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Title: “Better than we”: landscapes and materialities of race, class, and gender in pre-emancipation colonial Saba, Dutch Caribbean
Issue Date: 2017-02-09
Chapter 2: The Setting

Saba is the northernmost volcanic island in the active arc of the Lesser Antilles group, situated at approximately 17.38 degrees North, and 63.14 degrees West, measuring around thirteen square kilometers in area, and about 890 meters in elevation. Saba is presently governed as a “Public Entity” of The Netherlands along with St. Eustatius and Bonaire, a status which began in 2010 after Netherlands Antilles was dissolved as a country. This status was re-evaluated in late 2015, with changes expected to come in 2016. Prior to this time, Saba was part of the Netherlands Antilles, a country founded within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1954 as part of a reorganization of The Netherlands’ former American colonial territories following World War II. The Netherlands Antilles originally consisted of Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius, and Saba, and was reduced to five islands following Aruba’s departure from the country to assume an independent status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1985. The names “St. Maarten” and “Sint Maarten” are commonly employed presently to refer to the Dutch side of the island, versus “St. Martin” or “Saint Martin” which references the French side. However, this distinction was not commonly made in historical documents, and prior to the 1930’s nearly all references to the Dutch side employ the name “St. Martin” or “St. Martin’s”. Saba currently hosts a population of about 1,500 residents as of 2014, not including medical students at the Saba University School of Medicine, residing across four main settlements; The Bottom, which is the administrative center of the island, St. John’s, Windwardside, and Hell’s Gate.

Saba is a young island, approximately 500,000 years old, consisting of a rhomb-shaped single volcano rising to a central dome-capped peak which rises from the seafloor approximately 1,500m below the surface (Roobol & Smith 2004:31). Saba is an active volcano, which is evidenced partly by hot springs located near the surf at Great Point, Ladder Bay, and Well’s Bay, together with reports of fluctuating temperatures within the former sulphur mines (Roobol & Smith 2007). The last volcanic event reportedly occurred in the early seventeenth century, prior to Dutch colonization in 1640 (Roobol & Smith 2007). While “The Mountain” is the most ubiquitous dome on the island, it is surrounded by another sixteen domes. Due to the small area of Saba, the corresponding geology has created a very steep topography, fostering a social premium upon level landscapes. Consequently, Amerindian and colonial period settlements have been predictably concentrated upon the few pockets of flat land, often creating two to three occupation periods. Indeed, The Bottom, St. John’s, Windwardside, Flat Point, Spring Bay, Spring Bay Flat, Palmetto Point, and the Fort Gut Ridge site all feature Amerindian and colonial period occupations, and together compose most of the large swathes of relatively flat land on the island (Haviser 1983; Hofman 1993; Hoogland 1996; Espersen 2009). Saba
has no permanent or seasonal streams, and there are just three potable springs, located at the accordingly-named Spring Bay, Wells Bay, and Fort Bay. Three historic wells were erected at Middle Island, Cove Bay, and a second well at Wells Bay, to catch water from ground infiltration.

The peak of Saba is usually shrouded in clouds, as the steep slopes, and particularly the guts, funnel air current up the mountain where they condense and form cumulus clouds. This has drawn comparisons to a crown, earning Saba the nickname “The Unspoiled Queen”. Saba is subject to a range of seasonal and elevation-based fluctuations in temperature. The average daily minimum and high at sea level for January is 23°C and 29°C respectively, while in July, it rises to a daily minimum of 25°C and a high of 31°C. Temperatures average about one-degree cooler in The Bottom (Price 1934), and are cooler still as one ascends to Windwardside and the upper portions of Hell’s Gate. In one account from the early twentieth century, a visitor staying in Hell’s Gate reported a nighttime temperature of 15°C, even noting condensation from breath (Kruythoff 1939). The months of January and February are referred to locally as “winter”. Saba is subject to warmer months, characterized by higher precipitation, spanning between July to October, and a period of low precipitation from January to April. While these are typically referred to as the “rainy season” and “dry season” in northern hemisphere tropical environments, due to the small size and elevation of Saba, any month can be wet, and any month can be dry (Crane 1990). The Bottom received an average annual rainfall of 1,041mm between 1919 and 1932 (Price 1934), however the higher elevations and the windward faces of the island receive more precipitation than those lower and leeward. The differences in rainfall relative to elevation has fostered three distinct ecosystems, ranging from Xerophytic systems at the lower elevations to sea level, Mesophytic systems at mid elevations, and tropical montane ecosystem at the higher elevations of “The Mountain”.

