

# THE BLUE BEADS OF ST. EUSTATIUS: NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM ARCHAEOLOGY AND ORAL HISTORY

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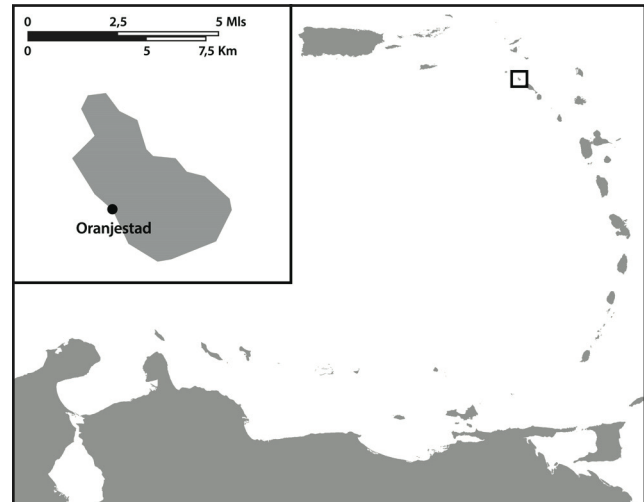
*The blue beads of St. Eustatius are a famous symbol of the island's heritage, evoking both positive and negative emotional responses in local stakeholders. Archaeologists often encounter oral historical accounts to explain the functions of the blue beads in colonial society. Until now, these accounts have not been thoroughly recorded, investigated, or integrated with other sources of data. Oral historical interviews conducted in 2016 provide information on the role of the blue beads in enslaved and free communities. We discuss these findings and their relation to archaeological evidence on the island as well as elsewhere in the Americas and West Africa. Such involvement of local people in the interpretation of their own heritage encourages the decolonization of archaeology, and we hope that this approach will become standard throughout the Caribbean region.*

“Well the main thing about, with slavery, that I hold close to my heart also is the blue beads... this is one artifact I treasure it like gold” (Interviewee EUX-OH-01).

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers have studied the beads of St. Eustatius (also known as Statia), an island in the Caribbean Netherlands (Figure 1), since the 1970s (Burger 2019; Hartog 1976:54; Karklins and Barka 1989; Stelten 2019). Archaeologists have often referred tangentially to oral historical accounts about blue beads by local people, but have often seen them as mythological. We would like to suggest that oral historical accounts of the blue beads have value on the same level as the archaeological evidence. This is because the legacy of enslaved people in the Caribbean is oral and material, and they seldom had a documentary voice.

Today the blue beads play an important role in the Statian economy, as tourists are attracted by the prospect of diving for them at archaeological dive sites such as Blue Bead Hole (Scubaqua Dive Center 2020). Unfortunately, chronic and well-established looting damages archaeological sites and it is imperative to thoroughly research the beads before more evidence is destroyed.



**Figure 1.** The eastern Caribbean showing the location of St. Eustatius (drawing: Felicia Fricke and Pepijn van der Linden).

In this article, we will discuss the provenience and archaeological record of these beads, as well as using oral historical narratives as a primary data source. We conducted the oral history interviews in 2016, and participants demonstrated detailed knowledge about the importance of the blue beads in enslaved Statian communities. Many of their stories can be triangulated with data from elsewhere in the Americas and West Africa and align well with the work of other scholars.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ISLAND

The ubiquity of blue beads on St. Eustatius characterizes the island's global and regional significance during the 17th to 19th centuries. The island, although relatively obscure within the modern context of the Caribbean and North America, was once an international epicenter for trade and commerce (Barka 2001:104). No other port in Europe or the Americas was as busy as St. Eustatius' Oranje Bay during

the latter half of the 18th century (Gilmore and Dijkshoorn 2005:201).

When the Dutch settled St. Eustatius in 1636, they followed a practiced and successful colonial model focused on agriculture. By the early 18th century, however, the Dutch understood that the lack of fresh water and the island's propensity for drought limited its agricultural prospects (Attema 1981). Its gentle Caribbean-facing coast offered a natural harbor and its proximity to French, Danish, English, Spanish, and other Dutch islands presented an opportunity for trade (Jordaan and Wilson 2014). The steadily developing economy boomed through the first half of the 18th century and in 1756 the island was designated a free trade port (i.e., with no customs duty). St. Eustatius' moniker, "the Golden Rock," branded the island as a prosperous hub of economic activity. Warehouses lined the harbor of the island's "Lower Town," a bustling and lively commercial district. An account by Janet Schaw, a Scottish woman traveling through the Caribbean between 1774 and 1776, illustrates the scale of the island's multinational influences:

From one end of the town... to the other is a continued mart, where goods of the most different uses and qualities are displayed before the shop doors. Here hang rich embroideries, painted silks, flowered Muslins, with all the Manufactures of the Indies. Next stall contains most exquisite silver plate, the most beautiful indeed I ever saw, and close by these iron-pots, kettles, and shovels. Perhaps the next presents you with French and English Millinary-wares. But it were endless to enumerate the variety of merchandize in such a place, for in every store you find everything, be their qualities ever so opposite (Schaw 1939:137).

In addition to its trade of a diverse array of merchandise, St. Eustatius was also a hub for slave trading. While some enslaved individuals arrived directly from West Africa, many were also sold between Caribbean islands via the inter-colonial slave trade (Klooster 1998). The first enslaved individuals came to St. Eustatius in the mid-1600s, and slavery was widely practiced on the island until abolition on 1 July 1863. There were slave depots at Fort Amsterdam and Crook's Castle, at the northern and southern ends of the island's commercial district, Oranje Bay (Dethlefsen et al. 1982; Gilmore 2013:43). Historically, a majority of African and Afro-Caribbean enslaved people inhabited the island, along with a minority of free Europeans (Oostindie and Klinkers 2003:58). By the late 18th century, however, a growing population of free Afro-Caribbean people resided in an area today referred to as the "free black village" (Goslinga 1985:152).

