

## The cannon of St. Eustatius

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The Caribbean area witnessed a turbulent history throughout the colonial period. For over three centuries after their discovery by Europeans, the West Indies were drawn into conflicts during the many wars between the European nations, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Denmark, and Sweden. The Dutch island St. Eustatius, commonly referred to as Statia, was no exception to this. Referred to as 'the Golden Rock' in the 18th century, this small Caribbean island was made into a free port by the Dutch in 1754 and quickly became the busiest and most important transit harbour in the Western Hemisphere in the following decades. It played a crucial role in the American War of Independence, during which merchants on St. Eustatius supplied the North American rebels with enormous quantities of arms and ammunition. After a few incredibly prosperous decades, the economic climate on the island changed for the worst, and today hardly anyone knows of its existence.

As a result of the many conflicts fought between the great European powers in this area, the West Indies are nowadays littered with cannon. Surprisingly little is known about guns in this region. Recently, however, *The Great Guns of Barbados* was published, which shows how promising cannon research in the Caribbean can be. In February and March of 2010 a cannon survey was conducted on St. Eustatius. A total of 72 guns were located, of which 59 were found on land and thirteen were located under water. The majority are located in situ. On St. Eustatius, guns can be found in many different places: in forts and batteries, museums, people's back yards, embedded in walls, near shipwrecks, and as isolated artifacts. Cannon of varying calibers were found, ranging from ½-pounder swivel guns to 24-pounders. These were cast at various foundries in at least five



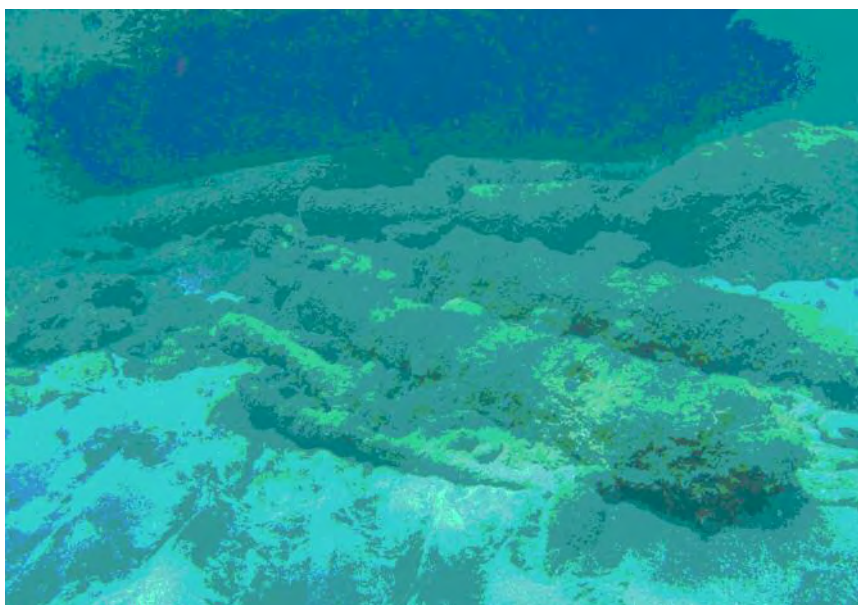
countries. The majority of guns were cast at Finspång (Sweden) and Fossum (Norway). Guns from Ruelle (France), Åkersbruk (Sweden), Heathfield (England), and Carron (Scotland) also found their way to Statia. A number of guns could not be identified with certainty due to heavy corrosion or encrustation. Cannon found on St. Eustatius were cast between the late 17th and late 18th century. A few guns encountered during this survey were found to be rare, and previously unknown types and marks have come to light on St. Eustatius.

From old sources it becomes clear that cannon on Statia hardly played any significant role in the island's

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**Above: Swedish and Scottish guns at Fort Oranje.**

**Below: Underwater cannon at the Twelve Guns site.**





Left: French 1766 pattern gun at Fort Panga, cast at Ruelle in France.

Above: Unknown trunnion mark 'EC' on what probably is a French gun.

defence. They were often not fit for use, and frequently exploded, killing nearby personnel. Often there was no shot or gunpowder available. The carriages were rotten and often collapsed, and sometimes there weren't even any carriages for the guns. Furthermore, the 'gunners' that operated the cannon were a group of amateurs lacking proper training. The results of the cannon survey confirm this situation. By examining ordnance inventories made during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it was possible to determine when certain guns were employed at a particular fort or battery. At many fortifications, even newly built ones, guns that were many decades old were still employed. This explains why the guns of St. Eustatius often did more harm to the people operating them than to the ships they were firing at. They were worn out and should have been replaced a long time ago. It seems that there were two periods in which a lot of guns were imported, both times after a period of instability and conquest. The first time was during the late 17th and early 18th centuries following three turbulent decades in which the island changed hands a number of times. This was also right

after the island became the property of the Second Dutch West India Company. The second time was the 1780's, after the island had been sacked by Admiral George Brydges Rodney during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and was subsequently conquered by the French.

The current survey almost certainly does not include all the cannon that are present on and around the island. Many more probably await discovery at shipwreck sites and at the bottom of the cliffs from which they were frequently thrown off. Future research on St. Eustatius and on other islands in the West Indies will shed further light on the military history in this region and could result in the discovery of many unknown or rare types of cannon. For anyone interested in ordnance and military history, St. Eustatius certainly is a place not to be missed.

#### Acknowledgements

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