

Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao

Abstract

Dutch museums contain many objects originating from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao when the islands were under Dutch colonial rule. Objects from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao held in Dutch museum collections are often not attributed to specific islands. It is therefore important to use multiple search terms referring to the islands in the Caribbean region formerly colonised by the Netherlands.

Description

Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (the ABC islands, also known as the Leeward Islands from a colonial perspective) are three island territories in the Caribbean Sea, just off the coast of Venezuela. The indigenous Caquetío people spoke an Arawak language and probably settled the islands from the Paraguaná Peninsula in Venezuela. The Spanish conquistador Alonso de Ojeda visited the archipelago in 1499, ushering in a long period of European colonial rule. In 1634, the [Dutch West India Company](#) conquered the island of Curaçao from the small Spanish occupying force and developed the island, with its strategically located Sint Anna Bay, into a stronghold in the war between the Dutch Republic and Spain. Two years later, Aruba and Bonaire were also occupied from Curaçao. After peace with Spain in 1648, Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao, grew into a freeport, from where many slaves were traded with the Spanish colonies in the Americas.

The West India Company went bankrupt in 1791 and Curaçao was twice occupied by the British during the Napoleonic Wars. The [Treaty of London of 1814](#) of 1814 placed the islands under the authority of the newly founded Kingdom of the Netherlands, which merged them administratively with Sint Eustatius and Dependencies and Suriname in 1828. The merger was partially reversed in 1845, after which Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten were administered from Curaçao. The colony was renamed the Netherlands Antilles in 1948. Together with the Netherlands and Suriname it accepted the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1954, thereby completing the decolonisation of the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. In 1986 Aruba became a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a path followed by Curaçao in 2010. In that year, Bonaire became a ‘public entity’ of the Netherlands. This rather complicated administrative history has had an impact on the formation of archives and collections. Please take this into account in your research.

The period of Dutch colonial rule in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao is in part characterised by a history of slavery and the slave trade. The [Caquetío](<http://www.wikidata.org/entity/Q5037181>) people of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao had already been forced into labour during Spanish rule. Under Dutch rule, especially after the granting of the so-called [Asiento de Negros](#) in 1671, enslaved people from West Africa were shipped to Willemstad and traded with Spanish America or forced into labour on the islands. The National Archives in The Hague has an extensive [research aid](#) on its website that can help you research the history of slavery in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. During the colonial period the Caribbean islands under Dutch colonial rule were called Curaçao en Onderhorigheden (Curaçao and Dependencies). As a result much archival material appears to relate only to Curaçao despite also containing information about the other islands formerly colonised by the Netherlands. Whilst the research aid provided by the National Archives in The Hague appears to be focused on Curaçao it also refers to archives that contain information about the other islands. There is

also a research aid on [Non-commissioned officers and soldiers in the army in the West Indies 1815-1950](#) that refers to relevant archival material about military personnel stationed in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, as well as the research aid [Civil servants in the West Indies: Suriname and the Antilles 1815-1936](#), which contains information about Dutch colonial civil servants in Suriname, Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten.

During the colonial period many objects were transported from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao to the European Netherlands, where they ended up in various museum collections. Searching for objects originating from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao can be difficult as objects can be located anywhere. When searching museum collections, it can be useful to use multiple search terms to find objects originating from Aruba, Bonaire or Curaçao. This is because an object may be attributed to a specific island in one case and to for example the Netherlands Antilles in another.

The Wereldmuseum, which manages a large collection of objects from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, has divided its collection by region of origin. The 'Caribbean' category contains around 4,500 objects, but not all of these originate from Aruba, Bonaire or Curaçao; the selection also includes objects from Jamaica and Haiti, for example. For more information about researching museum collections, see the [Doing Research](#) research aid. See the [Sources](#) research aid for more information and tips on finding relevant sources for your research.

Provenance research

Below you will find various sources and websites for each island where you can find more information to get your research started. The Leiden University [subject guide on the Caribbean](#) contains a lot of useful information regarding the university's Caribbean collection and other source locations. This list, compiled by the [KITLV](#), contains various links to relevant websites (not all links are still active).

The Colonial Collections Consortium is currently conducting an audit of museum collections originating from Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao that are held in institutions in the European Netherlands.

