

St. Eustatius, October 31, 2021.

Dear SECAR Board and Management,

With regard to the excavations at the airport, we - the group of concerned Stadians - have taken the position, from the moment we became aware of what was going on, that whatever happens, it must be done in close consultation with the Stadian people.

For some people it is still emotional that ancestors from not even that long ago were buried in a slave cemetery in which archaeologists are digging without any consultation with the population (in fact the relatives of the deceased slaves).

So as soon as some publicity was given to this (whether or not forced by discussions about it on the island) we took a position that simply boiled down to "first a plan, first consultation, first information, then digging and research". None of this came to fruition and the status is now as follows (at least, as far as we know): "rest with the pieces, a committee of independent experts will draw up an advice".

We immediately criticized this supposed independence, since the commissioner of the SECAR study, being the government commissioner, is also the installer of the commission of experts. The dependence is therefore enormous: whatever the government commissioner wishes as an outcome, the commission will note as "advice".

In our opinion, by acting in this way one is questioning one's own scientific integrity. After all, a true scientist will appeal to his or her independence and be averse to political guidance in this matter. But then again, we are not scientists and in that sense we have no 'moral qualms'.

As far as we have been informed, in the world of archaeology and anthropology, insofar as research is conducted on human remains that are to be excavated or have been excavated, ethics play a not unimportant role. In other words, the research must fit in with the image that relatives have of it. We do not know exactly where the boundaries lie, but "just continuing to dig" in an environment in which the next of kin are not unanimous in their approval, seems to us to lie outside those boundaries.

Because it is not or was not well known what the feelings were about this, no information was given - initially - but for the sake of convenience, so that the work could proceed undisturbed. After a townhall meeting could no longer be avoided, some openness was given after which feelings of protest could be observed among the population.

Now the investigation is at a standstill, probably also in connection with the hurricane season that lasts until December, but at some point the "coast is clear" again and with an expected positive (because politically directed) picture from the commission of experts, the suspended work will probably start again.

To date it is not clear to us whether SECAR has in any way sought to work within this or that ethical framework or whether money can simply be made from a job here. Given the commotion that has taken place, it is possible that latent feelings among SECAR-related scientists of "hey, can we do this just like that..." have now matured into genuine questions of conscience and that SECAR, too, first wants to know the answers to questions such as "do we really want to continue" and "does this research have sufficient and the right support base" within a responsible ethical framework.

Since there is still time and opportunity to calmly discuss and reflect on these questions, we ask the SECAR board and management for their views on this "project". We would like to hear your vision.

Kind regards,

On behalf of and with a group of concerned Statians,

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