

# The ABCSSS islands

## Abstract

Dutch museums contain many objects deriving from the ABCSSS islands when these were under Dutch colonial rule. Within Dutch museum collections, objects from the ABCSSS island are often not attributed to specific islands. It is therefore important to use different search terms referring to the islands in the Caribbean region that were formerly colonised by the Netherlands.

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## Description

Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Saint Martin (the ABCSSS islands) all have their own colonial histories, but were roughly conquered from, among others, Spanish colonisers by the Dutch [West India Company](#) between 1634 and 1636. The Spanish had been ruling the Caribbean region as a colony since the end of the fifteenth century. The ABCSSS islands had several European colonial rulers in the period after 1636, including the Netherlands, but also England and France. After the founding of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the [Treaty of London of 1814](#), after which England returned some colonies to the Netherlands, all six islands came under the administration of the Dutch colonial government.

In the beginning, the islands were considered, together with Surinam, to be the [West-Indische koloniën](#) (West Indian colonies). After a few administrative changes, the six islands were collectively referred to as [Curaçao en Onderhorigheden](#) (Curaçao and Dependencies) from 1845 onwards. From 1936 this became the Gebiedsdeel Curaçao (Curaçao Territory) and from 1948 the [Netherlands Antilles](#). Be sure to take these (outdated) colonial names into account in your research. Nowadays it is customary to refer to the islands by their individual names, but many sources still refer to the 'Netherlands Antilles' or, for example, the 'Caribbean Netherlands'. In 1986, Aruba became a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a path that Curaçao and Sint Maarten also followed in 2010. From that moment on, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Bonaire obtained the status of '[openbaar lichaam](#)' (public body of the Netherlands).

The period of Dutch colonial rule on the ABCSSS islands is characterised by a history of slavery, among other things. Even during the time of Spanish rule, the indigenous population of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba and St Maarten, the [Caquetío](#), were forced into labour. A large portion of the Caquetío of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao were also transported by the Spanish to the mainland of South America, where they were forced to work. Under Dutch rule, enslaved people from West Africa were also forced to work on the islands. The National Archives of the Netherlands have an extensive [research aid](#) (in Dutch) on its website that can help in researching the (slavery) past of the ABCSSS islands. During the colonial period, the Caribbean islands under Dutch colonial rule were called 'Curaçao en Onderhorigheden', which is why a lot of archive material seems to relate solely to Curaçao, while information about the other former Dutch colonies can also be found here. The research aid of the

National Archives in The Hague seems to be focused on Curaçao, but it also refers to archives that contain information about the other islands. There is also a search aid on [Non-commissioned officers and soldiers in the army in the West Indies 1815-1950](#) (in Dutch) which refers to relevant archive material about military personnel stationed on the ABCSSS islands and the search tool [Civil Servants in the West Indies: Surinam and the Antilles 1815-1936](#) (in Dutch), which contains information about Dutch colonial administrative officials in Suriname and on the ABCSSS islands.

During the colonial period, many objects were transported from the ABCSSS islands to the European Netherlands, ending up in various Dutch (museum) collections. Searching for objects originating from the ABCSSS islands can be difficult, as objects can be located anywhere. When researching museum collections, it can be useful to use different terms to search for objects originating from the ABCSSS islands. Sometimes an object is attributed to a specific island, other times to the Netherlands Antilles, for example.

The Wereldmuseum, which manages a large collection of objects from the ABCSSS islands, has categorised its collection by area of origin. The category 'Caribisch Gebied' (Caribbean Region) contains some 4,500 objects, but not all of them come from the ABCSSS islands. This selection also includes objects from Jamaica and Haiti. For more information about researching museum collections, see the research aid [Doing research](#). See the research aid [sources](#) for more information and tips on finding relevant sources for your research.

## Provenance research

Below you will find a number of sources and websites for each island where you can find more information to get your research started. The [subject guide on the Caribbean](#) from Leiden University contains a lot of useful information regarding their Caribbean collection and other source locations. In [this list](#), compiled by the [KITLV](https://app.colonialcollections.nl/nl/research-guide/https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F62191a1bbcd9b315db786f2037417b4f), contains various links to relevant websites (not every link functions any more).

The Colonial Collections Consortium is currently conducting an audit of object collections from the ABCSSS islands that are located in European Netherlands' institutions.

