



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia Social briefing:

**Latest archaeological discoveries opening the debate about
conservation and modernization in the capital**

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Summary

The long history of Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, makes it an ongoing site for archaeological excavations. Especially rich was the historical period between the 1st Century BC and the 5th Century AD when there was a Roman town called Emona (Aemona) on this location. A recent street infrastructure renovation project in the Gosposvetska Street revealed an unexpectedly precious archaeological site, a large Roman graveyard. The road building works, however, were greatly delayed by the excavation process, which brought up the debate about the management of the ancient heritage within a modernising capital town.

History and background

Slovenian capital Ljubljana has been inhabited since at least the Neolithic period, for more than 4000 years. The consecutive inhabitations have left each their own layer of cultural and architectural relics. Especially important is the ancient period, when the location of today's Ljubljana becomes a Roman town Aemona. It was initially thought that Aemona was built as a military outpost and then grew into a civil town. Today, however, most archaeologists claim that the town with a full name *Colonia Iulia Aemona* was built as a civil town on purpose, and that the wider context of its establishment was the attempt by Rome to secure the region after the Panonian-Dalmatian Uprising of 6-9 AD. Established by Emperor Augustus, Aemona was built according to the typical rectangular pattern of Roman towns in the size of around 500x500 metres. The main roads followed older infrastructure and served as connections on the larger

traffic routes around Europe, most notably the so-called Amber Road between the Baltic and the Mediterranean.

Although the existence of Aemona was vaguely known also in previous times, the excavations only started at the end of the 19th century, with more systematic large scale work only taking place from the 1960s onwards. The archaeologist who led the excavations, Ljudmila Plesničar Gec (1931–2008) organized a long series of excavation projects on the new building sites. These were many in the time of the rapid growth and modernisation of Ljubljana in the 1960s and 1970s. The most important of those were the discovery of Roman graveyard near the train and bus station, the remains of the town wall on the building site of the Revolution Square in front of the parliament and remains of the forum on the building site of an apartment complex. She also helped draft the conservation regulation for the ancient heritage in Ljubljana.

Recent discoveries and related controversies

Following Gec's great contribution and her conservation guidelines, engaging the archaeology specialists eventually became a necessary prerequisite for any building or renovation project in town. Since the location of the Roman Aemona today lies below a part of the town centre area, every investor working there has to make provisions for both time and money which will be spent on the obligatory archaeological survey of the building site. According to the estimated importance of the location, prescribed archaeological surveys are of different types, ranging from a very general assessment to a thorough excavation process. This is also seen as an unnecessary burden by the investors and it causes a lot of public debate. An additional issue which is also addressed is the status of the found artefacts after the excavations are over. Movable pieces, objects are usually brought to one of the relevant museums, but even they struggle to accommodate the big number of artefacts, especially from the Roman period, and due to financial and spatial limitations, a lot of those artefacts are never put on display. Each time there is of course also a more difficult decision to make,

namely, what to do with the building remains and other architectural artefacts. Most often after documentation they are documented and buried back and in only a few cases the archaeologists managed to get some of them displayed by the change of plan for the built building by the investors themselves. Since sites are numerous in Ljubljana, but also mostly of high importance, it is difficult to draw a sustainable strategy on how to keep a balance between conservation of the precious historical remains and the needs of a developing and growing capital city.

After the initial period of discoveries in the 1960s and 1970s several other projects also led to big controversies, some of which remain unsolved until today. First of these was the infamous NUK II project, an ambitious building project which was meant to complement the main building of National University Library (NUK), which became too small in the decades since it was built (1941). The first building plan was made in 1989 and the archaeological survey started in 1990. The rich archeologically material delayed the survey and in 1998, when according to the 1994 special Law on Building of NUK II, the building should had already been built, even the archaeological work was not finished yet. After they finished the excavations in 1999, other difficulties started and the inefficiency on the government side led to an even bigger delay in the building process. With the initial design and the planned infrastructure already completely outdated, Ministry for education made a new call in 2012, but despite the successful results, the building has still not started.

Another similarly controversial project in the capital was the underground parking garage in the Congress square, where the archaeological discoveries of a burial site and several Roman and medieval sites (notably 4 Roman wells) delayed the building for a year. Although the delay was a source of a lot of complaints, the Congress square garage is also an example of successful adaptation of the building design in order to enable the presentation of (unplanned) archeological discoveries. Similar developments took place in other

big rebuilding projects, the renovation of the main Slovenska road and now with the delayed project of the renovation of the connecting Gosposvetska road.

The Gosposvetska road discoveries

Similarly to the main Slovenska road renovation, the ambitious project of renovating the connecting Gosposvetska road caused a lot of concern. It is the main road entering the capital from the northwest and serves a lot of public transport as well. Its closure also led to the traffic »pockets« around it, making some streets virtually inaccessible. The plan of the city government was to renovate the plumbing, the sewage system, gas pipes etc. underground, and to completely change and modernise the paving and street architecture. The archaeological survey was scheduled to take place in the first four months of the one-year-long renovation plan, before the construction work started. The first archaeological works with only partial road closure started in August 2017 and went on until December. They restarted in March 2018 with the full closure of the road being put in place in April this year. The end of the renovation project was scheduled for the end of June this year, but is not finished yet by the end of July due to the prolonged archaeological excavations.

The archaeological survey presented some unexpected discoveries. Before the project began, archaeologists were aware that graves were previously found on this location but were not expecting the scope of the site. What they started discovering in autumn 2017 and spring 2018 was an archeological site of an amazing significance. They discovered an extensive Roman necropolis with sarcophagi and more than 350 skeleton burial sites from different periods of the Roman Aemona. The graveyard also enables them to trace the shift towards Christianity around the 4th Century AD. As part of the site they also discovered an amazingly preserved example of necropolis architecture, an early church from the same period with mosaics and other precious elements. An intriguing find was also a high-status female grave, which could belong to either a nun or

an early martyr, the remains of which were highly esteemed and often brought to towns like Aemona from other locations.

Apart from the delay which caused a lot of complaints by the inhabitants of the capital, the scope and the importance of the discovery now opened the issue of preservation and presentation of this extremely important archaeological site. It seems that the infrastructure needs of the growing capital city, for which the road is one of the indispensable traffic veins, and the interests of the science and history for which the destruction of the site would be an irreparable loss, will be extremely difficult to coordinate. As for now it seems that the renovation project might accommodate a certain type of site presentation, but the type and financial aspects of that are still unclear.

Conclusion

The recent road renovation projects in the capital along with several unprecedented archaeological discoveries on the building sites, again brought about the debate about navigating the heritage preservation and the needs of a growing modernizing city. Due to the special historical location of the capital Ljubljana and also of a number of other Slovenian towns which are built on the location of previous historical urban settlements, mitigating those two aspects is becoming a more imminent problem. Now mostly left to the skill and ingeniousness of the local governments, the guidelines on the relationship between the investment and preservation will probably require more attention also on the level of national policies.