

Urban archaeology in Europe's capital: Brussels and its archaeological heritage

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Zusammenfassung:

Im Folgenden werden die in jüngerer Zeit entwickelten Vorgehensweisen der Stadtarchäologie in Brüssel, der Hauptstadt von Belgien, dargestellt. 1991, zwei Jahre nach der Festlegung der Brüsseler Hauptstadtregion, entwickelte die Leitung der Denkmalpflege zusammen mit dem Königlichen Museum für Kunst und Geschichte einen Atlas, in dem zu erwartende archäologische Bodendenkmäler kartiert wurden. Seit 2008 sind auf der Basis dieser Kartierung für den Fall einer Zerstörung über- oder unterirdischer archäologischer Denkmäler spezielle Richtlinien betreffs der Organisation archäologischer Untersuchungen in die Bebauungsgenehmigungen eingebunden. Solche Untersuchungen können nur durch die Denkmalpflege selbst oder durch fachlich ausgewiesene öffentliche oder private Unternehmen durchgeführt werden. Außerdem wird in diesem Beitrag auf die Bedeutung und den Anteil der verschiedenen Bereiche von Stadtarchäologie für die Entwicklung und den Bebauungsplanung einer Großstadt hingewiesen.

Abstract:

This paper presents the recently installed operational workflow concerning archaeology in Brussels, capital of Belgium. In 1991, 2 years after the creation of the Brussels Capital Region, the Heritage Direction of this Region started, in collaboration with the Royal Museums for Art and History, the elaboration of an Atlas of archaeological expectations. Since 2008 and based on the results of this Atlas, specific conditions concerning the organisation of preventive archaeological research are integrated in the building permits in the case of the destruction of the standing or underground archaeological heritage. These interventions can only be executed by the Region itself or by acknowledged public institutions and private organisations. The paper wants at the same time to reflect on the importance and contribution of the various aspects of urban archaeology to the development and town planning of a city.

Introduction

Belgium is a federal state with three regions: the Dutch-speaking Flemish region, the French-speaking Walloon region and the bilingual Brussels Capital Region. Since the federalization of the Belgian state in 1989, heritage and subsequently archaeology are regional matters, each region having its own legislation. They are integrated into the "General Direction of Urban Planning and Housing".

The interest for and the battle against the massive destruction of the city's archaeological heritage, due to the impressive urban transformations starting under the reign of Leopold II (1865–1909), will only grow very slowly. Many actors played a more or less important role in the study of the Brussels archaeological heritage, the oldest being the *Société royale d'Archéologie de*

Bruxelles. Already at the time of its foundation in 1887, the members claim a law organizing the protection of buildings and of the objects discovered during public works. During the 1890's the *Société* organizes the archaeological surveillance of some of the city's larger construction projects, e.g. the Palace of Justice. The majority of their actions will however take place elsewhere on Belgian soil and rarely within the Brussels region. After the 1st World War, their activities stop till the beginning of the 1980's when they carry out mostly programmed excavations in relation to the restoration of larger buildings like the St.-Michaels-and-Gudula-cathedral.

The *Comité d'Études du Vieux-Bruxelles* is founded in 1903 to create a photographic inventory of the city's ancient buildings with a priority for those threatened to be demolished during large

urbanization works. This inventory is still widely used in scientific research.

From 1910 onwards, the Archival Service of the city of Brussels will, under the impulse of the head conservator Guillaume Des Marez, collect numerous objects and draw the architectural remains before their destruction during the North-South underground train junction works. Another major action will be their surveillance of the infrastructure works for the metro in 1967.

From 1991 onwards, the Heritage Direction of the Brussels Capital Region works together with the Royal Museums for Art and History to elaborate the Atlas of Archaeological Potential and to organize, till 2008, rescue excavations.

The legal dispositions in the Brussels Capital Region

The general dynamics of the archaeological research in the Brussels Capital Region are based on the convention of La Valetta (Malta), ratified by the regional Brussels parliament in 1992 and by the federal Belgian State in 2010. Its implementation is however a slow process resulting in a public action almost exclusively oriented towards preventive archaeological operations.

The actual legislation was adopted in 2004 in the Brussels Code for Town Planning (art. 243-250), completed in 2008 with two decrees organizing the archaeological excavations.

The legal definition of the archaeological goods is neither limited in a chronological way nor in space. Building archaeology is handled in the same way as subsoil archaeological excavations, the distinction being of minimal relevance in an urban context organized around a medieval urban nucleus originating between the 11th and the 14th century AD.

The deliverance of a building permit can be subordinated to various clauses permitting the archaeological monitoring of authorized building works and/or the realization of archaeological research before the building activities. These clauses are based on the archaeological expectations described in the *Atlas of the Archaeological Subsoil in the Brussels' Region* (cfr. *infra*).

