

## Urban Archaeology: A Science of the City

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**By comparing the ways in which Paris and London have updated their urban pasts since the seventeenth century, Stéphane Van Damme studies the birth of a science of the city. How has urban archaeology become simultaneously an object of mass consumption and a requirement for public action?**

Reviewed: Stéphane Van Damme, *Métropoles de papier. Naissance de l'archéologie urbaine à Paris et à Londres (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2012, 310 p.

On December 29, 2012, Parisians were able to discover historic Paris, from the Gallic village to the building of the Eiffel Tower, thanks to three-dimensional reconstructions projected onto nine enormous screens on the square in front of the Paris Town Hall. This multimedia project, entitled “Paris: A City that Takes You Back” (“Paris, la ville à remonter le temps”) was organized by several academic institutions and museums, including the Carnavalet Museum. While this endeavor clearly testifies to the public’s fascination with archaeology and to the fact that rescue archaeology is now a concern of city governments, the history of urban archaeology has yet to be written.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting a genealogical approach, Stéphane Van Damme has written an archaeology of archaeology: he shows “science being made” by interpreting scientific practices as social facts and examining the connections between knowledge and power. In the tradition of the science sociologist and archaeologist of the contemporary city Bruno Latour, Van Damme sets out to demonstrate how archaeology’s “invisible magnitudes”<sup>2</sup> became visible and readable. He places his work under the auspices of the British approach to the sociology of science associated with Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer.<sup>3</sup> The provisional model of experimental sciences that appeared in England in the 1660s required scientists to participate in collective work to validate the findings of their experiments. This explains the importance they attached to controversies and discursive activities, as well as the relationships between scientists and politics.

By emphasizing the spaces in which science is made—learned institutions, museums, libraries, etc.—these sociologists have entered the city. It was first approached from the perspective of publicity<sup>4</sup>: science was considered as an object of public consumption, and the

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<sup>1</sup> On archaeology in general, see Alain Schnapp, *La Conquête du passé: aux origines de l'archéologie*, Paris, Carré, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Van Damme, “Invisibles grandeurs. Gouverner le passé et collectionner la ville du XVII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (London, Paris, Lyon, and Edinburgh),” 2007, <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document564.php>.

<sup>3</sup> *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985; *La Science telle qu'elle se fait. Anthologie de la sociologie des sciences de langue anglaise*, eds. Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, Paris, La Découverte, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992; Larry Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology and Natural Philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1600-1750*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

sociologist's task was to trace the birth of a market of citizen-consumers.<sup>5</sup> Yet significantly, Habermas does not appear in Van Damme's index.<sup>6</sup> This metaphorical approach to space has given way to a more concrete perspective, thanks to the "spatial turn" in historical studies. The geography of knowledge<sup>7</sup> currently emphasizes urban space, as evidenced by Christian Jacob's recent work.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin's pioneering studies of capital cities,<sup>9</sup> the metropolitan condition has become one of the major themes of cultural history.<sup>10</sup> Van Damme's book takes a comparative approach, examining Paris and London, as well as Edinburgh and New York. What interests the author is no longer the "city of science" but the birth of the "science of the city": how has urban archaeology simultaneously become an object of mass consumption and a requirement for public action? Three spaces are considered in turn: scholarly space, public space, and political space.

### The Archaeology of Archaeology

The book's first part, entitled "The Metropolitan Palimpsest" with a reference to Olivier Mongin,<sup>11</sup> explains the major role played by the transformation of the urban fabric in the birth of archaeology, as urban renewal projects uncovered a new, buried city. These excavations occurred at the same time as the "visual turn" that began with the birth of experimental science. Scientists studied the ground and the underground of capital cities, as well as the material remnants they contained, thus establishing a system of archaeological proof that spelled the end of the written corroborations that antiquarians had once preferred.