Free residents of St. Eustatius enjoyed unhindered economic prosperity resulting from free-trade status until 3 February 1781 when the British, angered by St. Eustatius' support of the rebelling American colonies, captured the island and ransacked it for nine months (Hartog 1976). The French stole onto the island and took control in November of 1781, and by 1784 had handed it back to the Dutch, with whom they were allies (Attema 1981:43).

Despite the significant loss of wealth resulting from the British sack, the island's economy recovered, reaching its peak in 1790. Between 1794 and 1816, the island changed hands several times between the French, English, and Dutch (Attema 1981:61). After 1816 it became "permanently" Dutch. While trade activities were long past their peak, slavery continued to support a small agricultural economy on the island (Attema 1981:47). Over the next two centuries, the warehouses that lined the bay, relics of the island's former heyday, slowly fell into disrepair and washed into the sea.

## HISTORY OF THE ST. EUSTATIUS BEADS

Today St. Eustatius is famous for its glass beads, cultural markers of the island's economic "golden age." While stories about the beads live on among tourists and locals alike, oral narratives have yet to be thoroughly studied and critically evaluated. Narratives about the beads, both written and oral, share common elements as well as differing in their finer details. In order to understand beads within the context of St. Eustatius, we shall first place the beads within the wider context of the colonial era.

The bead trade in Europe can be traced back thousands of years, although the colonial period saw a more nuanced and calculated practice of bead exchange. The production of glass beads in Venice and other European centers boomed after Europeans realized that beads had aesthetic and symbolic value for people in areas they sought to colonize (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). Archaeological evidence indicates that glass bead production existed in West Africa well before the European colonial period (Babalola et al. 2017; Gott 2014; Lankton, Akin Ige, and Rehren 2006; van der Sleen 1958). Beads were used as decoration and amulets, and could convey cultural meanings such as marital status, wealth, age, and other social and political affiliations (Babalola et al. 2017; LaRoche 1994; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). European traders in Africa during the 15th to 19th centuries noted that blue beads were significant to many West African ethnic groups, e.g., among the Ashanti who used them in divination and religious offerings (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). The tradition of bead production

and usage in Yoruban culture was also symbolically meaningful, rather than purely aesthetic in nature, with various shades of blue representing political status, celestial bodies, or water, and white beads representing seniority and elite status (Mason 1998:29; Ogundiran 2002:455).

Consequently, when Europeans arrived in Africa seeking trade opportunities, they found a receptive market and well-established bead economy on the western coast (Russell 1997; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). Beads may then have come to the Caribbean in a variety of ways. Merchant and slave ships from Europe likely included beads as part of their cargo, but it is also possible that enslaved people brought some of these beads with them from their homelands (LaRoche 1994:16; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). Primary accounts describe men and women aboard slaving ships wearing beads around their necks, arms, and waists (Handler and Lange 1978:147; LaRoche 1994:16).

During the 17th century, when the Dutch took part in colonial activities in Africa and elsewhere, various factories in the Netherlands produced glass beads, including in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Middelburg, Rotterdam, and Zutphen (Baart 1988; Karklins 1974). Their products were drawn beads, however, not the blue beads which are furnace-wound. Archaeological evidence reveals that the blue beads found on St. Eustatius are the products of cottage industries centered in the Bavarian/Bohemian forest region which encompasses Upper Austria, southern Bohemia, and the adjacent section of southeastern Bavaria (Karklins 2019; Tarcsay and Klimesch 2018). They were also made in the Fichtelgebirge region of northeastern Bavaria (Karklins et al. 2016:29). The beads were exported through various ports, including Amsterdam, where they have been found in material dredged from the city's canals (van der Sleen 1963).

Curiously, while the Dutch traded a variety of glass beads internationally, beads found on St. Eustatius fall into a specific color spectrum that is discussed in more detail below. Given the multi-national trade legacy of St. Eustatius and its transient population of travelers, merchants, and traders, the limited variety of beads, with relatively few outliers, suggests that merchants catered to a specific market. Indeed, the typological specificity of St. Eustatius' beads warrants further investigation.

## BLUE BEADS FOUND ON ST. EUSTATIUS

### Attributes

The most common glass bead found on St. Eustatius, and most frequently associated with the enslaved, is a five-

sided cobalt-blue type. Locally called "Statia" beads, they are furnace-wound and typically 8-25 mm long and 8-15 mm in diameter (Figure 2). They are typically found in mid-18th to 19th-century contexts (Cook and Stelten 2014; Karklins and Barka 1989; Morsink 2013; Soffers and Zahedi 2013). In the past, scholars working on St. Eustatius have often used the term "blue bead" to refer to only this type (Burger 2019; Gilmore 2013). Local people, however, apply the term to a variety of beads of different shapes (including round, oblate, oblong, donut, flattened, pentagonal faceted, and five sided) and colors (many different shades of blue, but also white) (Figure 3).

The second most common type of blue bead is also furnace wound, nearly spherical, and ranges between 10 mm and 30 mm in diameter (Karklins and Barka 1989). Regardless of shape and color, all of the beads depicted in Figures 2-3 are locally called "blue beads." This linguistic disparity brings to mind that postcolonial approaches to archaeology stress the need for archaeologists not to impose colonial viewpoints onto local cultural practices. It is important to utilize phrases which have meaning for stakeholder groups (Atalay 2012; Gonzalez-Tennant 2014). With this in mind, we use the term "blue beads" to refer to this diverse array of glass beads found on St. Eustatius throughout the article.

Many of the beads found on St. Eustatius also commonly occur elsewhere, including the Netherlands, West Africa, the United States, and other Caribbean islands. The "Statia bead," however, is found in an unusually high concentration on St. Eustatius. An island-wide survey of archaeological sites conducted by the College of William and Mary between 1981 and 1987 uncovered 325 blue beads, 25% of which were "Statia beads" (Karklins and Barka 1989).