The realization of archaeological research be it in the subsoil or in existing buildings, is, via the above mentioned decrees of 2008, limited to the holder of a specific permit, i.e. "author of archaeological research". Legal persons as well as natural persons can apply for the permit. It is

subject to conditions of competence (university diploma's in archaeology and history and at least 3 scientific publications) and terrain experience (5 years of experience during the last 10 years and at least 3 different archaeological operations for which the reports have to be presented). The permit is valid for 5 years. The regional government can give the holders of this permit the authorization to excavate a (not threatened) site or a mandate to execute preventive archaeological research, the latter being organised via public procurement. The authorization or mandate for archaeological terrain research describes in a precise way the research program, planning, facilities, strategy, methods, registration documents and reports to produce.

The regional Administration bears all expenses for the preventive archaeological operations via its own teams and intervention logistics or via the authorized service providers. The financing of preventive archaeological operations is thus almost exclusively public with, occasionally, the logistic help of owners and building promoters, enabling the prescribed research to be executed in a faster pace.

Fortuitous discoveries must be signalled within 3 working days to the Archaeological Department of the Heritage Direction. They can involve an automatic halting of the building activities during 21 working days in order to enable the intervention of an archaeological team (an Administration team or an authorized team mandated by the Administration). In the case of an exceptional discovery, the regional government can prolong this time period and, if necessary, suspend or cancel the building permit.

Atlas of the archaeological potential

The principal tool to evaluate the archaeological potential within the scope of a building project or renovation is the *Atlas of the Archaeological Subsoil in the Brussels' Region*. This regional atlas covers in a detailed way the 165 km² of the territory with its 19 communes and is developed within the cartography project of the Administration of Town Planning and Housing (www.BrUGIS.be). It constitutes a compilation of ancient topographical maps, historical documents and various types of archives projected on the actual cadastre. Synoptic maps show, for each of the 19 communes of the Brussels' Region, the ancient roads and waterways, constructions like farms,

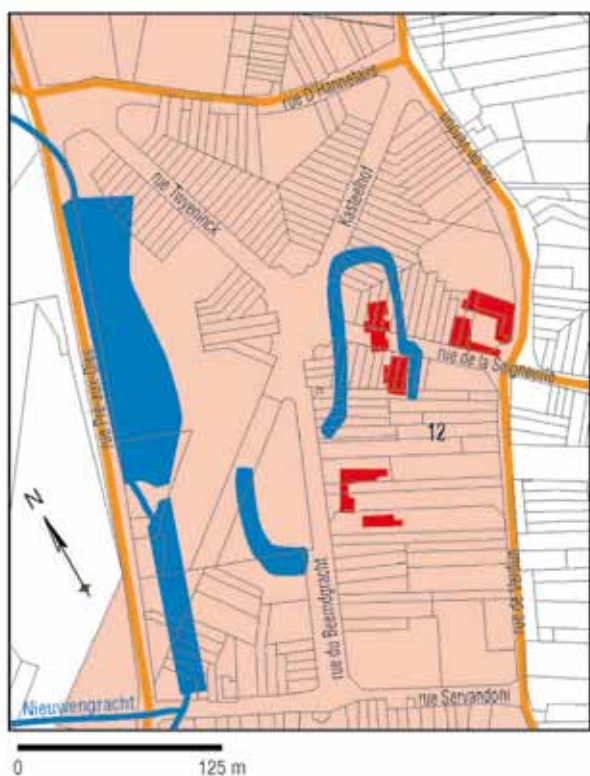


Fig. 1: Example of the Atlas of the Archaeological Subsoil, commune of Haren. In blue: ancient waterway, in orange: ancient road, in red: Ter Elst, the 16th century castle of Haren, in pink: the parcels with a high archaeological potential (© MRBC-DMS).

churches and manors dating till the 18th century, and the archaeological zones around these constructions (fig. 1). A description of the archaeological objects found on and around these sites completes each commune.

As the detailed information for each feature is actually only available in a paper edition, the Archaeology Department is preparing a website giving detailed digital access to these features, linking them to their cartographic counterpart. This website will also give the possibility of subject-related and diachronic research.

The precision of the digital maps enables to distinguish the level of archaeological potential for each cadastral parcel. To qualify this potential, a consultation and interpretation of the assembled data by an archaeologist is necessary. This can be completed by a terrain evaluation like e.g. a location visit to identify fossilized traces of the original relief, or the execution of pedological and/or archaeological trenches to precise the absence/presence of remains, their nature, their state of conservation etc. In recent years, these evaluations have been multiplied and are linked



Fig. 2: Archaeological excavations on the terrain Quai aux Barques 5, Brussels (© MRBC-DMS)

to the systematic development of preventive archaeology. Subsequently they enable to calibrate, foresee and plan the excavations.