Aruba In collaboration with the [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 [Colección Aruba website](#). The database does not only include collections located in Aruba itself but also relevant collections held for example in the [National Archives of the Netherlands](#) and the museums of the [Wereldmuseum](#), as well as other institutions in the Netherlands. There is also a specific [slavery database](#) where you can search for (archival) collections relating to enslaved people in Aruba in the period 1840-1863. Unlike those enslaved in Suriname, who remained under Dutch state supervision for another ten years after the abolition of slavery in 1863, those enslaved in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao gained their freedom immediately on 1 July 1863.

Other relevant resources:

- [Archivo Nacional Aruba](#)
- [Museo Arqueológico Nacional Aruba](#)
- The research aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao](#) of the National Archives of the Netherlands also contains relevant information concerning Aruba.
- The [Delpher](#) includes newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, that contain relevant information about Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.
- The book [De geschiedenis van Aruba tot 1816 : van zustereiland tot imperium in](#)

[imperio](#)' by historian 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 Bonaire heritage field. Established in 1998, the foundation 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 above, it is important to use multiple search terms when researching Bonaire's heritage at Dutch institutions, for example by searching on 'Curaçao en Onderhorigheden' and not just on 'Bonaire'. This is because the islands in the Caribbean that were colonised by the Netherlands were assigned the administrative term Curaçao en Onderhorigheden, with no distinction being made between the different islands.

Other relevant resources:

- The research aid [Kòrsou – Curaçao](#) of the National Archives of the Netherlands also contains relevant information concerning Bonaire.
- The [Colonial History](#) research aid of the National Archives of the Netherlands can also direct you to relevant archival material regarding Bonaire.
- The [Delpher](#) collection includes newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, that contain relevant information regarding Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

Curaçao For a long time Curaçao was eponymous with 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. The research aids [Curaçao: Slave and Emancipation Registers 1839-1863](#) and [Curaçao: Free from Slavery \(manumissions\) 1722-1863](#) may also 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:

- The [Delpher](#) collection includes newspapers, such as the Amigoe di Curaçao, that contain relevant information regarding Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.
- The [Colección Aruba](#) website, which provides online access to a large part of Aruba's cultural heritage, also contains information that is relevant to Curaçao.
- The research aid [Plantations and real estate in Curaçao 1720-1845](#) of the National Archives of the Netherlands.

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](#)

Primary sources

Secondary sources

Book:

Heijer, H. J. den. Geschiedenis van de WIC: opkomst, bloei en ondergang. Vierde herziende druk. Walburg Pers, 2013. Book published in 2013 about the history of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), which played an active role in the colonisation of the Caribbean.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/861797634>

Book:

Oostindie, Gert. Paradise Overseas: The Dutch Caribbean, Colonialism and its Transatlantic Legacies. Warwick University Caribbean Studies. Macmillan Caribbean, 2005. Book published in 2005 that describes the history of the colonisation of the ABC islands by the Netherlands in seven essays.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/61483105>

Book:

Oostindie, Gert, and Roitman, Jessica V. (eds). Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680-1800. Brill, 2014. Book published in 2014 that examines the role of the Netherlands in the colonisation of the Atlantic world.

<https://brill.com/edcollbook-oa/title/25367>

Book:

Martis, A. De geschiedenis van Aruba tot 1816: van zustereiland tot imperium in imperio. LM Publishers, 2018. Book published in 2018 covering the history of the island of Aruba up to 1816. It describes the pre-colonial period (2500 BC-1500), the years when the island was under Spanish rule (1499-1634), the period under the administration of the Dutch West India Company (1636-1791) and the transitional years that followed until the transfer of the island from the British to the Dutch (1792-1816).

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/1051752557?oclcNum=1051752557>

Book:

Alofs, Luc. Koloniale mythen en Benedenwindse feiten: Curaçao, Aruba en Bonaire in inheems Atlantisch perspectief, ca. 1499-1636. Sidestone Press, 2018. Book published in 2018 describing the period of Spanish rule on the ABC islands.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/1050133765>

Book:

Smeulders, Valika (ed). Ons koloniale verleden: in 50 voorwerpen. Alfabet Uitgevers, 2023. Book published in 2023 as part of the project Our colonial past in 50 objects, which also features various objects from the ABC islands.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/1452966194>

Book:

Stipriaan, Alex van, Alofs, Luc and Guadeloupe, Francio (eds). Caribbean cultural heritage and the nation: Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in a regional context. Leiden University Press, 2023. Book about the history of shared cultural heritage of the ABC islands.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jj.4470335>

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

*first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2024-11-25
last edited by Abacus as translator on 2025-10-20*