

SYMPOSIUM VIII  
GENERAL HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY  
ARCHÉOLOGIE HISTORIQUE  
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**HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF DUTCH PRO-  
TESTANT SKELETAL REMAINS FROM “DE TEMPEL” SITE, CURACAO**

**Jay B. Haviser, M. Rakieb Khudabux and Els Langenfeld**

**□ ABSTRACT**

*During restoration of the 19th century Jewish Synagogue Tempel Emanu-El, popularly called “De Tempel” on Curacao, sixteen human burials were recovered from beneath the basement floor. Based on historical documentation, these burials were identified as being from one of the earliest Dutch Protestant cemeteries known for the island. This Dutch cemetery dates from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, and was used for lower-income Protestant citizens and soldiers on the island. Archaeological and historical observations are presented regarding details of the specific contexts of these burials, and circumstances of their eventual location beneath the synagogue.*

**□ INTRODUCTION**

In 1998, during restoration of a 19th century Synagogue popularly called “De Tempel”, on Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles, human burials were encountered by the restoration workers. As will be shown here, these remains were from a late 17th to early 19th century Dutch Protestant cemetery at the precise location, and beneath the synagogue. It now appears that these burials may constitute the oldest Dutch Protestant human remains excavated in situ in the Caribbean. With historical documentary research by Els van Langenfeld, archaeological excavations by Jay Haviser, and physical anthropological studies by M. Rakieb Khudabux, the basic results of these studies are presented here. Unfortunately, the physical anthropology data was not fully available at the time of this paper, so only the historical documents and archaeology research are to be presented here.

**□ GENERAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In Figure 1 is the present situation of the Punda Peninsula, downtown Willemstad, Curaçao, where De Tempel site is located and indicated by the arrow, while the old walled-city area is shaded in gray.

The Dutch Protestant cemetery in the area of the present ‘De Tempel’ synagogue, is first documented in 1705 (van Langenfeld 1999). However, it seems that prior to that time, Dutch Protestant burials were placed just outside the walled-city from 1635 to 1681, in the an area called “Fo’i Porta” (van Meeteren 1944). Jacob Beck, as director of the West India Company (WIC) from 1704-1709, noted a new stone wall was built at the location to enclose some previously existing burial plots, and prepare a formal cemetery for additional burials. Interestingly, the ‘previous’ burials mentioned by Beck were not indicated on a 1676 van Robijn map of the area, yet the cemetery and newly constructed wall

do appear, as an underlay to proposed development plans, on the 1707 Gebhardt map. By 1737, the cemetery is very clearly indicated on the Schrijver map (Figure 2), as well as on a map from 1744 by Hertell.

One of the most informative maps regarding this cemetery was made by Geerts in 1754 (Figure 3), on which he not only indicates the surrounding wall structure, but also two small house structures documented as being the residence of the cemetery watchman. Yet most interesting from the Geerts map, is the clear drawing of 206 crosses within the cemetery plot, placed in a such a pattern so as to indicate not only rows of burials but also crosses closely paired together, which is suggested here to possibly represent multiple burial locations. To support this suggestion, there is a group of multiple crosses at the precise location of the De Tempel excavation area, where four multiple burials were recovered. Although it is not considered likely that Geerts took the time to count every burial marker in the cemetery (for 206 markers), it is important to note that the distinction between single and paired crosses does appear to be intentional. The cemetery continued to be indicated on a general engineer's map from 1787, however without the detail of crosses present.

In the early 19th century several important events dramatically effected the use of this cemetery, first was the English capture of the island from 1800-1803 and also from 1807-1816. Secondly, was the massive destruction of much of the Punda peninsula, including the cemetery, by a hurricane on October 17, 1807. During the aftermath of the 1807 hurricane it was reported that bodies from the cemetery were actually exposed, suggesting the shallow depth of some of the subsurface graves, as well as opening of above-ground tombs. Due primarily to the lack of identifiable grave markers remaining after the hurricane, the cemetery was officially closed by the British in 1808. However, due to difficulties in establishing a new cemetery location on the island, there are recorded burials at the cemetery until April 1810. After May 1810, the British government advised everyone with family members buried at the cemetery, to exhume the bodies and/or remove the above-ground burial tombs before cleaning of the area was to begin. By 1812, we see that the British had established an open meat market at the general location of the cemetery. On an 1820's anonymous map, from after the Dutch regained control of the island, we note a distinctive area indicated along the seaside, yet it is unclear whether this represents the remains of the old cemetery wall, or the delineation of the meat market area. The meat market apparently lasted for a considerable period as it is indicated on an 1860 map of the area. During the period of the 1860's the land in question was given by the Dutch government to the separated Sephartic Jewish Community, for the construction of a new synagogue. The present Tempel Emanu-El synagogue was subsequently built on the site from 1865-1867.

This graveyard was clearly documented as being primarily for the burial of soldiers, both Dutch and other European, as well as Protestant colonists of more modest means, not the elites (van Langenfeld 1999).

## □ EXCAVATIONS

During restoration work at De Tempel (Plate 1), human skeletal remains were noted in uncontrolled excavations outside the west entrance and beneath the basement floor tiles. The National Museum archaeologist was called in to excavate those human remains noted beneath the eastern half of the basement floor (Plate 2). As well, two additional controlled test trenches were excavated on the western half of the basement floor and just outside the southwest entranceway (Figure 4). In total, fifteen separate human skeletons were recovered from this site, of which ten were excavated 'in situ' under controlled circumstances. However of the ten 'in situ' burials all had some form of recent or historical disturbance to the burial contexts, to be discussed in detail later. In support of the historical documentation of this as a soldier's graveyard, it was noted that all of the identifiable remains were male, and with one exception, all were under 25 years of age. From the indications available most of these individuals were noted as probable of caucasian racial group (M.R. Khudabux, personal communication).