In this way, Van Damme shows the eighteenth-century proximity between archaeology and the natural sciences: building on the work of Sabine Barles,<sup>12</sup> he examines the relationship between archaeology and land-use planning. The sudden rise in archaeological research is tied to the major urban planning initiatives that characterized the Enlightenment city. Underground engineers and hydrographers became interested in material remnants of the past. In the nineteenth century, archaeological knowledge was closely tied to public action, as illustrated by the fact that a project to write a general history of Paris was directed by none other than Baron Haussmann.

While engineers and scientists were thinking in historical terms, historians, to the contrary, appropriated the methods of the experimental sciences. Since the Renaissance, antiquarians were primarily interested in written documents, in keeping with the philological practices of the time. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, this "paper archaeology" was

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<sup>5</sup> Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere and the Origins of the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review*, 101:1, February 1996, 13-40.

<sup>6</sup> "Farewell Habermas? Deux décennies d'étude sur l'espace public," in *L'Espace public au Moyen Age*, eds. Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2011, 43-61.

<sup>7</sup> David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place. Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> *Les Lieux de savoir*, I, *Espaces et communautés*, ed. Christian Jacob, Paris, Albin Michel, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Capitales de la modernité: Walter Benjamin et la ville*, ed. Philippe Simay, Paris, Ed. de l'Éclat, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> *Capitales culturelles, capitales symboliques: Paris et les expériences européennes, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, eds. Christophe Charle and Daniel Roche, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002; Stéphane Van Damme, *Paris, Capitale philosophique de la Fronde à la Révolution*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2005. Stéphane Van Damme is organizing, along with Antonella Romano, an international investigation into the capitals of science: see the special issue they edited of *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, on "Sciences et villes-mondes" (Science and world cities), 55:2, April-June 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Olivier Mongin, *La condition urbaine. La ville à l'heure de la mondialisation*, Seuil, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Sabine Barles, *La Ville délétère. Médecins et ingénieurs dans l'espace urbain, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1999.

in steep decline: material proof had replaced textual proof and archaeology was now preferred to the criticism of written sources. Where archaeology had once been based on chance, with amateur archeologists commenting on accidental discoveries, it was now driven by design: in the 1750s, the famous antiquarian Caylus used the engineers of the Ponts et Chaussées (France's leading civil engineering school) to collect archaeological information. The exploration of urban space became systematic. The participation of architects in excavations led, however, large monuments to be overemphasized at the expense of smaller archaeological data. Significantly, nineteenth-century Parisian archaeologists include the engineer Baptiste-Prosper Jollois (1776-1842), who presented his research to the Academy of Inscriptions, and particularly the architect Théodore Vacquer (1820-1899), who directed excavations sites beginning at mid-century.

Yet neither the Academy of Inscriptions nor the University recognized urban science as a full-fledged discipline. Consequently, amateurs continued to play an important role alongside the professionals.

### ***“Vieux Paris” & “Old London”***

In part two, “From Controversy to Admiration: The Recognition of Metropolitan Grandeur,” Van Damme studies the emergence of feelings of attachment to urban archaeological heritage. They were first expressed by amateurs outraged at the pillage—whether real or imagined—of archaeological objects. Some of these controversies even became affairs of state, as in the case of the arenas of Lutetia. They were discovered in 1869 as a result of construction undertaken by the Omnibus Company. Archaeologists organized a press campaign that managed to recruit two national figures, Victor Duruy and Victor Hugo. This collective action pressured the city to purchase the land and to establish a square there in 1892. Thanks to the concept of the “old city,” coined at the initiative of archaeologists and amateurs, the idea of heritage was extended to the entire urban center. A new form of sociability took hold of places “where the urban past was reified,” namely antique stores, public lectures, historic walks, and so on. The old city became fetishized, as the author nicely puts it. New audiences, particularly women, grew interested. The shift in the meaning of the word “*antiquaire*,” from archaeologist to antique dealer, is in many ways a sign of this expanding public interest, as is the proliferation of objects, such as postcards, or popular practices, like guided tours.