### Geographical Distribution

Both archaeological excavations and looting have revealed four main zones of blue beads on St. Eustatius: Upper Town, Lower Town, the agricultural plain, and the Maritime Archaeological Zone on the western side of the island. This is consistent with historical settlement patterns on the island, with beads seldom found in areas that were unpopulated.

The historic commercial district of the island, Lower Town, has revealed dense hoards of beads across the Oranje Bay area. Although much information has been lost due to looting, test excavations at the Crook's Castle site, a former sugar refinery and slave depot, revealed a wide variety of beads (Dethlefsen et al. 1982; Karklins and Barka 1989). Blue beads were also found at other sites including a trash deposit (n=28), a domestic structure (n=47), and several



**Figure 2.** Five-sided “Statia Beads” are not uniform in size or color, and are the most common type of blue bead found on St. Eustatius (photos: St. Eustatius Centre for Archaeological Research and the SMH Collection).

warehouses (Karklins and Barka 1989; Soffers and Zahedi 2013). A commercial project at the Oranje Bay Hotel site uncovered one bead, although it was later discovered that local residents sifting through back dirt found at least four additional specimens. Residents and tourists strolling along the beach at the Scubaqua Dive Center occasionally find beads in the sand.

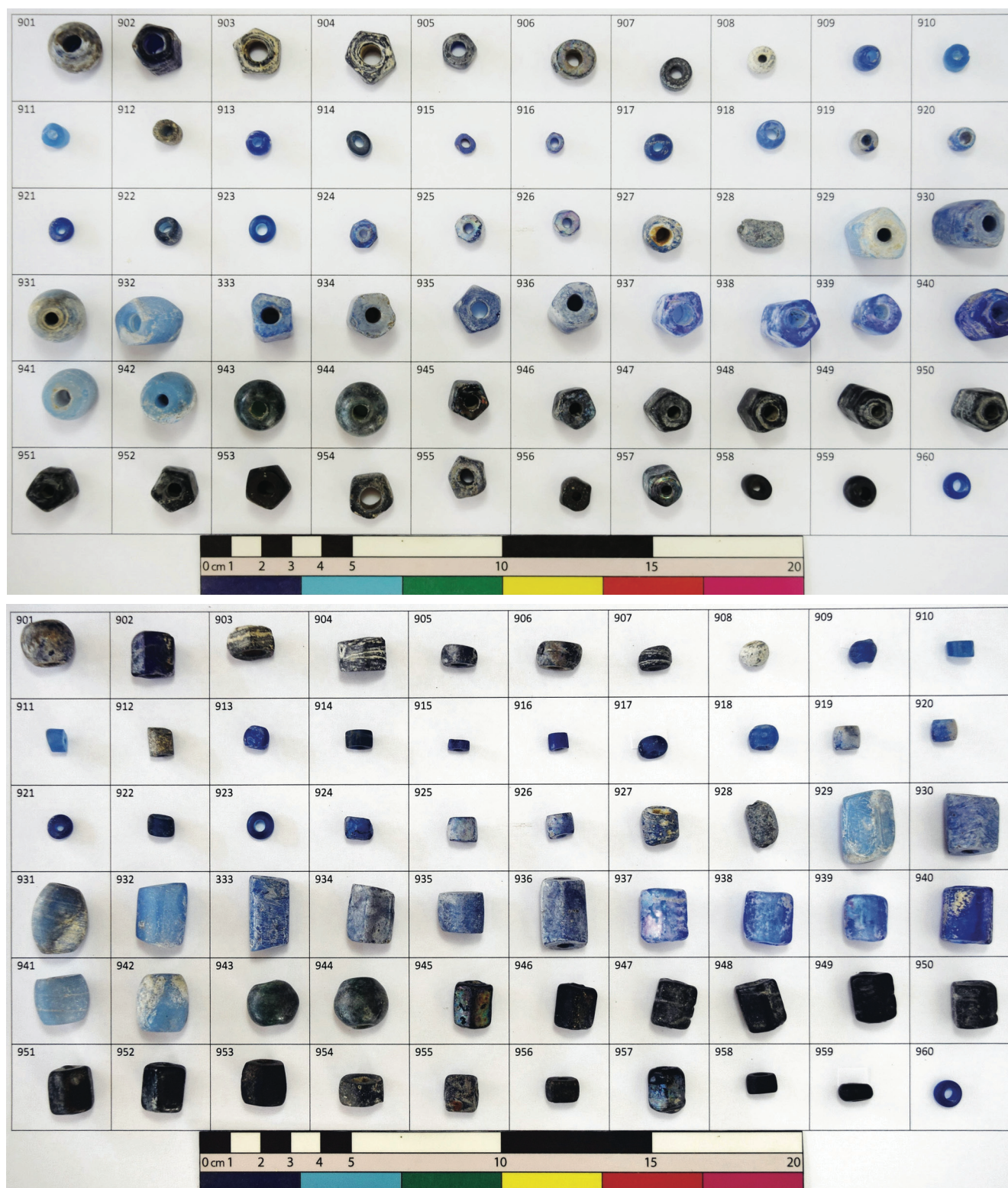
In Upper Town, a diverse range of sites has revealed blue beads including an unmarked grave, the synagogue ( $n=1$ ), Simon Doncker House ( $n=46$ ), Government Guest House ( $n=171$ ), and Princess Estate ( $n=4$ ) (Karklins and Barka 1989). Blue beads have also come to light in the gutters of Upper Town, having been washed out of the soil during rainstorms, although this occurrence has reportedly decreased in recent years. On the agricultural plain, archaeologists have found beads at the Battery Bouille site, Fair Play Plantation, and English Quarter (Cook and Stelten 2014; Karklins and Barka 1989; Morsink 2013).

