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Excavations on St Eustatius offer new perspective on the history of slavery



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"If you dig into the soil of St Eustatius, you dig into history," says Sherees Timber. She is one of the inhabitants of the island who hopes to find the story of her ancestors, now that archaeologists have discovered an ancient slave cemetery. There may still be a hundred skeletons.

The cemetery was on the spot where the airport of Oranjestad is now located. Archaeologists have now unearthed 53 skeletons. The find is unique. Never before has such a cemetery of this association been discovered on one of the islands in the Caribbean. The find is also special for the inhabitants of St Eustatius. Possibly ancestors are buried there. Research should show that.

Boxes

Timber is enthusiastic about the excavations and hopes to learn more about her ancestors: "I have a picture of my great-grandmother, but that's where it stops. Her parents, my great-great-grandparents, must have experienced slavery."

She walks with archaeologist and project leader Ruud Stelten along the excavations. A team of twelve archaeologists is meticulously releasing the skeletons found.



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"It is striking that most enslaved people are buried in coffins," says Stelten. "The wood of it has almost completely decayed and the remains of the lid have fallen on the bodies. These residues must be meticulously removed. From the many nails that lie on and next to the skeletons, we deduce that most of the boxes have consisted of dozens of panels, sometimes more."

Buried with head to the left

Almost all skeletons are buried with their heads to the left. According to Stelten, this is a Christian tradition. "We have found three graves in which the people are not like that. These are graves without a coffin and in them lie people with filed teeth. That is

a West African custom and was forbidden by slave owners. These three skeletons are therefore almost certainly the first generation of enslaved people. People who weren't born here."



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St Eustatius was colonised by the Netherlands in 1636. The island, which lies in the northeast of the Caribbean, became an important transit port for the regional trade in sugar and enslaved people from West Africa.

Several universities, including Leiden University, have pledged to cooperate in studying and analyzing the remains to learn more about the lives of the buried individuals. By means of a DNA analysis, it is investigated where these people came from and protein studies are examined from which diseases they have suffered. Once the excavation is complete and the DNA bank has been created, residents can come forward to see if their ancestors were buried there.

According to archaeologists, the discovery of the cemetery therefore offers new insights into the lives of enslaved people from their own perspective. Most of the stories have been recorded by the people who were in power or managed the

plantations.

New perspective on slavery

Timber also emphasizes the importance of other perspectives on the history of slavery. Not only on St Eustatius, but also in the Netherlands. "The exhibition on slavery in the Rijksmuseum is encouraging. It is a good sign that it was opened by King Willem Alexander. This means that the Netherlands is taking its first steps to process the history of slavery."

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