New urban spaces—museums, archives, and libraries—were the initiative of amateur archaeologists, not the government. This was true of libraries: in London, the Guildhall Museum was created in 1826 by the City Corporation; in Paris, a collector, Jules Cousin, was responsible for the opening, in September 1871, of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, which replaced a library that had recently been burned down. While the idea of national heritage led states to create archaeological museums in their capital cities, such as the British Museum in London in 1759 or the Cluny Museum in Paris in 1843,<sup>13</sup> municipal officials were reluctant to open archaeological museums, which they considered dusty and insufficiently celebratory of urban grandeur. The city of London refused to purchase the private collection of the great collector Charles Roach Smith (1807-1890). A petition of amateur archaeologists was required before the treasury acquired the collection and donated it to the British Museum. The role of amateurs enflamed social rivalries: the Guildhall Museum, which was financed by merchants from the City, competed with its rival, the London Museum, founded in 1911 by

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<sup>13</sup> Dominique Poulot, *“Surveiller et s'instruire”: La Révolution française et l'intelligence de l'héritage historique*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1996.

West End aristocrats and real estate owners: these landowners vastly expanded its antique collection, to such an extent that at present it has become the largest urban archaeological museum. In Paris, the opening in 1880 of the Carnavalet Museum, devoted to the capital's history, was the effort of many local learned societies, the most famous of which was the Société de l'histoire de Paris et de l'Île-de-France (the Society for the History of Paris and the Île-de-France), quite distinct from the more fashionable and feminine neighborhood societies.

### **Archaeology: The Past's Future<sup>14</sup>**

Urban archaeology has constructed itself under the supervision of government authorities, its scholarly and political dimensions frequently overlapping. The final chapter, "Paper Metropolises: Publishing Grandeur" studies the transition from the visible to the readable. Archaeological research first produced local monographs. Urban histories were financed by municipal authorities. In Paris, the city government first hired a historiographer in the mid-seventeenth century, in addition to financing such major projects as the Benedictine monk Dom Félibien's *History of Paris* (1725). Finally, in 1759, it opened a historical library in the city hall. History's political stakes are in these instances very obvious: Paris sought to defend its local privileges against the central government and the city's stature against its rivals.

In the 1860s, the project of a general history of Paris was no longer run by the city corporation, as in the eighteenth century, but by a sub-committee, the Historical Service of the City of Paris, created by the Seine department: bringing together members of the prefecture, the mayor's office, and archivists, its task was to supervise archaeological activities. This bureaucratic system is responsible for what became a genuine "excavation policy": the registration and writing of archaeological reports was now an administrative responsibility as much as a scientific activity. Government authorities assigned archaeologists a twofold task: to salvage documents in the aftermath of the burning down of the Paris city hall and the Palace of Justice in 1871. Subsequently, Théodore Vacquer's papers were deposited and classified at the historical library (the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris), thus becoming Paris' first archaeological archives. In 1898, the creation of the Old Paris Committee was followed by a subcommittee on inventory charged with predicting possible demolitions. "Thinking about the future," Van Damme writes, "transformed rescue archaeology into preventive archaeology" (108).

Archaeology, the science of the past, has become a science oriented to the future. As a result, it is now considered essential to the training of municipal officials. The creation of the School for Advanced Urban Studies (École des hautes études urbaines) by the departmental council of the Seine in 1919 was a response to the challenge of teaching what Renaud Payre called "urban science" (*science communale*). In conclusion, Van Damme observes: "Urban history fully participated in the sciences of municipal action that gradually emerged with the creation of municipal schools charged with training future city officials. It was part of a network of reform." (236). As this fascinating book demonstrates, archaeology is very much the future of our urban past.

First published in [Laviedesidees.fr](http://Laviedesidees.fr), 6 December 2012. Translated by Michael Behrent.

Published in [Books&Ideas.net](http://Books&Ideas.net) 7 January 2013.

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Demoule and Bernard Stiegler, *L'Avenir du Passé. Modernité de l'archéologie*, Paris, La Découverte, INRAP, 2008.