Perhaps the highest concentration of blue beads lies at Blue Bead Hole, located in the Maritime Archaeological Zone on the western side of the island (Figure 4). Long-established and encouraged looting has eliminated the possibility of knowing the exact number of beads found at the site, although it is estimated in the thousands (Stelten

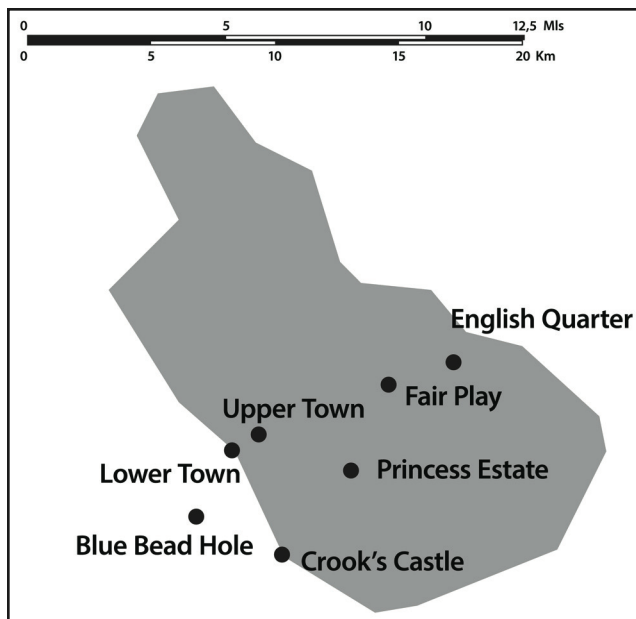
2019:77). The explanation commonly given for the high number of beads at Blue Bead Hole refers to the oral history of formerly enslaved individuals throwing blue beads (symbolic of their bondage) off the cliffs at Crook’s Castle on Emancipation Day (1 July 1863). This interpretation of the site is problematic for several reasons. The nearby presence of ballast stones and other historical artifacts such as ceramics, clay pipes, and glass suggests that Blue Bead Hole is a shipwreck site. The sandy sea floor has no distinct topographic features that would encourage the beads to collect at the site naturally. Additionally, Blue Bead Hole is too far from Crook’s Castle to throw beads from this location to the site (Stelten 2019:77). It is unlikely that the bead deposit at Blue Bead Hole resulted from this celebration of freedom.

Yet the collective memory of symbolically throwing beads from the cliffs persists. Indeed, historical accounts, archaeological research, and anecdotal evidence have noted an abundance of beads at Crook’s Castle, perhaps supporting the oral historical narrative. Both the material and the oral narrative may be true. It is possible that the blue beads at Blue Bead Hole came from a wrecked ship, and that formerly enslaved people also threw beads from the cliffs at abolition.





**Figure 3.** “Blue beads” come in a wide range of colors, ranging from opaque white to almost black (photo: St. Eustatius Centre for Archaeological Research and the SMH Collection).



**Figure 4.** Blue bead find sites on St. Eustatius (drawing: Felicia Fricke and Pepijn van der Linden).

Archaeological research therefore reveals a wide distribution of blue beads across the island, both at terrestrial and marine sites. Yet, evidence is missing at sites with a direct and exclusive link to enslaved people. Archaeologists found no glass beads in the excavations of the Schotsenhoek or Fair Play enslaved villages, although they found shell beads at the latter. The one blue bead from the Fair Play Plantation lay in a building identified as the “big house” (Cook and Stelten 2014). This inconsistency between oral historical and archaeological evidence is thought-provoking; as for historical accounts, they seldom mention blue beads at all.

There might be a number of explanations for this, not least the shortfall of additional research into the lives and experiences of the enslaved on St. Eustatius, and an overemphasis on the economic and material systems of slavery and plantation society. In recent years there has been increasing attention to the decolonization of archaeological research (Agbe-Davies 2010; Battle-Baptiste 2011; Singleton 2010). Utilizing new strategies such as community input and collaboration on archaeological research, interpretation, and information dissemination will inform better practice that is more relevant to communities that are the ultimate stakeholders in heritage research. An interpretative focus on oral history in this setting can contribute to the democratization of knowledge, which can be a powerful agent for social change and overcoming persistent systemic oppression in the Caribbean.

## ORAL HISTORY AND THE BLUE BEADS

Once considered merely a methodology, oral history has emerged as a discipline in its own right (Shopes 2014). The collective memories that it allows us to access can be accurate at considerable time depth (Boeyens and Hall 2009; Fahlander 2004). Antiquarians and early archaeologists were more likely to use oral history at greater time depths, but with the adoption of scientific methods, archaeologists questioned the reliability of such information. In the last two decades the pendulum has swung back, with the influence of post-structuralism and post-modernism on archaeology (Jones and Russell 2012). Researchers learned that memory functions differently at different time depths. Recent or linear time (within three or four generations) can provide detailed historical accounts, while middle or cyclical time (over the past four centuries) can provide more general information such as palimpsests of historical events and qualitative information about lifeways (Boeyens and Hall 2009; Fahlander 2004; Mason 2012; Spear 1981). More distant time periods may include mainly mythical information which, while not necessarily factual, can help to understand a cultural group (Spear 1981). Some researchers do argue for the usefulness of oral history at a mythical time depth, for example almost a thousand years in Ethiopia (Finneran 2009).

In Africa, postcolonial archaeology has long relied on oral historical data in tandem with data from the archaeological record and colonial documentation (DeCorse 2014; Miller 2003; Schmidt 2013; Schmidt and Munene 2010). Such studies are successful in their deconstruction of colonial narratives and their construction of the subaltern (Schmidt and Munene 2010). Oral history as a discipline has therefore proven its ability to be helpful in contexts like colonial Statia where one group of people is systematically oppressed by another.

With this in mind, oral historical data collected during interviews in 2016 provides us with a more nuanced view of the blue beads and their importance in the enslaved communities of the island. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately one hour each, and were part of a wider project looking at the lifeways of enslaved people in the Dutch Caribbean. We recruited interviewees using the snowballing technique (Braun and Clarke 2013:57). Transcripts (*see* Appendix) are referenced by their individual codes such as EUX-OH-01. This anonymization was necessary in order to protect the identities of participants and is standard practice in oral history projects examining sensitive topics such as slavery and operating in small communities.