## □ EXCAVATION RESULTS

One of the most significant and unique aspects of these burials was the specific burial technique used for many of them. This technique consisted of multiple burials in a single grave pit, at different intervals in time (Figure 5). This was manifest as having a first burial pit dug, with the coffin interred and covered. After a period of time a second burial was dug into the same grave pit until either the coffin or the bones of the first burial were encountered, then the second coffin was placed and buried. In one instance there were noted three burials in one grave pit (Burial 5), with the oldest skeleton (skeleton #2) completely disarticulated by excavation of the second burial (skeleton #3), and third burial (skeleton #1) placed atop both of the previous burials (Figures 6-8).

This burial technique is not uncommon in Europe in general, and the Netherlands in particular, however it is more often associated with direct family members being buried in the grave pit, whereas in this example these were unrelated soldiers. The difficulty of digging into the coral imbedded soils of the Punda peninsula would have also been a significant factor in stimulating re-use of grave pits.

Of the recovered 'in situ' skeletal remains, Burial 1 had only one skeleton and the coffin nails. The crania was bent to an unnatural angle and braced with a red brick fragment, apparently since the coffin was too short for the body length. This burial was very badly damaged lengthwise by the restoration work prior to controlled excavation.

In Burial 2 were noted two skeletons; skeleton 1 (Figure 9) as the uppermost burial revealed a well preserved human from the lower femura to the crania, with only the right humerus missing, and the coffin nails present. The coffin nails noted in all of these excavations were square iron nails (with one brass nail exception), averaging 5cm in length (Plates 3-4). The lower legs of this skeleton were damaged by the restoration workers. The second skeleton in this burial was severely disarticulated as a result of the upper burial placement. A single bone pant button was noted at the pelvis region.

In the third grave pit were also noted two skeletons, Burial 3, skeleton 1 (Figure 10) were the uppermost remains in this grave and had the neck and head damaged by restoration workers. Both the right femur and the right tibia were missing from this skeleton, however coffin nails and a single bone pant button were found. The deeper skeleton of Burial 3 (Figure 11) was also missing the neck and crania by restoration work, yet also lacked the right humerus and right femur. Coffin nails, a bone pant button, and a brass cuff button were found. The buttons noted in all of these excavations were cut bone buttons with single back eye extensions, well polished and averaging 1.5cm in diameter, there was one brass button with a back eye extension (Plates 5-6).

In Burial 4 were also two skeletons, the uppermost skeleton (Figure 12) lacked the crania, right arm and right ribs due to reconstruction work, yet also was missing most of the right tibia. Coffin nails and a bone pant button were found. However, there were noted a human right femur and fragments of a humerus and fibula in the backfill soils surrounding this burial. Burial 4, skeleton 2 (Figure 13) was one of the only nearly complete skeletons recovered in these excavations, with only sections of the crania missing. There were coffin nails, albeit fewer than in the other burials, also found in situ.

Burial 5 has been previously noted, yet also revealed that with skeleton 1 the right femur, radius and ulna were missing, and only coffin nails found. For skeleton 2, which was in fact the earliest burial in this grave pit, the body was completely disarticulated with none of the smaller bones noted, some few coffin nails and large water-worn stones were found. In skeleton 3 the body was quite well intact, with the exception that it was missing both of the femura. Coffin nails were present in situ.

Burials 6, 7 and 8, were severely disturbed by historical and modern disturbances and did not reveal any articulation of the bodies.

As to the artifacts recovered with these burials, only the above-mentioned buttons, coffin nails (and possible handles?), and red brick fragment were found directly with the human remains as present in the burials. Additional artifacts were noted in the backfill soils surrounding these burials, including kaolin pipe fragments and a slate board fragment scratched with the letter 'b'. Ceramics noted were Dutch Faience and lead-glazed coarse earthenware ceramics, Pearlwares, and Creamwares. Also found were glass fragments, black-glazed roof tile fragments, yellow brick, red brick, as well as shell and faunal bone fragments (Haviser 1999).

## □ CLOSING COMMENTS

Clearly, there are two significant points made in this paper. The first is related to the socio-political aspects of land use in urban contexts at this Dutch Caribbean colony. Whereby a Protestant cemetery for poor immigrant soldiers was deemed of minor patrimonial value compared to the construction of a synagogue by the wealthy Jewish community. The second point is that the multiple use of single grave pits by the Dutch, was a European tradition carried over into their Caribbean colonial contexts, with a variation being that the multiple burials were not necessarily family related.

There are two interesting additional comments that can be made here regarding the historical documentation and archaeological evidence at this site. First, is in regard to the missing long bones from numerous of these burials. Clearly some of these missing bones are the result of the multiple burial technique, which resulted in miscellaneous loose bones in the fill dirt, as noted in Burial 4, skeleton 1, or that may have been lost altogether. Additionally, there appears in a letter from the island governor in 1749 a detailed description of the “scandalous” practice by “evil disposed” “negroes and mulatten” of excavating burials at this site in the night to remove human bones for “bruha” or black magic (van Langenfeld 1999).

A second interesting comment here relates to the lack of clothing noted for these Protestant soldiers, as evident by a very few single pant buttons, which were probably underwear, and no substantial grave gifts. The latter point is most probably related to the poorer status of the individuals buried in this cemetery. Yet for the former point, it has been noted in early 18th century documents that the United Protestant Community of the Curaçao colony would regularly hire-out the burial clothes for soldier’s burials with a small fee. This practice continued throughout most of the 18th century (van Langenfeld 1999). What appears to be the case here, is that the clothes were removed after the ceremony and before the burial, for reuse later, and the soldier was then buried in his underwear.

For this paper, only some highlights of the research at this Dutch Protestant cemetery have been provided. It is the intention to include more, and more detailed information in subsequent published reports of these excavations.

