

The history of Bruges is written in water

Verwerft Dieter

Raakvlak, Stad Brugge, Komvest 45, 8000 Brugge, Belgium
E-mail: dieter.verwerft@brugge.be

Research Focus

To give water a chance to flow and infiltrate naturally in cities, landscape studies in urban archaeology have vital information to offer. This lecture focuses on the 2023 excavation of the Eekhout Abbey at the Brusk museum site in Bruges. Employing mechanical coring techniques, archaeologists uncovered the original position on a sandy ridge and a previously unknown waterway, challenging existing hydrological narratives.

Significance of Landscape Studies

Urban archaeology in Bruges, known for information-dense sites, encounters challenges in effectively managing time and resources. Landscape studies play a crucial role in adjusting research strategies and accurately interpreting findings, transcending the realm of archaeology. Understanding our historical relationship with water contributes to shaping a vision for the future.

The history of Bruges unfolds in layers, from hunter-gatherers in prehistory to a sea-port during Roman times. From the 9th century onwards the city features medieval settlement zones on the highest points of the sandy ridge. Due to low altitude and proximity to coastal plains, marshes are found next to and within this medieval metropolis. This makes for a dynamic landscape, especially when we also consider waterways.

The Reitjes, canalized waterways in Bruges, are both a tourist attraction and a crucial consideration in archaeological research. Originating from a river system flowing through the sandy ridge, the Reitjes contribute to a complex subsoil, influenced by human refuse, construction layers, tidal sediments, and peat. To fully grasp this complex environment, Raakvlak the Archaeological Service of Bruges and Ommeland, drew upon their experience from large scale investigations in the coastal wetlands to introduce new methods in urban archaeology.

Archaeological Implications

Mechanical corings at the Eekhout Abbey site uncovered a filled-up waterway, more than 20m wide and 7m deep. This discovery challenges existing hydrological histories and has broader archaeological implications. The site's dimensions hint at a part of the original, natural river system running through Bruges, the Reitjes.

The historical and cultural significance of water in Bruges, from Celts worshiping it as the place of Gods to its role in Christian liturgy, reflects changing human perceptions of environmental control. The enlightenment era saw waterways in cities as a danger or a nuisance. Historical waterways were vaulted over or filled up, but contemporary challenges highlight our integral role within the natural landscape.

Advocacy for Landscape Studies in Urban Archaeology

In advocating for landscape studies in urban archaeology, this presentation emphasizes the importance of understanding our historical relationship with water. By letting water flow and infiltrate naturally in cities, landscape studies provide vital information to address contemporary challenges. By telling the story written in water, we hope to inspire awareness about the current challenges facing us and hint at possible solutions, even in urban settings.

I propose a 5-minute oral presentation at #VMUSD24 to share the compelling narrative of Bruges' hydrological history and its implications for the future. This project not only challenges archaeological norms but also prompts reflection on our dynamic relationship with water.

Keywords

Bruges; water infiltration; landscape studies; urban archaeology; mechanical coring techniques; hydrological narratives