The archaeological excavations and building archaeology

The archaeological excavation needs to be executed in an exhaustive way according to the destruction in surface and depth necessary for the developer's planned works. However, the conditions of accessibility and the availability of facilities for each site often force the archaeologist to change priorities, rendering the excavation more selective, based on the data provided by the archaeological atlas, evaluations and current research (fig. 2).

The archaeologist disposes of a comprehensive manual, containing among others a field guide on the handling of archaeological objects during the excavation phase, a sampling manual, guidelines for drawing the objects and for constituting the archaeological report.

Particularly in urban contexts and on sites where renovation and new constructions go together, the combination of subsoil archaeology and build-



Fig. 3: Building archaeology Quai au Bois de Construction, Brussels (© MRBC-DMS).

ding archaeology constitutes a necessity. But where subsoil archaeology is largely accepted, building archaeology is still a difficult issue, being a fairly young discipline. Yet, the “excavation” technique applied here, e.g. trenches cutting through layers of plaster and wallpaper, is basically similar to the subsoil technique and gives a complete picture of the evolution and various building and transformation phases of the investigated construction (fig. 3).

Registration of the archaeological data

The finds are processed by the *Laboratory for Archaeology in Brussels* (LAB), created in 2007 and housed within the Administration’s buildings (fig. 4). This laboratory counts a ceramics and a metals specialist, both being at the same time responsible for the management of the storage rooms, and 4 technicians. Incoming objects are washed, restored, marked before being studied and described in the report by the archaeologist in charge (regional or by mandate) and finally stored. All laboratory actions on the archaeological objects and their location in the storage rooms are inventoried in a centralised Archaeological Database.



Fig. 4: The Laboratory for Archaeology in Brussels (LAB) (© MRBC-DMS).

This management system functions at the same time as a research tool. Every author of archaeological interventions within the Brussels Capital Region is therefore obliged to use this database to introduce all the information and documentation of his/her excavation. The information demanded concerns *int.al.* the stratigraphic units and their relations, the objects discovered with a detailed description of the material, decoration, form, etc. and is based on a unique number system (fig. 5).

Archaeology and the public

The authorized institutions, mandated to excavate a site, are obliged to present a publishable excavation report. These are published online on the website of the Heritage Direction. Previously, the archaeological excavations were edited in the paper series ‘Archéologie à Bruxelles / Archeologie in Brussel’ of which 4 volumes have appeared between 1995 and 2001.

The increasing interest from the general public in past history has however pushed the archaeo-



Fig. 5: A 15th century greyware jug, discovered during excavations rue des Chartreux, Brussels (© MRBC-DMS).



Fig. 7: The archaeological museum in the Coudenberg, ancient palace of the Dukes of Burgundy (© MRBC-DMS).



Fig. 6: Three examples of walking tours with historical and archaeological information, available in the city's major information points (© MRBC-DMS).

logists to the difficult but highly rewarding task of popularising the results of their research. The general public is therefore informed of the ongoing excavations by posters fixed to the fences surrounding the dig. They explain the archaeological work and its context together with a mapping of earlier finds in the neighbourhood. The same information can be found in the regional information point of the Halles-Saint-Géry, located in the centre of the city.

The archaeological department also develops brochures with walking tours. Today 8 brochures are available in various museums and tourist and information points in the city (fig. 6): the 1st

and 2nd city wall, the old harbour and an archaeological tour downtown, the Marolles (a popular quarter between the 1st and the 2nd city wall), the Brussels' palaces and the *Mont des Arts* uptown, and the priory of *Rouge Cloître* on the outskirts of Brussels in the Sonian forest.

While Brussels does not have a regional archaeological museum, many of the objects originating from the abovementioned 19th and 20th century archaeological surveillances, can be seen in the Royal Museums for Art and History and in the City Museum on the Grand-Place. Likewise, there are two site-museums: *Bruxella 1238*, a small museum showing the remains of the Franciscan cloister located in the centre of the city underneath the actual Stock Market, and the *Coudenberg*, near the actual Royal Palace, presenting the remains of the palace of Charles V (www.coudenberg.com). The Coudenberg Museum exhibits moreover an interesting collection of archaeological objects found during the various excavation phases of the site (fig. 7).

The restoration and protection of archaeological sites

Once the archaeological remains excavated, which criteria will nourish the decision to safeguard, conserve, restore and eventually open them to the public? In other words, why would we want to preserve any archaeological remains? Are they part of a larger heritage for the future generations or is their preservation an end in itself?