### Blue Beads as Exchange Vectors

Several interview participants mentioned the use of blue beads as a type of “currency” (EUX-OH-01, EUX-OH-03). In the past archaeologists have treated such information with skepticism, wondering how the use of blue beads as currency would have functioned in practice. There are two reasons why we believe that oral historical accounts of such usage should be taken seriously. Firstly, the use of the word “currency” may be misleading, as it implies the use of a commonly upheld system within which all participants know the monetary “value” of a bead in a given context. The existence of such a complex system within such a small community may be unlikely. Instead, we suggest that the beads should be seen less as a true currency and more as part of an extended barter system like that used in West Africa during the same time period, where items like cowrie shells, blue beads, and fabric were exchanged for captives (Law and Mann 2003; Liberato 2009). We also know that barter systems existed in other communities of enslaved people in the Caribbean during this period (Tomich 1991). Secondly, it seems that the use of blue beads in this way reinforced enslaved status. Acquiring blue beads from their enslavers instead of money paid for services rendered may have made it more difficult for enslaved people to participate in the wider economy, for example by buying their own freedom. One interviewee (EUX-OH-02) mentioned that this “currency” may actually have been a form of “disrespect” for the labor of enslaved people.

In a North American context, Russell (1997) does not consider it likely that slave owners provided enslaved people with the beads that they used at The Hermitage, Tennessee. Yet, given what we know of the ways in which enslavers psychologically manipulated enslaved people – e.g., the technique of “divide and conquer” (Akbar 1996:16-19; Lewis 1983) – the provision of blue beads to the enslaved people of St. Eustatius seems a credible part of a system whereby maximum profit can be made with minimum risk. If enslaved persons with a specialization such as blacksmithing or sailing received blue beads for their labor, then the enslavers could keep the money they earned. The system was complex in that there were “ranks” of blue beads, with the large, round marble beads being “worth” more in the system of exchange and therefore more frequently given to those with a higher social position in the enslaved community, especially men (EUX-OH-01). As Chan (2007:141) notes, the use of beads as items of personal adornment in West Africa is sometimes linked to notions of status and prestige.

### Blue Beads as Cultural Commodities

The blue beads also came to perform important social roles. Several interviewees mentioned their use in marriage.

Enslaved men had to earn the right to marry enslaved women by acquiring enough blue beads to go around their waist (EUX-OH-06, EUX-OH-10). Chan (2007:140-141) and Karklins and Barka (1989) note that the wearing of beads (including around the waist) might be associated with women and with ideas of womanhood in African-American contexts. In fact, at the New York African Burial Ground, an adult woman was buried with a string of mostly blue beads around her waist (Russell 1997). Adorning the waist may relate to cultural values of thinness, plumpness, and obesity in women. Cross-culturally, plump but not obese individuals are often seen as healthier and more attractive (Madrigal 2006:42-44). This might have been particularly so in marginalized communities such as the enslaved. Food scarcity in enslaved communities is indicated by the prevalence of deficiency diseases in buried populations (Handler 2009; Khudabux 1991:39-48), but also by ongoing traditions of carbohydrate-heavy diets which are cheap and filling. Interviewees indicated that the traditional diet of St. Eustatius includes johnny (or journey) cakes, dumplings, sweet potatoes, and yams (EUX-OH-02).

Although other bead types are found on Statia and elsewhere in the Americas in association with enslaved people, the vast majority of beads found here are blue (Karklins and Barka 1989). The preference for blue echoes patterns at other sites in the Americas, e.g., Rich Neck in Virginia (Franklin 2004:127). There may be some cultural significance to this. Stine, Cabak, and Groover (1996) have suggested that beads may function as protective or healing charms as well as decorative items in the areas of West and Central Africa where enslaved people in the Americas originally came from, and the association of this color with protection from spirits and witches continued in the Americas (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). For example, a blue bead was found in a 19th-century context at the Slayton House workrooms, Annapolis, in a door sill cache also containing nine pins and a crab claw (Leone and Fry 1999). Use of amulets and caches like these provided ways for enslaved people to cope with their enslavement and exert their agency (Chan 2007:163; Frey and Wood 2003; Lima, Souza, and Malerba Sene 2014; Wilkie 1997). The color blue is thought to have protective properties in other areas of the Caribbean, such as in Curaçao (Fricke 2019:222).

At Newton Plantation in Barbados, a man was buried with a string of blue beads around his neck. Archaeologists have suggested that he may have been an Obeah man for the local enslaved community (Handler and Norman 2007). Obeah is an African-influenced belief system existing on the English-speaking Caribbean islands, including St. Eustatius (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011:155-156). The word Obeah probably derived from the Ashanti



*obayifo* (wizard) and *obeye* (witch) (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011:155; Sypkens-Smit 1981:81). Its traditions, however, are influenced by many different West African beliefs about witches, ancestors, and spirits (Frey and Wood 2003; Wilkie and Farnsworth 2005:198). It is similar to Vodou, Myal, Quimbois, Brua, and Montamentu, which are all African-influenced belief systems in the Americas (Allen 2010; Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2011:155-171; Havisser 2006, 2010). Blue beads have also been interpreted as apotropaic adornments (to ward off evil, to bring luck) on enslaved sites in the United States (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). It is therefore possible that the multiple meanings of blue beads in St. Eustatius are linked with Obeah, although such interpretations of material culture in the Americas are tentative because of the large, diverse, and changing region of West Africa potentially contributing cultural elements (DeCorse 1999).