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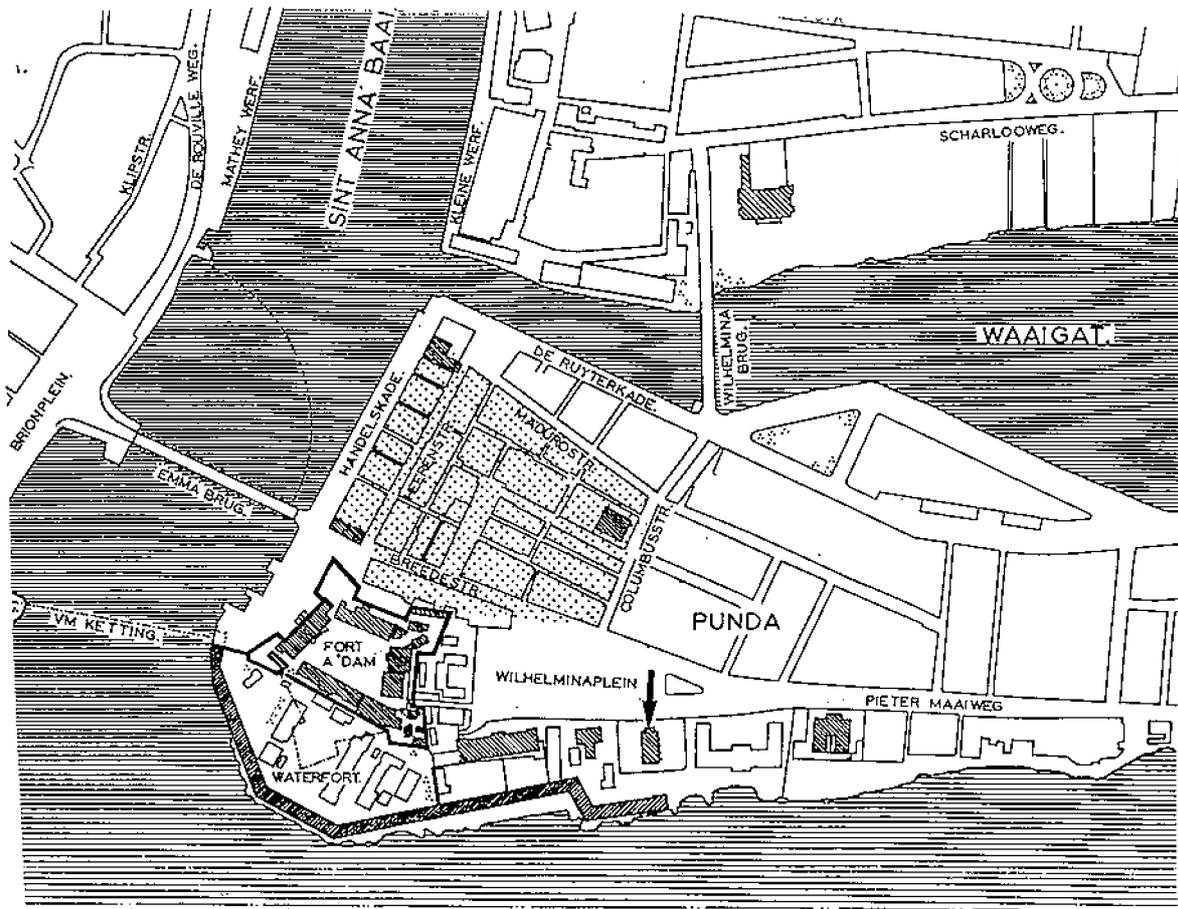
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## □ FIGURE CAPTIONS

1. Map of the Punda Peninsula, Curaçao, in 1956 (Ozinga 1959, fig. 4).
2. Schrijver Map of Punda in 1737 (Buddingh' 1994, fig. 48).
3. Geerts Map of Punda in 1754 (Ozinga 1959, pl. 30).
4. Excavation areas in 1998 at De Tempel, Curaçao.
5. Sketch drawing of burial pit reuse at De Tempel, Curaçao.
6. Burial 5, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.
7. Burial 5, skeleton 3, De Tempel, Curaçao.
8. Burial 5, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.
9. Burial 2, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.
10. Burial 3, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.
11. Burial 3, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.
12. Burial 4, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.
13. Burial 4, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.

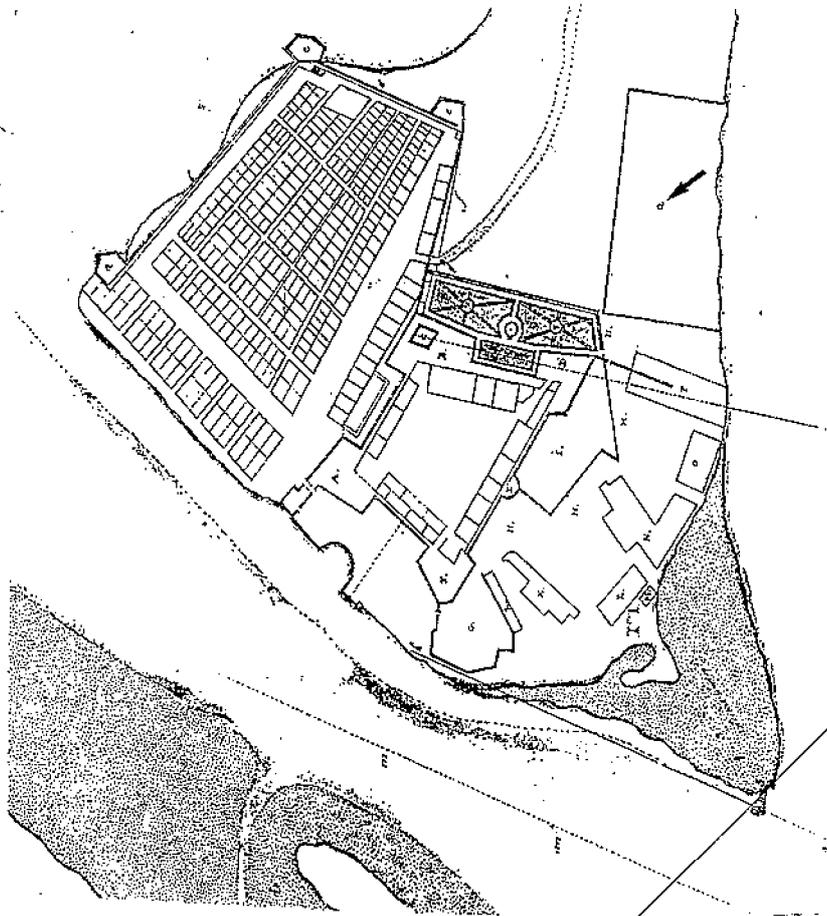
## □ PLATE CAPTIONS

1. De Tempel, Curaçao, under restoration in 1998.
2. Burial excavations in the basement of De Tempel in 1998.
3. Square nails used for the coffins at De Tempel, Curaçao.
4. Square nails with wood attached from De Tempel, Curaçao.
5. Bone and brass buttons, front side, found with the burials at De Tempel, Curaçao.
6. Bone and brass buttons, back side, found with the burials at De Tempel, Curaçao.