Anchorage around Saba is poor, due to deep waters which surround the island, rocky bottoms which snag anchors, strong and shifting currents, and exposure to the trade winds on the windward face of the island. Anchorage is limited to The Ladder, Fort Bay, and Well’s Bay, while Spring Bay was also used as anchorage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to service the Spring Bay and Flat Point plantations. No harbours existed on Saba prior to the twentieth century, and therefore goods and people were ferried between ship and shore by rowboats. The poor quality anchorage is evidenced through the abundance of anchors across the sea floor; “Big Mike” of the former Saba Deep dive company, who has been scuba diving around Saba for nearly thirty years, has noted the locations of at least 120 anchors around the island (Mike Austin, personal communication 2013), while on St. Eustatius, SECAR has noted 42 anchors, which is comparatively much less as the island offers excellent anchorage on the south face of the island, and maintained a period as a major international trade center during its “Golden Rock” era (Ruud Stelten, personal communication 2014).
Positioning Research Locally

There has been considerable pre-Columbian archaeological work completed on Saba in the past quarter-century, but comparatively less concerning the island’s colonial period. In 1923, the Dutch archaeologist Josselin de Jong became the first to undertake excavations in Saba, searching for evidence of pre-Columbian occupation in The Bottom. However, it was not until 1947 that his results were published. Jay Haviser followed over sixty years later, by initiating a three-part survey of colonial and pre-colonial archaeological sites on Saba in 1983. Part one consisted of all sites below an elevation of 300m. Due to logistical and time constraints, parts two and three were not completed. His team mapped, surveyed, and amassed surface collections at thirty-two identified colonial and pre-colonial archaeological sites across the island. Haviser (2001) outlined the historical and cultural peculiarities of the Dutch Caribbean relative to their impact upon archaeological research on each respective island, and followed up with a study concerning the longevity of Saba’s seventeenth century fort (2010).

In 2011, together with Grant and Joanna Gilmore, he conducted Malta compliant archaeological excavations in Windwardside, excavating and relocating five nineteenth century burials at a construction site. Corinne Hofman and Menno Hoogland (Hofman 1993; Hoogland 1996, 1999; Hofman & Hoogland 1987, 1991, 2003, 2011, 2016; Hoogland & Hofman 1991, 1993, 1999; Hofman et. al 2006) have conducted extensive pre-Columbian surveys and excavations across Saba, ranging from sites in The Bottom, Kelbey’s Ridge, Spring Bay, Spring Bay Flat, and Plum Piece. Philippa Jorissen (2015) conducted faunal analysis between the assemblages from SB 026 and SB 027 as part of this research, along with SB 030, as a means of interring class through diet. The author undertook excavations at Palmetto Point (SB 027) in 2008 as part of his Research Masters thesis at Leiden University, which has been followed up by further excavations on sites across the island, including many that are central to this research. Several Masters thesis from Leiden University have resulted from research on Saba, including surveys of sugar plantations (Bruins 2000), comparative Amerindian site distribution (Pedrosa Negami do Nascimento 2010), pre-Columbian burials (Bastiaanse 2010), and GIS predictive site modeling (Soffers 2013).

The topic and legacy of slavery on Saba is not observed to the same degree as in the nearby Dutch islands of St. Maarten and St. Eustatius. Emancipation Day, 1 July, is observed as a national holiday and celebrated on both the latter islands, but is not a holiday on Saba, nor is it celebrated there. While there has to date been no concerted efforts to instate it as an observed, island-wide holiday, this does not imply that the issues pertaining to race and slavery on Saba have been settled across Saban society. In fact, some white Sabans among older generations are not even aware, or even deny that the institution of slavery existed on their island. Among both white Sabans and African
descent Sabans, there is interest in the history of slavery on Saba, but it is not unanimous; some responses to the author varied from intense interest to concerns about “rocking the boat” and dredging up a painful past that for the benefit of nobody. The legacy of racial divides from slavery on Saba persist into the present, and is best expressed in the human landscape by the concentration of African-descent Sabans in The Bottom, and most white Sabans in Windwardside. At the village level, up until the 1980’s, there were certain tacitly acknowledged “no go” zones for African descent Sabans in Windwardside. The divide in the present day is not as pronounced as in former times, likely since the island became increasingly less insular due to the influx of immigrants from the U.S.A., the Netherlands, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Canada, and the Philippines, the constant stream of foreign medical students since 1989 with the Saba School of Medicine, and the growth of dive tourism since the 1980’s. This research is well positioned to unveil the colonial origins of social organization on present-day Saba, and provides histories for those Sabans who were often neglected in the documentary record, such as the poor, enslaved Africans, and free Sabans of African descent.
Figure 2: Social and Physical Landscape of Saba, 2016

