THE ‘OLD NETHERLANDS STYLE’ AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH FORTIFICATIONS OF THE CARIBBEAN

Jay B. Haviser

Introduction

In his subtle descriptions of the Netherlands culture and history, the renowned Dutch historian Adriaan Barnouw often indicated that one of the key cultural characteristics of Dutch ethnicity has been a precise need of orderliness in their world. This was also true in the seventeenth century Netherlands colonial approaches in the Caribbean, such that fortifications were for defense and settlements were for the colonists, each with its function within broader goals of establishing a colony, yet each maintained separately. Dutch seventeenth century fortifications of the Caribbean are clearly designed with this cognitive understanding in mind (see Figure 9.1). As their facilities rarely have space for colonists to reside and indeed only minimal barracks for the soldiers, the forts were for military defense of the colonists who had their residence nearby. This was part of a ‘global Dutch uniformity’ whereby colonial settlement plans were strictly proscribed to local commanders and engineers by means of guidelines and technical regulations from the Netherlands metropolis, as a manifestation of the Dutch need for orderliness. In fact, Netherlanders first came to the New World primarily to make fortunes, thus it was a commercial drive underlying Dutch culture that needed to project a ‘neat and well-organized’ corporate image for their West India Company. The creation of significant fortifications, was not only as Falk suggests a symbolic act of dominance, but was also clearly part of this corporate

---

image approach, as the old Dutch saying goes ‘expenditure proceeds profit’. To grasp an insight into seventeenth-century Netherlands colonial strategies of the Caribbean, we must first understand some of the historical developments in Europe that caused them to look to the west in the first place.

**Sixteenth–Seventeenth-Century Netherlands Contexts in Europe**

The foundations of what would become the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century, lay in the later part of the sixteenth century and coincide with the Dutch Wars of Independence against Spain, better known as the Eighty Years War (1568–1648). During this war,

---