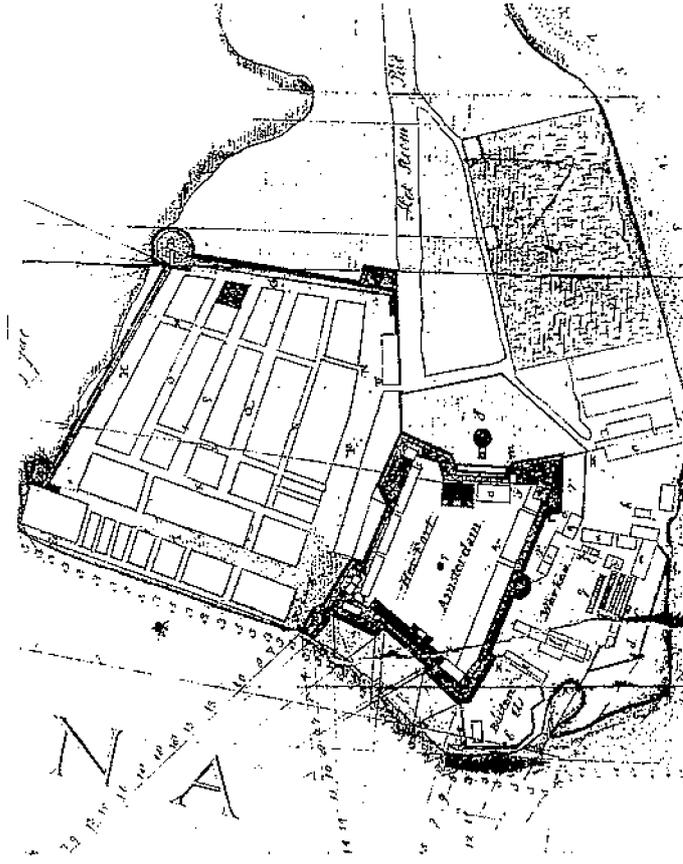
Map of the Punda Peninsula, Curaçao, in 1956. "De Tempel" structure is indicated by an arrow, the Old Walled City sector is shaded. (source: Ozinga 1959, Fig. 4)

1. Map of the Punda Peninsula, Curaçao, in 1956 (Ozinga 1959, fig. 4).



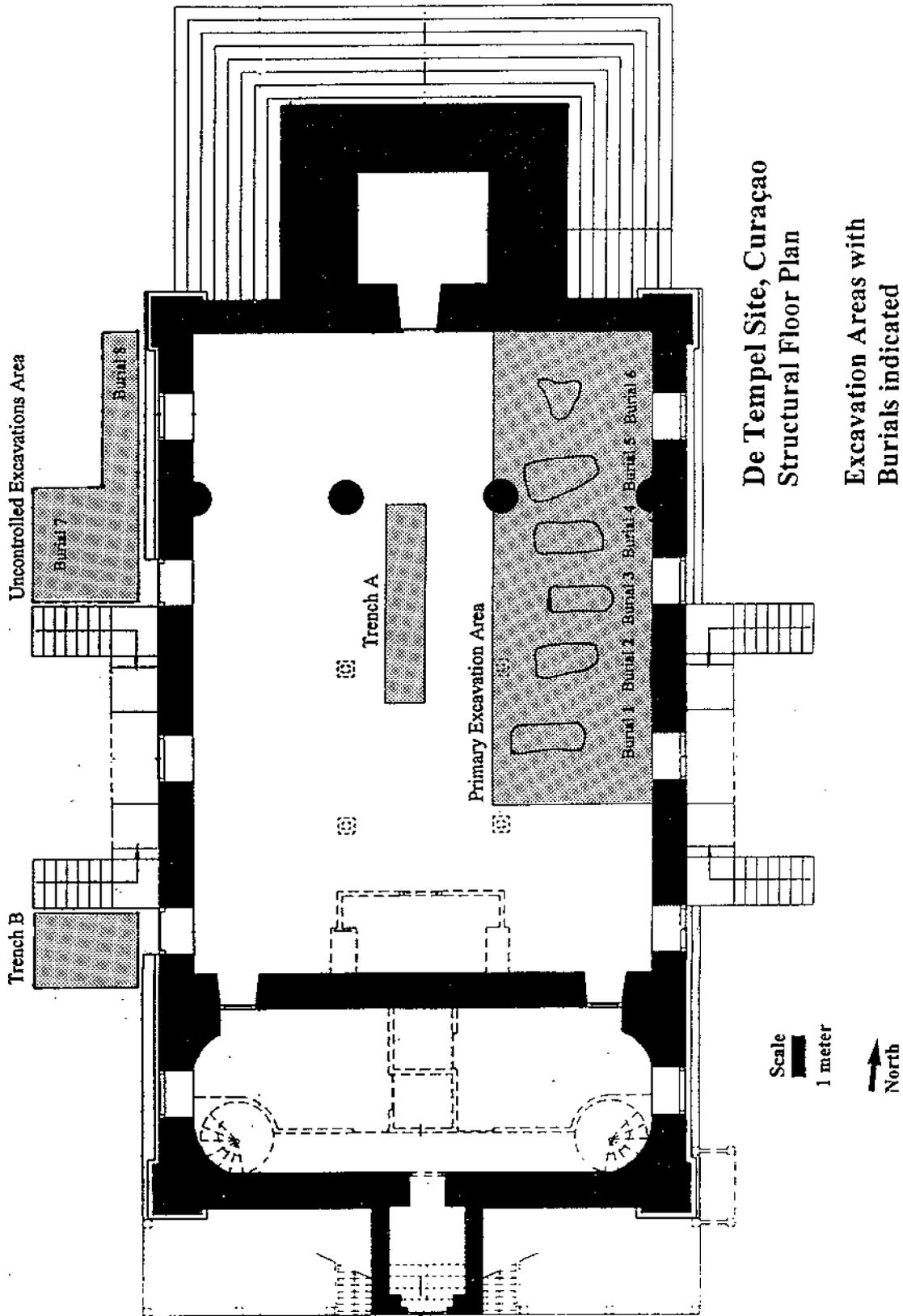
Schrijver Map of Punda in 1737. The burial ground is clearly indicated outside the Walled City sector. (source: Buddingh' 1994, Fig. 48)