Legend

Saba - Social and Physical Landscape

1. Fort Bay (harbour)
2. The Bottom
2a. The Promised Land
3. St. John’s
4. Windwardside
5. Booby Hill
6. Hell’s Gate
6a. Behind-the-Ridge
7. Flat Point (airport)
8. Fort Bay (anchorage)
9. Bunker Hill
10. Paris Hill
11. Great Hill
12. Ladder Bay (anchorage)
13. Well’s Bay (anchorage)
14. Torrens Point
15. Diamond Rock
16. Cave of Rum Bay
17. Great Point
18. The Mountain
19. The Bottom Mountain
20. Giles Quarter
21. The Level
22. Core Gut Bay
23. Old Booby Hill
24. Spring Bay (anchorage)
25. Cove Bay
26. Green Island

Settlement

Physical environment

500 0 500 1000 1500 2000 m
Figure 3: Relevant Archaeological Sites, Saba

Legend
1. SB 001 - Flat Point
2. SB 002 - Flat Point well
3. SB 003 - Flat Point indigo vats
4. SB 004 - Spring Bay
5a. SB 005a - Spring Bay well and indigo vats
6. SB 007 - Spring Bay Flat
22. SB 022 - Little Rendezvouz
26. SB 026 - Middle Island
27. SB 027 - Palmetto Point
36. SB 036 - Privy pit (The Bottom)
37. SB 037 - Fort Gut Ridge site
38. SB 038 - Core Gut Bay
39. SB 039 - Hell's Gate structure
40. SB 040 - Tara Ground

Contour line (10m)
Positioning research regionally

Plantation archaeology has been a common element of Caribbean historical archaeology due to the defining role they occupied in the social and economic environments of the colonial period. This is no exception relative to the region, including St. Maarten and St. Eustatius. On St. Maarten and St. Martin, several plantations were surveyed as part of an island-wide archaeological survey by Haviser (1988). Partial excavations of plantations on the Dutch side have included the Ebenezer Plantation (Barka 1991), the Welgelegen Plantation (Barka & Sanders 1993), the Belvedere Plantation (Haviser 1996), the Bethlehem Plantation (Hofman, Hoogland, & Gilmore 2003), the Vineyard Plantation (Haviser 2004), Emilio Wilson Estate (Haviser 2006), and the Rockland Plantation (Haviser 2012). In St. Eustatius, many plantations have been surveyed beginning in the late 1970’s into the 1980’s (Haviser 1982; Dethelfsen et al. 1979), and analyzed in terms of spatial analysis (Delle 1994). Norm Barka undertook excavations at several sites, including the Princess Estate (1987), and the country estate of Johannes de Graaf (1996). Other excavated plantations have included the Pleasures Plantation (Gilmore 2005), the Steward Plantation (Stelten 2012), the Golden Rock Plantation (Haviser & Stelten 2012, unpublished), the Schotsenhoek Plantation and slave village (Stelten 2013), the Fair Play plantation (Cook 2015, unpublished), and the estate of Johannes de Graaf (Barka 1996). Afro-Caribbean ware on St. Eustatius has been analyzed by Barbara Heath (1988, 1991, 1999), Grant Gilmore (2005), with comparisons drawn to Afro-Caribbean wares from St. Kitts (Ahlman, Schroedl, & McKeown 2009). Free African descent resident villages have been excavated in St. Maarten (Haviser 2008, unpublished), while on St. Eustatius one has been located and excavated by Grant Gilmore between 2008-2010, but to date no site report has been published (Ruud Stelten, personal communication 2015). Regional research involving colonial burial practices and grave marker surveys have included excavations of the Belvedere Plantation burial ground (Barka 1998), excavations of a Catholic priest’s grave in St. Maarten (Haviser 2006), and the excavation of three nineteenth burials from a proposed construction site in Windwardside, Saba (Haviser 2013).

Concluding remarks

This research marks the first series of excavations within plantation contexts on Saba, and additionally the first concerted study of slavery and race during the island’s pre-emancipation colonial period. The small size and limited areas of land of practical use across Saba have restricted settlement to the few areas sufficiently large and flat to permit economic exploitation and settlement. As a result, a comprehensive sampling can be obtained from sites across the island to provide key comparative material assemblages. The following chapter will introduce the theory and methodology employed by this research to interpret the pre-emancipation colonial material landscape of Saba.