The authors of the urbanization projects do not always understand the necessity to preserve ar-



Fig. 8: The Romanesque crypt under the St.-Michael-and-Gudula-cathedral (© MRBC-DMS).

archaeological remains and, at the same time, the archaeologist destroys the object he studies. This scientific procedure stands consequently in harsh contrast with the necessity to anticipate any future enhancements. Moreover, if the archaeologist puts the traces of early medieval agriculture on the same level as the remains of the duke's palace, the latter has the merit of being probably easier to present to the public than the little bits of "dark earth". Yet, archaeological goods lack, more than any other heritage form, information and necessitate often heavy restoration options to preserve them, especially in urban contexts with their high concentration of archaeological deposits and very specific deterioration factors. Concurrently, the remains form a direct contact between the visitor and the past but, having lost their original function and only holding a scientific value together with a possible aesthetic, symbolic and/or cultural value, they therefore need a didactic angle in most cases.

In the Brussels Capital Region, the majority of restored archaeological remains are legally protected elements or features situated within the perimeter of another protected building/monument. A first example is the Gothic cathedral of St.-Michael-and-St. Gudula, protected in 1936. In 1991, as a preliminary to the restoration work in the cathedral, the *Société royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles* decides to excavate the choir to find the remnants of the Romanesque church even with the underground not being in danger of any destruction. During this excavation, a Romanesque crypt is discovered, partially destroyed and filled in with rubble dating to 1250 but still having its original soil and 4 monolithic columns supporting the now disappeared vault. The 2m



Fig. 9: The 13th century city wall, the so-called Anneessens-tower on the Boulevard de l'Empereur (© MRBC-DMS).

high walls still bear some mural paintings and a large number of exceptional graffiti dating to the 11th–13th century (fig. 8).

The then used arguments to preserve this space were the stability of the actual building, the singularity of the space and a scientific argument, namely to be able to conduct further research. Although the restoration is a success, public access is restrained both due to its location underneath the actual choir of a still active church, its small surface (max. 10 persons) and the obligation to be accompanied by a guide. But often these limitations enlighten the secluded and exclusive character of the space.

At the entry of the cathedral, the visitor has access to another but this time "archaeological" crypt, presenting the remains of the Romanesque West portal destroyed during the construction of the Gothic portal. In order to make the visits fluid, a corridor was dug into the West portal itself. The space is therefore completely artificial and demands a huge level of abstraction even considering the array of didactic panels.

A second example is the first city wall, dating to the beginning of the 13th century AD. Segments of this rampart have been protected in different phases from 1937 till 2002. They seem to be put up along the actual roads, incongruous but imposing (fig. 9). In the absence of any explanatory panels, and with the original slope covering the foundations and the moat having disappeared, the understanding of the functioning of the wall remains however a difficult exercise for the non-specialist.

Furthermore, some portions of this city wall are enclosed in the actual network of houses. This



Fig. 10: The 13th century city wall in the Hungarian Cultural Centre, Treurenberg, Brussels (© MRBC-DMS).

encapsulation has grown historically: in the 15th century the city wall has lost its defensive and controlling function and will constitute the backbone of the numerous houses built against it, reflected in the post-medieval parcel organization. The Hungarian Cultural Institute, situated behind the St.-Michael-and-Gudula cathedral, presents a very nice example of this encapsulation (fig. 10).

Urban planning and archaeology in the future

The management of the archaeological heritage should thus not aim at the excavation at whatever cost, but rather the preservation of this heritage with excavations only executed in the case of absolute necessity. But the first and fundamental problem is that archaeology still isn't an integral part of the urbanization planning. Often there is a tangible resistance to archaeological operations, even with archaeological operators being only a short period of time on the terrain after which they leave it to the developers. Secondly,

the vast majority of archaeological remains cannot be conserved. But then again, and unless a mandatory clause in the building permit, the archaeological data are often completely ignored by the developers, invoking technical and financial reasons to avoid any excavation. This state of mind reflects in fact a problem of mentality and of ignorance concerning archaeology and its methods, considering any archaeological potential as a potential "risk". The sensitization of the non-archaeological actors in the administrations and building offices charged with the appraisal of the building documentation should therefore be the archaeologist's priority.

The archaeological heritage is indeed perishable and irreplaceable and should be integrated as much as possible in the urban tissue as it is the only relationship between the past and the future of a city. But it should be presented as an urban project on a human scale, reconciling heritage and sustainable development in a coherent way. We can therefore only join the concern of Michel de Waha, professor at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*, expressing already in 1994 the wish that urban archaeology should be an archaeology "of the city" and an integral part of its environment and not a more or less accidental archaeology "in the city".

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