2. Schrijver Map of Punda in 1737 (Buddingh' 1994, fig. 48).



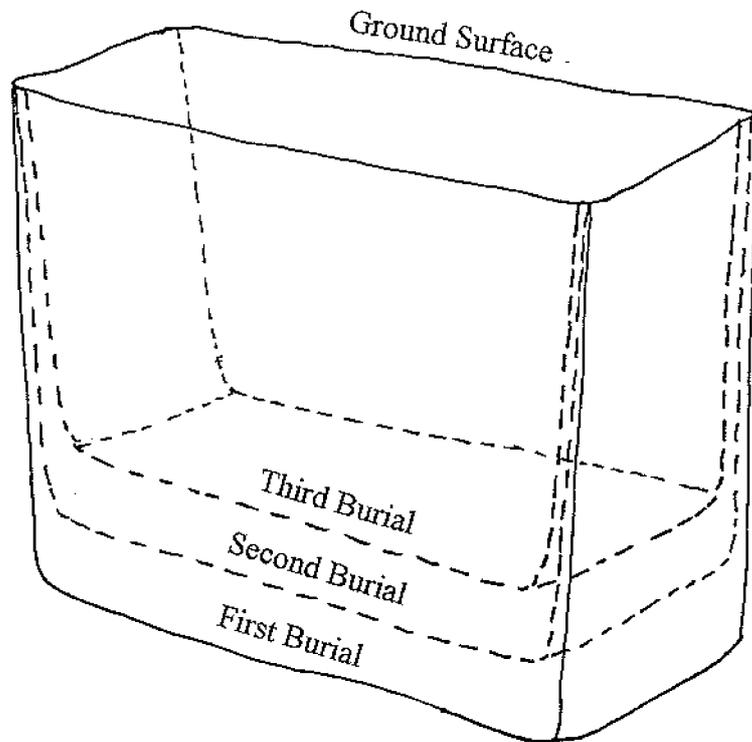
Geerts Map of Punda in 1754; The burial ground with numerous crosses is clearly indicated, having less crosses noted to the eastward side and two small structures associated with the north border of the cemetery. (source: Ozinga 1959, pl. 30)

3. Geerts Map of Punda in 1754 (Ozinga 1959, pl. 30).



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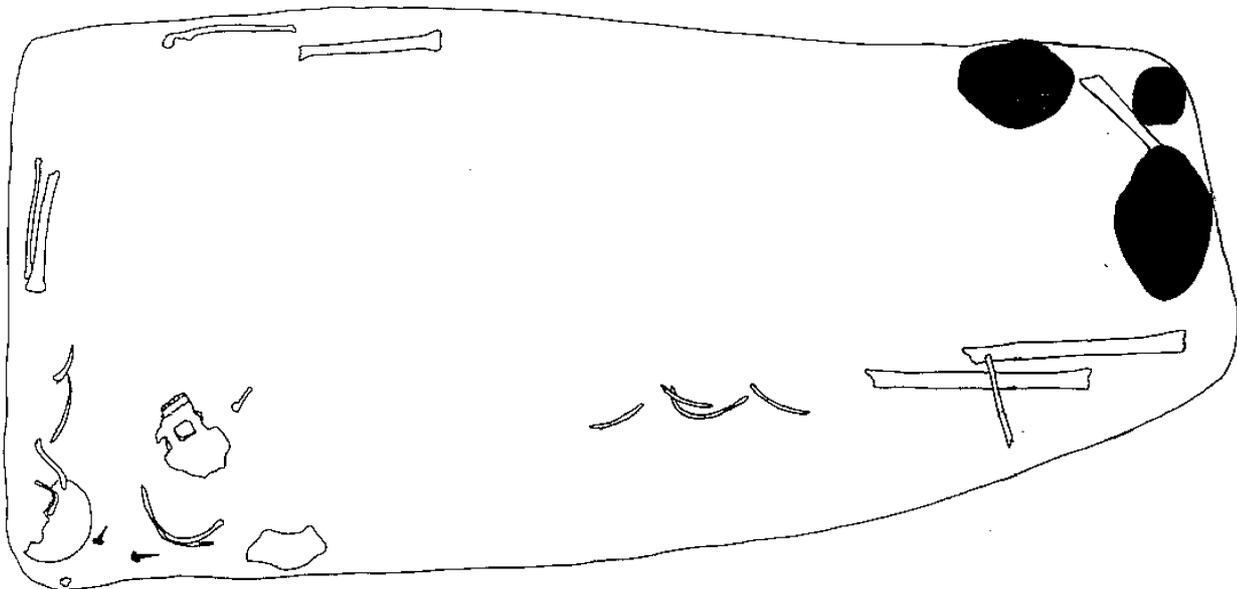
4. Excavation areas in 1998 at De Tempel, Curaçao.