## STATIA'S ENDANGERED CULTURAL HERITAGE

The blue beads of St. Eustatius have a range of historical values and meanings. To the Dutch, they evoke imperial nostalgia, embodying the former glory of the Dutch colonial empire; to enslaved people, they had a range of symbolic and practical attributes associated with trade, marriage, status, and religion; to the inhabitants of St. Eustatius today, blue beads have taken on a mythological quality and play a role in island identity. While some people hold the blue beads "close to their hearts" (EUX-OH-02; *see also* EUX-OH-01 and EUX-OH-10), gifting them to loved ones and wearing them as ornaments, others avoid them because of their association with slavery and oppression. It is clear from any viewpoint that the blue beads are extremely valuable both as historical and contemporary objects.

Despite consensus on the cultural value of the blue beads, they are still threatened by persistent looting. Local dive shops in particular have engaged in active removal of cultural materials from archaeological sites such as Blue Bead Hole. (We note that the two dive shops on the island are not owned by people from St. Eustatius.) Finding a blue bead is marketed as "lucky" for tourists as indicated on the Scubaqua dive shop website:

According to the legend you don't find blue beads but the beads find you, and if you're found, you will return to St. Eustatius again and again. Blue beads are the only artifacts that are allowed to leave the island (Scubaqua Dive Center 2020).

Articles such as "Treasure-hunting in the Caribbean" (Dean 2016) and "Blue Bead Fever" (Harterink 2013), among many others, brand St. Eustatius as a tourism destination

where treasure hunting is allowed, and even encouraged. Through a postcolonial lens, the use and destruction of local heritage for the purpose of economic benefit by white and usually non-local people is at best inconsiderate and at worst cultural exploitation and appropriation. With so many unanswered questions about blue beads at hand, the ultimate risk posed by bead looting is that we will never truly know the stories of the beads and the people to whom they belonged.

Both looting and archaeological excavation have demonstrated a geographically wide distribution of blue beads at categorically diverse sites (i.e., domestic, commercial, military), yet their absence in enslaved contexts is puzzling. Exposing this research gap are oral histories that consistently and unequivocally describe blue beads as symbolically important to enslaved people, consistent with archaeological evidence from elsewhere in the Americas (Dillian 2011; LaRoche 1994; Russell 1997; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). As archaeologists know, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (Altman and Bland 1995). Rather, apparent inconsistency between oral histories and archaeological evidence should inspire further inquiry and reaffirm the need for more substantial research. This issue, moreover, recalls the importance of combining traditional archaeological methods with the study of oral history, especially in contexts where diverse perspectives have been understudied and underexplored.

To understand this inconsistency more thoroughly, we may consider the nature and context of past archaeological research conducted on St. Eustatius. Cultural resource management projects required by commercial development in parts of the island such as Lower Town have provided insight and context to the island's rich mercantile history, while historical documentation has provided a wealth of information on the ways in which the system of slavery was administered at elite levels. This research has prioritized colonialist history, embedded in a European perspective, partly because the information is readily available. While it has been commonly assumed that Lower Town was occupied almost exclusively by free people during the slaving era, a 1781 document listing merchants of Lower Town includes census information on their enslaved people, who made up approximately 52% of the population. Although the document does not indicate where these enslaved people resided, it is possible that they lived alongside, or at least worked closely with, slave owners in the Lower Town district. In the context of St. Eustatius, an island where enslaved individuals outnumbered their enslavers (Barka 1996), it is probable that objects belonging to the enslaved would appear in a range of contexts not restricted only to plantation villages. On the other hand, oral historical



accounts referring to the blue beads as highly prized may make it unsurprising that enslaved villages are not littered with them. Blue beads had great value for enslaved people but less value to slave owners who might have stored them or discarded them with less care.

A wider scope is now essential for strong, more nuanced interpretations. The challenge for 21st-century archaeologists lies in developing a progressive research model that fosters an understanding of diverse perspectives, facilitates sustainable relationships between researchers and local communities, and empowers marginalized groups. In the context of St. Eustatius, providing opportunities for descendent populations to celebrate and study their own history will ensure that archaeological investigations on the island not only continue in the future, but also provide better research with deeper context and greater nuance. The value of local involvement in scientific research cannot be understated as archaeologists and other scientists move away from a colonial and “global-north” perspective. With this in mind, it is pertinent for researchers to reflect on the value of oral history narratives, which can diversify and enhance the benefits of archaeological research.

Legally speaking, the unauthorized excavation of artifacts (including beads) from protected archaeological sites is punishable by up to one year in prison or a fine (Overheid Nederland 2010). There are over 100 protected archaeological sites on St. Eustatius, including some which are very popular with blue bead hunters, such as Crook’s Castle. Unfortunately, Blue Bead Hole is not on the protected list, allowing tourists to vandalize a site that has great importance for local heritage narratives. In the future, increased protection for underwater sites should be a priority, as should improved education for island visitors, who in many cases do not understand that they are damaging the beautiful island to which they return again and again. Local organizations such as the St. Eustatius Centre for Archaeological Research (SECAR), St. Eustatius National Parks (STENAPA), the St. Eustatius Historical Foundation, and the St. Eustatius Monuments Foundation can be instrumental in this regard. Indeed, some progress has already been made: the dive shops on St. Eustatius are selling reproduction beads produced by a glass artist on the neighboring island of Saba which are an ethical substitute for authentic beads. Dive shops have also reportedly begun recording beads recovered at dive sites, although their continuing encouragement of the removal of historical artifacts from the site and the island remains problematic.

Looting undertaken by locals may be more difficult to halt. The economic circumstances of the island do not offer a wide variety of jobs and, as on many Caribbean islands, the

cost of living is high. Greater financial and social investment is needed by the Dutch government to make St. Eustatius a “Golden Rock” for all those who live there, and not only for the tourists who come there to enjoy the beautiful scenery both above and below the waves.

