

Sint Eustatius, August 1st, 2021.

Dear Ms. Francis and Ms. Toet,

On July 13, 2021 (about three weeks after the town hall meeting on June 21, 2021 (where notification was first provided about the then ongoing excavation of the St. Eustatius Burial Ground) a Group of Concerned Statians sent a well defined letter to the Government Commissioner, aimed to stop the excavation work. While our letter seemed to have been acted upon, the archaeologists had already planned a temporary suspension due to hurricane season. In other words, no excavations will take place at least until January 2022. Our letters to the Government Commissioner got a short notice of receipt (at least, the first two) and since then it has been quiet on the Government Commissioner's side.

The Government Commissioner may be silent towards us, but on July 29, 2021 the regional The Daily Herald newspaper announced that an "independent" Stata Heritage Research Commission" [SHRC] has been created. But this commission has been organized behind the scenes (completely out of the public eye). We counter that any official designated by the government commissioner would give us the opportunity to also designate a candidate. This is to guarantee independence. These words turn out to be like pearls before swine. *Of course, this is not at all the intention that there should be an independent Commission.* Rather, the impression must be given that experts are hard at work so that a plan for digging can be drawn up and approved. Any possible gadfly, or thorn in one's side, must be chased away because for whatever reason "the show must go on."

Just a recap. It is true that the excavation developments were not made public until June 2021, but in fact the work has been going on quietly and behind the backs of the people living on Statia for a year. In November 2020, SECAR delivered a report that was presented to Mr. Van Rij, the government commissioner at the time. It doesn't seem to have occurred to him for a moment that you need to consult with the population on this. *That has been (somewhat) put on the back burner since November 2018 anyway. There is no consultation with the local population at all.*

On February 9, 2021, Mr. Van Rij notified SECAR of the allocation of a budget of US\$ 167332. Now a PR machine must be started. Mr. Van Rij retires as government commissioner on April 18, 2021, and on April 20, 2021, the new government commissioner - Ms. Francis - takes the decision to allocate US\$ 12000 for SECAR's public relations activities (i.e. the excavations, which at that time no one on the island really knows about). These public relations activities are invested by SECAR with 3C, the company of the "volunteer" Courtney van Rij, the wife of the just-retired government commissioner. Oh yes, this decision should be in the "List of Decisions of Week 16", but that very one cannot be found (anymore) on the Statian Government website.

Speaking of money, a very reliable source informs us that the budget for the anticipated excavation is about one and a half to two times larger than a non-profit organization (such as a university) would ask for. According to the budget provided by SECAR, this results from individuals, who already have a job as a researcher (and are paid accordingly), are also claiming the funder of the research, namely the island government. The Island government is absolutely not critical of this budget, and thus SECAR seems to be paid "handsomely" (including the just mentioned US\$ 12000 for the PR machine).

At the time of the halt of the excavation works, the government commissioner was still rather quick in responding to our input. In retrospect, that was perhaps not so difficult considering that the hurricane season had begun. After that, things got a little messier. A really substantive response from the government commissioner was never received and from various signals it became clear that all sorts of things were happening behind the scenes. Thus (as reported above), seemingly out of the blue, a committee (Statia Heritage Research Commission: SHRC) of fifteen members has been established and it seems that the chairman of this SHRC - Mr. Jay Havisier - is acting as if he were authorized to do so by Mrs. Francis, the Government Commissioner. A resolution or order to that effect (including composition, terms of reference and budget of the SHRC) cannot be found on the website of the local government. However, the SHRC is introduced here. That introduction ends with "*The appointment of SHRC is due to the fact that the Public Entity has neither the experience nor the expertise to deal with a project with such a significant cultural impact*". The group of concerned Stadians, on behalf of and with whom this is written, was still able to delegate Teresa Leslie PhD (anthropologist, working at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA).

The modus operandi of this Commission is "special." Everything that is discussed must remain internal, which of course is impossible if you are sitting on behalf of a group with whom you would not be able to communicate. And on July 29, a publication appears in The Daily Herald that was never discussed in the SHRC, so is ostensibly an action of the SHRC chairman who may or may not have coordinated with the government commissioner on this (I can hardly imagine that there was no consultation on this). Where ethics and integrity are delicate and cherishable values in this project, they are being trampled on in practice by incorporating this non-transparency into one's own modus operandi. I can hope that there are also independently thinking, integrity and ethic members in the SHRC who disapprove of this way of working. Or have they all been handpicked by the government commissioner(s) with the only "job requirement" *being complete obedience to the government commissioner and the SHRC chairman*.

The report mentioned in the third paragraph - we refer to the SECAR report from november 2020 - mentions only one approach while any right-thinking person can think of more. Only the possibility of *ex-situ* investigation is mentioned in the report while doing nothing and leaving the cemetery alone, or if necessary an *in-situ* investigation, are also among the alternatives. It is clear from everything that even the suggestion of 1) broad consultation with the Stadian population and 2) other strategies than the *ex-situ* survey is considered a non-option which is brushed aside with great misconduct. With

every step the SHRC has taken to date, it is becoming increasingly clear to us that the members ostensibly of ethics, integrity and respectful conduct know only how to write and pronounce these terms, not what they really mean. Furthermore, we note that one of the authors of the Code of Ethics used is also named as the executor of the study, so a proper separation of responsibilities and interests also seems to be too much.

We therefore strongly urge the SHRC to 1) in any case weigh three alternative research strategies against each other, 2) listen to the local population and take stock of their feelings, expectations and wishes, after which 3) a plan can be distilled that is supported by all parties with regard to the next steps to be taken. We note that the consultation of the local population is a delicate step because, at least for the past three years (since the NL intervention in February 2018) but probably for much longer (decades-, if not centuries), the Statian population is not used to having a say in anything. In practice, it has always been the administrators who acted and decided *on*, and certainly not in consultation *with*, Stadians.

*Note: It is almost sad to learn that State Secretary Knops, who rather autocratically handles the island administration, is now participating as the Dutch representative in the G20 Ministerial Conference of International Cultural Heritage.*

We call upon the government commissioners to take their responsibility with regard to the truly honourable and ethical conduct of the excavations near the airport of St. Eustatius. All cc: addressees we call upon to support us in our appeal.

Kind regards,  
on behalf of and with the Concerned Stadians Group,

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Cc: *Chairman and members of the Kingdom Relations Committee*  
*National Ombudsman*  
*National Service for Cultural Heritage*  
*Members of the Island Council*