An idealized sketch drawing of the burial pit reuse technique common at the Dutch Protestant cemetery site, De Tempel, Curaçao.

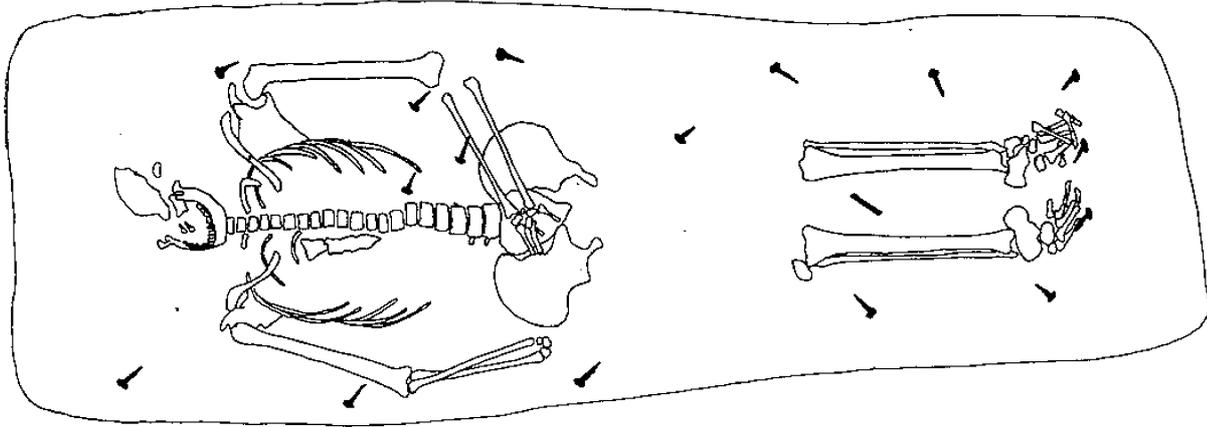
In actuality, the second and third burial pit excavations were not as precisely aligned within the original burial pit dimensions, extending beyond the original pit limits.

5. Sketch drawing of burial pit reuse at De Tempel, Curaçao.



De Tempel Site  
Curaçao  
Burial 5  
Skeleton 2  
Scale 1cm = 8.5cm  
North

6. Burial 5, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.



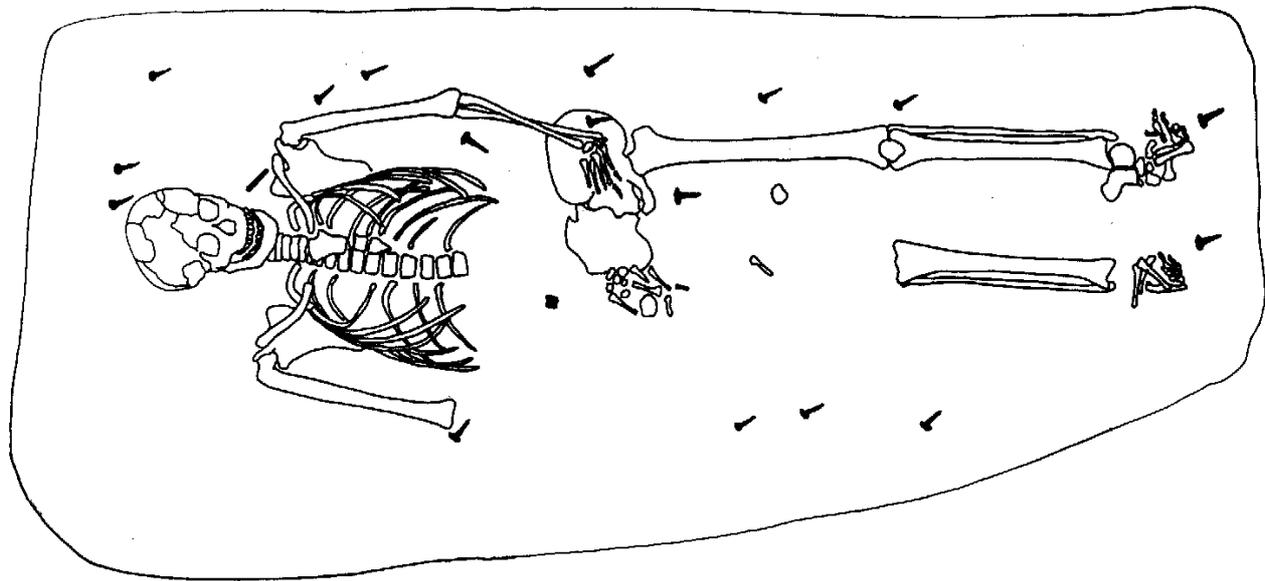
De Tempel Site  
Curaçao  
Burial 5  
Skeleton 3  
Scale 1cm = 8.5cm  
North