## CONCLUSION

St. Eustatius’s blue beads are widely regarded as important objects to both past and contemporary communities on the island. This study has shown that the integration of archaeology and oral accounts can provide new perspectives on their history and social significance. It has also demonstrated that in seeking knowledge and nuanced interpretations about people of the past, it is essential that we involve people of the present. Indeed, for non-Caribbean researchers, working in the Caribbean is a privilege. We therefore have a social responsibility to include local stakeholders in our research and to listen to perspectives that may sometimes be very different from our own. In this way, our archaeological endeavors become better integrated, more sustainable, and more relevant to stakeholder communities. It is our hope that by honestly evaluating the way in which we engage with cultural materials and the people to whom they belong, we will be able to have a positive and meaningful impact both inside and outside academia.

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## APPENDIX. ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTS

These transcript excerpts come from semi-structured anonymous interviews conducted by Felicia J. Fricke (FJF below) on St. Eustatius in 2016. They pertain directly to the blue beads. Full interview transcripts relating to the lifeways of enslaved people on the island can be accessed on submission of a suitable research proposal on the archiving website DANS Easy ([www.easy.dans.knaw.nl](http://www.easy.dans.knaw.nl)).

### Interviewee EUX-OH-01

**EUX-OH-01.** And they used to call them trade beads, some – I grew up knowing them called trade beads, Indian beads and later on in between, well, people say, well, slave beads, you know, but these were used as pay to the slaves so... when they worked, this is what they were paid with, they wasn't really paid with currency, it's the beads. And then they trade among themselves. [...] Well the main thing about, with slavery, that I hold close to my heart also is the blue beads. You know, even though they were used as pay to the slaves it, it is something about the bead, it's – I don't know if it feels like a connection or the excitement about it, just finding one or having one. I have some and I tend to have it every time just making sure that I feel them to make sure they're there [unintelligible] stuff like that. And it's something that you think back and say well, in those times these was used as pay to slaves. And the story behind of them that they came here in large quantities. They were stored and then these was paid to the slaves. So every time I go out and look for them, 'cause they are very hard to find now. And I heard, you know, like stories that they were in the past they were found here a lot. And up until the 1900s kids – because maybe people knew that they was from the olden days, they were paid to the slaves, but since slavery was abolished there wasn't – the demand for them wasn't much and it seemed that there wasn't value anymore, so nobody never really focused on them. But kids still used to collect them and string them and strangely this is the tradition that people still feel connected and want to look to find one, you have tourists coming in and they want to find one so, this is one artefact I treasure it like gold. [...] Oh, [you find them] anywhere on the island once you go walking. I always the same, I am walk with the head down, it can be a little dangerous. Because I am for sure experience a little incidence without paying attention, so focused in looking for the beads, but once you find one the feeling is – you feel so excited, you feel so happy that it's like a big exam you finally – you find a test and you win the test. You know we have them in different shapes and color. One of the main ones I want to really find is the marble, the marble bead. We call them marble. Those are the big blue ones. And the slaves that got those, they got them based on their position. And mostly men slaves used to get those kind of round ones. So imagine finding the big round one, it's like you hit the jackpot [laughs] you know? [...] I remember one time a tourist told me that she found about five in her back yard when she was doing gardening in New York. Five of the same five-sided beads. And she told me that she found them in her back yard and I was like excited to know that, you know, because she said it was – I know for sure they different shapes like I mentioned sizes and colors, but she said no they were just the same like the ones that you have.

And she said it was in perfect shape, in perfect order. So here we go looking for them when the weather is rainy. Especially when we have a rough sea, you see a lot of people walking the beach or the coast area looking for these, these beads. [...] The beads – because the beads I do know, OK, to each his own, I don't know – the main thing I know that from hearing what people say when they find their bead it brings the excitement and then you hear some oh, I looking for years, I never find any, I want to find one, and some just be like I don't care how much it costs, I will pay for one, you know, and I know for sure they have tales from the olden times that the blue beads, they don't, you don't find it sometimes, it finds you. And I know for sure that people for over the years and [unintelligible] trace back through the centuries that persons dreaming about beads, you know, dreaming about beads in a certain area they were buried, some of the beads were also hidden, some slaves used to bury them and hide them, if they have – some of them have the barrels with the beads in the store rooms in the cellars from warehouses. Some of them will try steal some and hide it. So they find different areas. And it was said too that when it had Emancipation Day, that most – I don't know if it, to say it was a myth – but they say that they would go to the cliffs and throw it over the cliffs as a symbol that they were free.

### Interviewee EUX-OH-02

**EUX-OH-02.** I think they said the slaves were paid here with the blue beads, that they will call money, and what can you with that if you can't trade it anywhere else? You understand....

**FJE.** What's your opinion on the blue beads as payment thing?

**EUX-OH-02.** I think that was horrible, 'cause how – what is the value? Who determines the value? How do you know how much money you had? Or... you know, I think it was unfair 'cause if they had real money, they should have been paying them, if they wanted to pay them then pay them in real money, but I think that was still sort of a disrespect towards them because you're giving them a bead that – that's why they say on emancipation, you know the word Emancipation Day, they took all the blue beads and they throw them out over the cliff because they are like, now we don't have to use these any more as payment. Now we get the real money.

**FJE.** Oh OK. I have heard that story but I don't know which cliff it is. Is it....

**EUX-OH-02.** That's what they call Crook's Castle, I don't know if you heard of Crook's Castle, that's why they

said when you go over there you find a lot of blue beads, that's where, because that's where they went by that area, and they threw them over there. Yeah. That's the story. And it's true 'cause a lot of people find a lot of blue beads over that way. I've never found one, but hey [laughs].

**FJF.** Are you looking?

**EUX-OH-02.** Ah well, I stopped. When I was younger we did. When I was younger we used to go look. But yeah.

**FJF.** They say it finds you.

**EUX-OH-02.** Yeah, that's what they said. So I'm still waiting! [laughs]. Waiting for it to find me. I guess I'm unfindable [laughs].