**Aruba** In collaboration with [the Internet Archive](#), a large part of Aruba's cultural heritage has been digitised and made accessible. The collection can be accessed via both the [Internet Archive website](#) and the [Coleccion Aruba website](#). Not only collections located in Aruba itself have been included in the database, but also relevant collections at, for example, the [National Archives of the Netherlands](#) and the museums of the Dutch [Wereldmuseum](#) have been included, as well as those of other institutions in the Netherlands. There is also a specific [slavery database](#) where you can search for (archival) collections relating to enslaved people on Aruba in the period between 1840-1863. Unlike the enslaved in Suriname, who remained under Dutch state supervision for another ten years after the abolition of slavery in 1863, the enslaved on the ABCSSS islands were free after 1 July 1863.

Other relevant resources:

- [Archivo Nacional Aruba](#)
- [Museo Arkeologico Nacional Aruba](#)
- The research aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao](#) (in Dutch) by the National Archives of the Netherlands do also contain relevant information concerning Aruba.
- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, which contain relevant information regarding Aruba (and the other ABCSSS islands).

- The book '[De geschiedenis van Aruba tot 1816 : van zustereiland tot imperium in imperio](#)' by historian dr. J.A. Adi Martis describes the precolonial history of Aruba and the period of colonial rule by the Dutch West Indian Company.

**Bonaire** The [Fundashon Históriko Kultural Boneriano](#) (FuHiKuBo) is a central foundation in the heritage field of Bonaire. The foundation, established in 1998, aims to document, collect and preserve everything related to the (intangible) heritage of Bonaire. This has resulted in various platforms, such as [Archivo Boneiru](#) and [Patrimonio Kultural Intangibel Boneiru](#). As described earlier in this research aid, it is important to use multiple search terms when researching Bonaire's heritage at Dutch institutions, for example by also searching for 'Curaçao en Onderhorigheden' instead of just 'Bonaire'. This is because the islands in the Caribbean that were colonised by the Netherlands were given the administrative term Curaçao en Onderhorigheden, in which no distinction was made between the different islands.

Other relevant resources:

- The research aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao](#) (in Dutch) by the National Archives of the Netherlands do also contain relevant information concerning Bonaire.
- The research aid [Koloniale geschiedenis](#) can also direct you to relevant archival material regarding Bonaire.
- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, which contain relevant information regarding Bonaire (and the other ABCSSS islands).

**Curaçao** Curacao has long been the namesake of the Caribbean islands that were colonised by the Netherlands, which means that a relatively large amount of archive material is available about this island. The National Archives of the Netherlands' [research aid Kòrsou – Curaçao](#) directs you to a large amount of relevant archive material about the colonial history of Curaçao. There is also a research aid [Slaven- en emancipatieregisters 1839-1863](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/curacao-slaven-en-emancipatieregisters-1839-1863) (Slave and Emancipation Registers 1839-1863) and [Vrij van Slavernij (manumissies) 1722 - 1863](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/curacao-vrij-van-slavernij-manumissies-1722-1863) (Free from Slavery (manumissions) 1722 - 1863) that may be relevant to research into the history of slavery on Curaçao.

The website [Curaçao History](#) provides a useful timeline that divides the history of the island into clear time periods, which can help you to focus your research. The [National Archives of Curaçao](#) has an extensive website with a wide range of information.

Other relevant resources:

- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, which contain relevant information regarding Curaçao (and the other ABCSSS islands).
- The website of [Coleccion Aruba](#), which contains a large part of the digitized cultural heritage of the island Aruba, does also contain information that is relevant to Curaçao.
- The research aid [Plantages en onroerend goed op Curaçao 1720-1845](#) (Plantations and real estate on Curaçao 1720-1845) by the National Archives of the Netherlands.

**Saba** Saba officially became part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1816, having previously been under French and English colonial rule. Until 1845, there was a Commander for Saba, Sint Eustatius and Saint Maarten. During the colonial period, these islands were known as the Windward Islands. Two relevant archives from that period can be found at the National Archives in The Hague: the [Inventaris van de archieven van Sint Eustatius, Saint](#)

[Martin en Saba, 1709-1828](#) (Inventory of the archives of Sint Eustatius, Saint Martin and Saba, 1709-1828) and the [Inventaris van de archieven van Sint Eustatius en Saba, 1828-1845](#) (Inventory of the archives of Sint Eustatius and Saba, 1828-1845). Thereafter, the administration of the island fell under what was then called the *Gouverneur van Curaçao en Onderhorigheden* (Governor of Curaçao and Dependencies). For relevant archives from the period after 1845, see the search aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao]((<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/korsou-curacao-mensen-van-toen>)).