7. Burial 5, skeleton 3, De Tempel, Curaçao.

De Tempel Site  
Curaçao

Burial 5  
Skeleton 1

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm

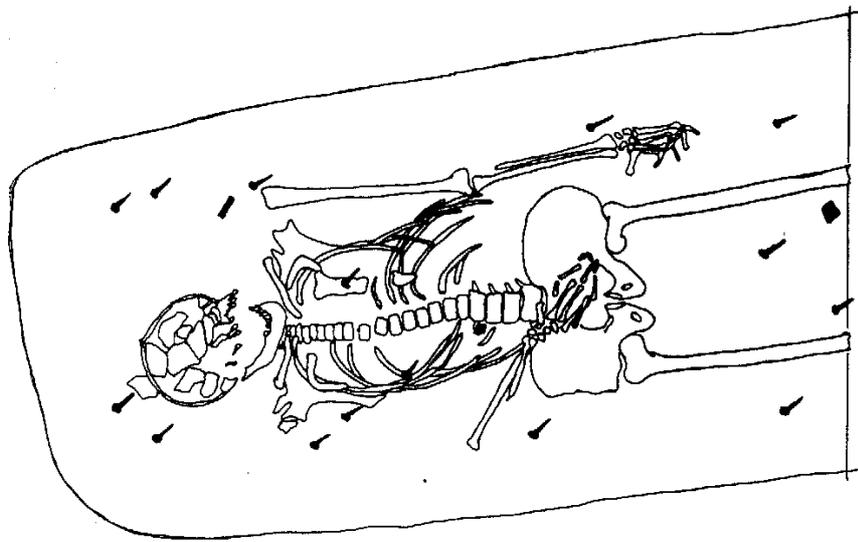


8. Burial 5, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.

De Tempel Site  
Curaçao

Burial 2  
Skeleton 1

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm

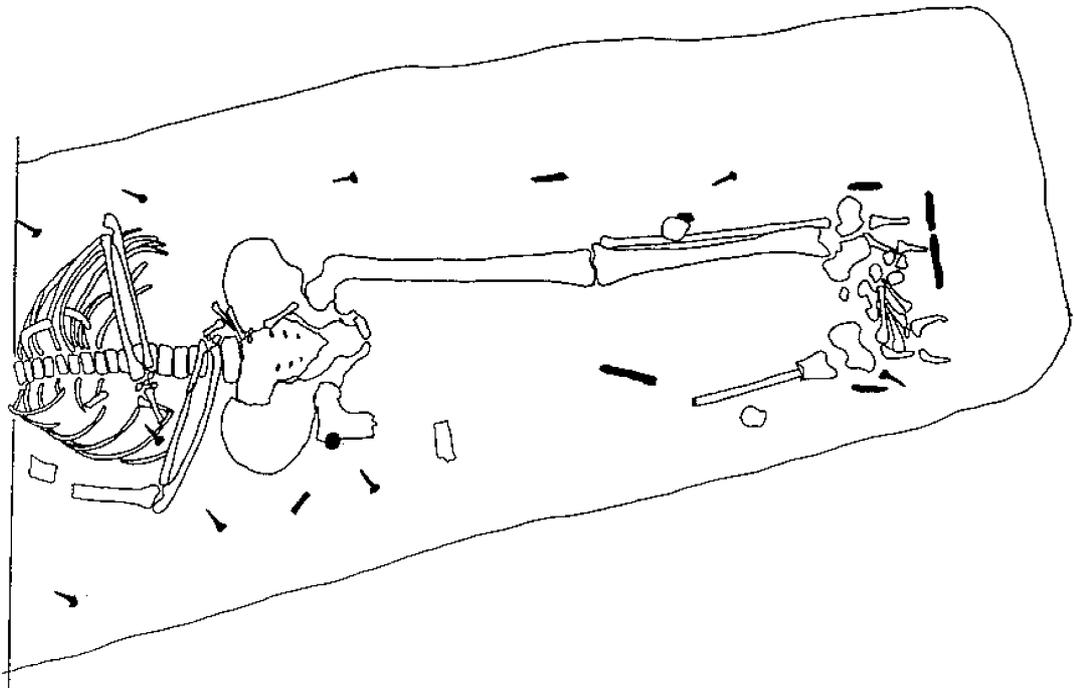


9. Burial 2, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.

**De Tempel Site  
Curaçao**

**Burial 3  
Skeleton 1**

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm

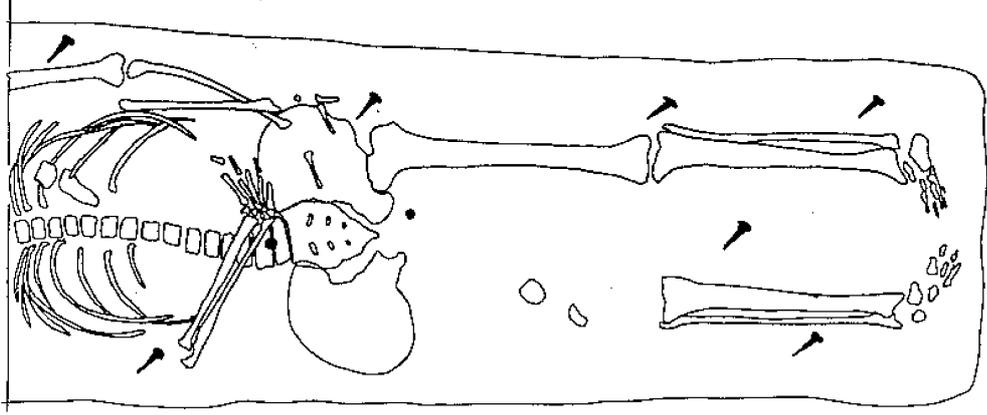


10. Burial 3, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.

**De Tempel Site  
Curaçao**

