the assistance of the St. Eustatius Historical Foundation and Lt. Governor Eugene Abdul. The first is known as *English Quarter* and is located on 303 ha (750 acres) of land on the Atlantic side of the island. It was occupied from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the 1930s. The other plantation is known as the *Pleasures Estate* and is located on the west side of the Quill volcano, facing the town of Oranjestad. It originally contained over 25 ha (62 acres) and was probably occupied between 1742 and 1977 when the main home on the property burned down. Both plantations have substantial standing ruins including both sugar works and main houses. *English Quarter* and *Pleasures* were both first recorded in a general archaeological assessment of the island begun by Norman Barka in 1981 and finished by John Eastman in 1996 (Barka 1985; Eastman 1996). Surface collections in the sugar complex at English Quarter were conducted by Linda France in 1984. I undertook the only previous archaeological work at *Pleasures* (Gilmore 1997, 2000). In 1997, plan drawings were completed for the sugar processing area.

### First field season (April 2000)

During the spring of 2000, I carried out a geophysical survey on each plantation with the goal of locating slave sites. A fluxgate gradiometer was utilized at *English Quarter* while a resistivity meter survey was completed at *Pleasures*. These instruments were provided by the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. Slave residences were found on *English Quarter* plantation through the identification of seven discrete hearth areas and associated artefacts approximately 100 metres west of the central plantation area. These hearths were constructed of volcanic rock and artefacts recovered during test excavations included Afro-Caribbean ware, iron kettle fragments, cattle bone, and a small quantity of European ceramics. At the *Pleasures*

*Estate* plantation, it is believed that slaves actually lived in upper stories of the sugar processing facilities. Afro-Caribbean ware was evident among these structures while no discrete hearth areas were identified.

### **Second field season (June-September 2000)**

The second phase of archaeological work has been very successful. Over twenty undergraduate students from the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, participated in extensive open-area excavation on both sites. Through this work, the physical layout of slave residences and their relationship to the rest of the plantation complex have begun to be determined.

During the first half of the summer the archaeological team excavated two structures at the Pleasures Estate. One building has been identified as the kitchen and it seems that slaves resided on the second floor. Evidence for food items included crab claws, iguana bones, goat bones, cattle bones and pig bones. Of particular interest were slave-produced ceramics with African motifs incised into bases and sides. In addition, slave ceramics with salt glaze were excavated - this seems to be an unprecedented manufacturing technique. An additional building was excavated which is likely to be an industrial storage building, as very few artefacts were recovered here.

During the second half of the summer, students excavated a third building that was thought to be associated with sugar processing due to a molasses storage vat adjacent to the structure. Some slave ceramics were recovered from within this building as well. The most spectacular aspect of this structure was a unique flue system that was probably used in the processing of indigo (Fig. 1). Indigo was one of the first crops introduced to St. Eustatius before widespread production of sugar began.



**Figure 1** Flue system, probably for the processing of indigo (photograph by R. G. Gilmore).

### Future work

I will continue the excavations with the assistance of Anna Bakare between September 2000 - May 2001. At *English Quarter*, the areas surrounding the hearths will be excavated to the living floors in order to determine the construction techniques utilized in slave residences. In addition it is hoped that trash pits and other features may be located to provide further artefactual evidence related to slaves. At the *Pleasures Estate*, the buildings associated with sugar manufacture will be excavated to determine in which one(s) slaves resided.

In addition to the field research, I would like to complete a comprehensive investigation of the St. Eustatius archives kept in the *Algemeen Rijksarchief* (Royal Dutch Archives) in The Hague, Netherlands. This would involve reviewing all the letters, wills, deeds and probate records kept in these archives for descriptions of slaves on St. Eustatius. This data will be assembled into a comprehensive database to determine the slave population on St. Eustatius and possibly how some of these individuals may have participated in the island economy.

### Conclusion

Through a combination of both archaeological and documentary evidence the complexities and richness of slave life on St. Eustatius can be reconstructed. The archaeology of slavery is the process by which this cornerstone of St. Eustatius history may be made relevant to both current residents and the rest of the world. The enslavement of Africans by Europeans had an unequalled impact on the world economy during the Colonial Period and must therefore be tackled from a global perspective. By investigating slavery on St. Eustatius, a broader understanding of how African and European cultures combined to form the complex societies found in the Caribbean today can be achieved.

### References

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