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THE CONVERSATION

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Lockdown reveals cracks in archaeological heritage protection

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The archaeological site of the Parliament House in Namur on 15 April 2020. Agent du Patrimoine en Périel, le groupe pour la défense des agents de l'Agence wallonne du Patrimoine (AWaP), Author provided

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Langues

- English
- Français

Could lockdown spell destruction for vital archaeological sites? It almost did in Namur, Belgium, where local authorities decided to cut short rescue excavations to save time lost during lockdown. They were eventually forced to backtrack.

On Friday 10 April, archaeologists working on the future site of the Parliament of Wallonia were shocked to learn of the site's imminent destruction in the media. Excavations had been on hold since 13 March due to the lockdown imposed by the government during the Covid-19 health crisis. The Walloon Parliament began extension works this winter, revealing historical remains. In accordance with the law, archaeological excavations began so that more of these remains could be brought to light and preserved prior to construction.

The suspension of excavations during the lockdown should have meant extending their deadline, and

thus pushing back construction and handover. However, authorities opted to destroy the archaeological site so construction could continue on schedule. Construction workers are not subject to the same strict lockdown measures as archaeologists, who were forced to down tools at the onset of the crisis. Given that the two sectors must work in tandem, it is difficult to see why the same rules do not apply to both.

Faced with community opposition (a petition collected over 7,000 signatures), authorities finally backpedaled, announcing on 20 April that archaeological works would resume gradually from May 4 and could continue until May 31. As Belgium began to lift restrictions, work on the site did indeed resume, albeit with a smaller team.

This incident is a reminder that we must be careful to ensure that governments do not create alarming and dangerous precedents for archaeological excavations under the cover of the managing the Covid-19 crisis.

Rescue archaeology: a principle of international law

In the 1960s, rapid economic development became the number-one cause of the destruction of archaeological sites in western countries. At that time, many historical remains were destroyed to make room for large construction projects that ravaged previously preserved archaeological strata.

As a result, governments and heritage protection organisations sought to strike a balance between maintaining economic development and preserving archaeological heritage. Broad protection principles emerged simultaneously in several western countries.

It was these principles, backed by governments, that would shape international law and appear in several important founding texts in Europe. In 1968, UNESCO published a recommendation “concerning the preservation of cultural property endangered by public or private works”. It advised governments to take measures to preserve and salvage cultural goods within their borders.

The following year, the Council of Europe drafted the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage. Known as “the Valletta Treaty”, this document – which was revised in 1992 – lays out the principles of rescue archaeology: identifying and protecting archaeological heritage; adopting integrated archaeological heritage conservation; financing archaeological research and conservation; gathering and publishing scientific information and raising public awareness.

From then on, international law was no longer limited to regulating archaeological research and orchestrating the fight against pillaging and the scattering of collections. It invested States with greater responsibility for the protection of their heritage.

Belgium signed this treaty in 2002, before integrating its broad principles into the Walloon Heritage Code.

Rescue archaeology, as laid out in these texts, is to be carried out prior to construction in order to

excavate and document any remains that may be destroyed. These measures were established after the realization that some large construction works, such as the Forum des Halles in the 1970s in Paris, had led to the destruction of heritage.



The hole in Les Halles in 1975. The Halles market in Paris was deemed unsanitary and razed in 1969, even though no archaeological excavations were carried out prior to the destruction and reconstruction of the site. AFP

The famous “hole” in Les Halles and the construction of the shopping centre wiped out large swathes of Medieval and Gallo-Roman Paris, including part of the Innocents cemetery without any prior archaeological excavations.

Short- versus long-term thinking

Urgent imperatives (jobs, the economy, industry, etc.) are often used to justify the unconscionable. When it comes to heritage, this attitude means the permanent destruction of archaeological sites, even those that are rare and of vital importance to the history of humanity.

Another striking example is the case of the site at Biache-Saint-Vaast, in Pas-de-Calais, an exceptional location containing ancient Neanderthal bones. Its excavation in 1976 was rushed and incomplete, so significant information about prehistoric times was irreversibly lost. Why? To build a steelworks in the name of jobs and industry. The steelworks shut down 30 years later.

Yet, what is the purpose of archaeology if not to provide a long-term vision? It puts our priorities into perspective and gives our societies essential insight. We should not minimize this or cast it aside for so-called urgent imperatives. If we do, we risk depriving future generations of their right to understand their past, all in the name of development.

We thought we had seen an end to the large-scale destruction of archaeological sites without prior excavation in Europe. But the example of Parliament House in Namur demonstrates the risk is still real.

Important historical remains in Namur

The Namur site is highly significant. Prior to the suspension of excavations at the construction site of the Walloon Parliament extension, many aristocratic dwellings from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period linked to the nearby Countal Castle had already been uncovered. A large warehouse has also been found on this site in the city's historic heart.

Excavations had barely begun when lockdown measures came in to force on 13 March, forcing the archaeologists to interrupt their work.

In the Middle Ages the city was host to intense trade activity due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Sambre and Meuse rivers. The excavation of this warehouse is an incredible opportunity for archaeologists to better understand the city's commercial operations. Below the medieval strata, they expect to find remains from the Roman era, which must also be excavated in the final four weeks of the archaeological works.

In archaeology, there are no second chances. If the neighbourhoods of these ancient and medieval cities are not excavated, they will be lost forever and we will never know their secrets. Society must be careful not to sacrifice its heritage and the rights of future generations to understand their past on the altar of the economy and development.

There are multiple pressures and risks facing archaeologists today, including budgetary restrictions, problematic management during fieldwork and ideological appropriation of research results. These ethical dilemmas, which were recently examined during the Archaeo-Ethics Conference in Paris, should be a continued source of reflection and, if need be, action for archaeologists.

Translated from the French by Alice Heathwood for Fast ForWord

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