**FJF.** [laughs] Apparently it's good to go out and look after it rains.

**EUX-OH-02.** Yeah, that's what they said. Yeah. See I don't have patience. [...]

#### Interviewee EUX-OH-03

**EUX-OH-03.** Oh, the blue beads. Although slave and it's so long ago you still would come across these blue beads and they actually called to slave beads, they cost a lot of money now. You can get one for oh, around – they are very expensive now, because, and I am going to give an example. A tourist from Venezuela was up here, and he wanted a slave bead. [...] And I say excuse me mister, it's not the glass you're buying, it's the history behind it. When he called back to get the slave bead it was gone already because he didn't realize. You see, so you're not buying the bead, it's the history behind it that you're – that's what it's all about, that's what you're, you know. And up to today you still when it rain a lot you can find them. I have never found one, but... But many people they have tourists came here and found them. You see, but I have never found any! 'Cause some people walk looking. But I don't look so I have never found any. [...]

Oh, the slave beads. Yeah. They paid for them – in fact, there's a saying that Manhattan was bought with 30 slave beads, 30 beads. The Indians gave it because they were interested in things like that. And that's what they – they bought them, they took the slave beads so the Indian took that for them and – you know it's interesting... because the Dutch had it at first. Yeah, it's interesting. Like when you go down Greenwich Village and so you see the same type of buildings. [...] What they do is they exchange, they

exchange stuff, they – the provisions and so. You see. Like long time ago money was hardly ever used. They – you came with your product and you exchange. You had potatoes, I had yams, and you gave that person and then you exchange. [...] Well, they were actually made in Holland. And that's where they were made in Holland and then they brought them down here. [...] And this is interesting, Queen Juliana, well now called Princess, she got a necklace with blue beads and silver. [Name of company] made them for her. So that's another thing that many people mightn't realize but she got the – they presented her with a necklace. And the prince, each prince had a bead. That's another thing. Each one of them, they had given them so – when they came with her, they had – so each one's supposed to have a slave bead. [laughs] Well now they came, I don't know if he still has it, but each of them had a – was given a slave bead.

#### Interviewee EUX-OH-06

**EUX-OH-06.** And what we also learned in the history book that Holland made some slave beads, they are blue. And they used them in different parts of Europe, also in Africa and Asia and other parts of the world. And so the slaves – in order for me as a slave to get married to you, I have to work for as much blue beads so that they can tie around your waist. Then I can have the opportunity to get married to you. So if you are fat, I work harder. If you are slim as you are, it was easier. [laughs]. You know? So that was one of the things that – Manhattan, New York was bought by the Dutch for 30 blue beads, and these blue beads were all here for also they used as payment to the slaves and so. And for business. And were used quite a few places around the world. They were made in Holland. Glass beads. So that's what we learn about the slave beads.

**FJF.** Did they use them to trade amongst themselves?

**EUX-OH-06.** Yes, and amongst other – business colonies and so. Yeah. They were very important.

#### Interviewee EUX-OH-10

**EUX-OH-10.** By the way there are many people on Statia who have that mind-set. They think slavery is over and done with, let's not get stuck in it, and we're free, we've been free since 1863, let's focus on the future, and all that slavery stuff, you know, let's forget about it, let's move on. And there are other people on Statia who think the opposite – no no no, we must not forget because then we ignore, then we, yeah, we ignore, the suffering of our forefathers and so forth. So those two currents, if you like, tendencies, trends,

exist on Statia. [...] So I don't know how many stories you've heard already. One of them is that a man could only take a – a slave could only take a woman as his companion, you know, I can't say wife because they were not officially married, if he had enough blue beads to string around her waist.

**FJF.** Yes, I did hear that and I wanted to discuss that as well because it seems in that case if you have to do that, it's easier to marry a thin woman than it is to marry a fat woman. So does that imply that having a bit of extra weight on you was desirable? Do you think that that's where that comes from?

**EUX-OH-10.** Yeah? Logic would dictate that, yeah. The – the, yeah, the wider your circumference, if I may put it that way, the richer your suitor had to be.

**FJF.** Yeah. And I guess if there's a shortage of food, then if you can be fat then it's – yeah, you're showing that you can get food.

**EUX-OH-10.** Yeah. Correct. So that's another story is that when abolition happened and the slaves got their freedom, they symbolically threw their blue beads over the cliff. Which would then explain why you find so many of them along the beach. Maybe you've heard that story as well? Yeah. So – but you know, so I told you I travel. And of course I went to Ghana as well because there, you know, the Dutch were there, built forts and had – Elmina was their capital and so forth, and of course a lot of the enslaved Africans that came to Statia were shipped from the Gold Coast, from Ghana, what is now Ghana. And lo and behold, when I was in Ghana, what do they sell on the market? Blue beads! They are still a normal item of everyday use in West Africa, at least in Ghana where I was and where I saw them for sale on the market. So there is a very very strong tradition of using these blue beads connected with the West African culture. Of course originally they were introduced as an import item and a guy did research into their chemical composition and found that they were, that they correspond with a glass factory in Amsterdam, of Mr Soop. And yeah, they, the Dutch did use the beads as items of trade and barter in West Africa. Which means that they were considered valuable items, and so the West Africans were used to looking at the blue beads as valuable items that you can buy things with, barter things with. So yeah, that continued here on Statia. Of course the remarkable thing is that you do find them on other places, but not in the same quantities as here on Statia. So that's a bit peculiar. What does – why is that? On other islands and also in North America, you know, in the east coast you find them, but not as many as here. So one of the explanations is that a ship carrying barrels with these beads

on – was here, at Statia, and either in a storm or something, either the ship got wrecked or maybe in a storm the barrels rolled out of the ship or – but anyway, that – because of that, a ship losing its load, either because it went down itself or it lost its load in a storm, and the load consisted amongst other things of these barrels with blue beads, here in Statia maybe that is an explanation. It is possible. It's not documented but it's an explanation. [...]

**FJF.** Yeah, that's really interesting. I was wondering about the blue beads in West Africa. What – what are they used for there?

**EUX-OH-10.** Right now?

**FJF.** Mm, yeah.

**EUX-OH-10.** Yeah, I think as decoration.

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