**Burial 3  
Skeleton 2**

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm

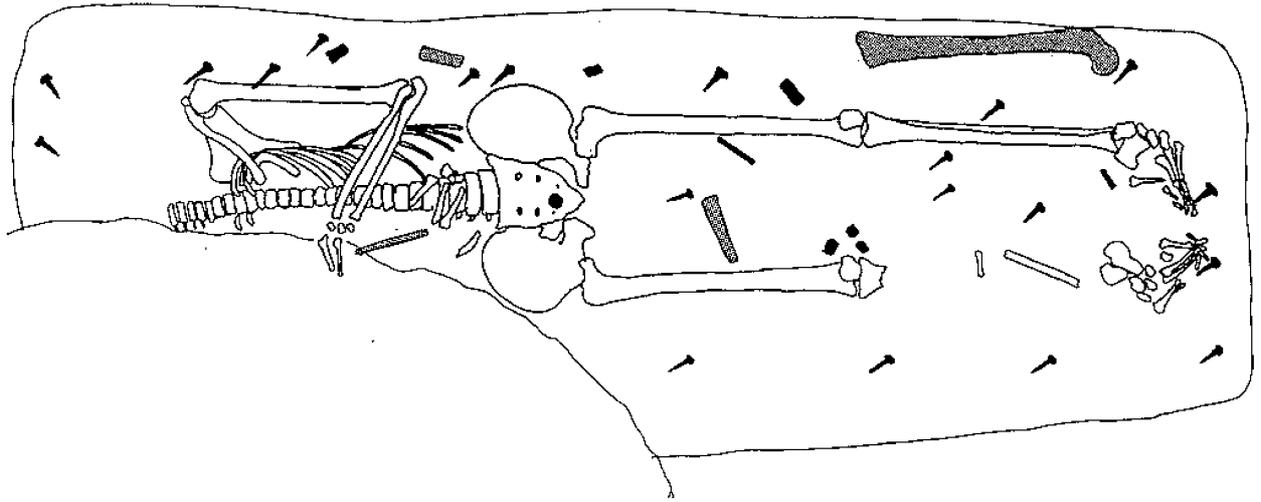


11. Burial 3, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.

De Tempel Site  
Curaçao

Burial 4  
Skeleton 1

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm

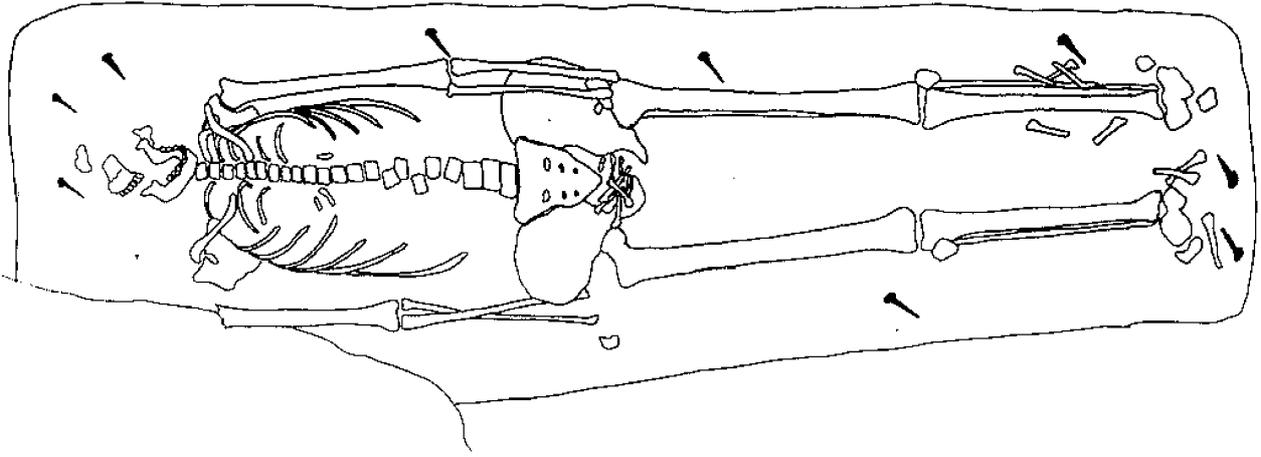


12. Burial 4, skeleton 1, De Tempel, Curaçao.

De Tempel Site  
Curaçao

Burial 4  
Skeleton 2

Scale 1cm = 8.5cm



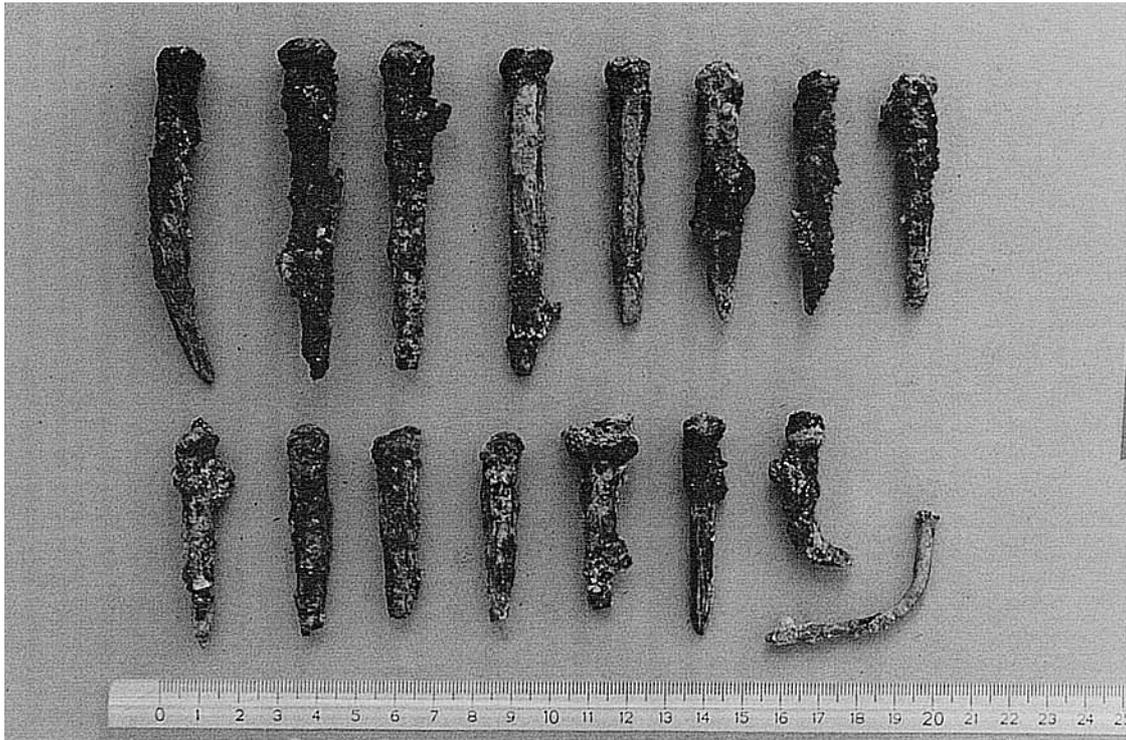
13. Burial 4, skeleton 2, De Tempel, Curaçao.



1. De Tempel, Curaçao, under restoration in 1998.



2. Burial excavations in the basement of De Tempel in 1998.



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