Other relevant resources:

- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the *Amigoe di Curaçao*, which contain relevant information regarding Saba (and the other ABCSSS islands).

**Sint Eustatius** Sint Eustatius also fell under the colonial rule of various countries (the Netherlands, England and France) before 1816. The [website of the local government](#) tells the history of the island using historical drawings and maps. Until 1845, there was a Commander for Saba, St Eustatius and St Martin. During the colonial period, these islands were known as the Windward Islands. Two relevant archives from that period can be found at the National Archives in The Hague: the [Inventaris van de archieven van Sint Eustatius, Saint Martin en Saba, 1709-1828](#) (Inventory of the archives of St Eustatius, St Maarten and Saba, 1709-1828) and the [Inventaris van de archieven van St. Eustatius en Saba, 1828-1845](#) (Inventory of the archives of St Eustatius and Saba, 1828-1845). Thereafter, the administration of the island fell under what was then called the *Gouverneur van Curaçao en Onderhorigheden* (Governor of Curaçao and Dependencies). For relevant archives from the period after 1845, see the search aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao]((<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/korsou-curacao-mensen-van-toen>)). The research aid [Vrijgelaten slaafgemaakten op Sint Eustatius, 1862-1863]((<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/vrijgelaten-slaafgemaakten-op-sint-eustatius-1862-1863>)) (Freed slaves on St Eustatius, 1862-1863) of the National Archives of the Netherlands contains relevant information about the history of slavery on St Eustatius.

Other relevant resources:

- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the *Amigoe di Curaçao*, which contain relevant information regarding Sint Eustatius (and the other ABCSSS islands).

**Saint Martin** Only the southern part of the island is a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, just like Aruba and Curaçao. The northern part is an overseas territory of France. Until 1845, there was a Commander for Saba, St Eustatius and St Martin. During the colonial period, these islands were known as the Windward Islands. Two relevant archives from that period can be found at the National Archives in The Hague: the [Inventaris van de archieven van Sint Eustatius, Saint Martin en Saba, 1709-1828](#) (Inventory of the archives of St Eustatius, St Maarten and Saba, 1709-1828) and the [Inventaris van de archieven van St. Eustatius en Saba, 1828-1845](#) (Inventory of the archives of St Eustatius and Saba, 1828-1845). Thereafter, the administration of the island fell under what was then called the *Gouverneur van Curaçao en Onderhorigheden* (Governor of Curaçao and Dependencies). For relevant archives from the period after 1845, see the search aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao]((<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/korsou-curacao-mensen-van-toen>)). The St. Maarten National Heritage Foundation manages the museum's extensive collection on the island, and the [website](#) contains a lot of relevant information.

Other relevant resources:

- Within [Delpher's](#) collection, you can find newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, which contain relevant information regarding Saint Martin (and the other ABCSSS islands).

## Relevant literature

- Den Heijer, Henk. [Geschiedenis van de WIC: Opkomst, bloei en ondergang](#) (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2013).
- Oostindie, Gert. [Paradise Overseas: The Dutch Caribbean; Colonialism and Its Transatlantic Legacies](#) (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005).
- Martis, A. [De Geschiedenis van Aruba Tot 1816 : Van Zustereland Tot Imperium in Imperio](#) (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2018).
- Alofs, Luc. [Koloniale Mythen En Benedenwindse Feiten : Curaçao, Aruba En Bonaire in Inheems Atlantisch Perspectief, ca. 1499-1636](#) (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018).
- Smeulders, Valika, ed. [Ons Koloniale Verleden : In 50 Voorwerpen](#) (Amsterdam: Alfabet Uitgevers, 2023).
- Stipriaan, Alex van, Luc Alofs, and Francio Guadeloupe, eds. [Caribbean Cultural Heritage and the Nation : Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao in a Regional Context](#) (Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2023).

## Related Aids

- [Select and delineate](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Civil servants](#)
- [Military and navy](#)
- [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies \(KITLV\)](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)

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