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Protection and valorisation of industrial heritage related to Global Heritage Stone Resources in Belgium

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Among the many varieties of stones formerly and still exploited in Belgium, three types were selected to be presented as candidates for the Global Heritage Stone Resource initiative: Belgian Bluestone, Red Marbles and Black Marbles. The procedure is in progress concerning their nomination and their close relationship with geoheritage is presented in this contribution.

These stones and marbles (in fact, sedimentary limestones able to receive a polished finish) were exploited in many different quarries all around the southern part of Belgium, the Wallonia, in open air or underground quarries. Today, a dozen of quarries (some very large) are still active for the extraction of Bluestone, one in Red Marble and one (underground) in Black Marble. But many disused quarries in these materials are still visible in the country. Some of them have been selected as protected heritage, as examples of industrial heritage or of special techniques. For example, the classical cutting technique named helicoid wire was used for the first time, in the second half of 19th c. in the red marble quarry of Beauchâteau (village of Senzeille), now protected. Many other abandoned quarries are protected for biological reasons, because they represent very important places for the preservation of biodiversity, both for fauna and flora. An exhaustive list was prepared of the ancient industrial sites and of their biological specificities – in the program called Natura 2000. Some underground ancient quarries are protected because of their cavern fauna and flora, and also of their importance for water as a natural resource. One inactive quarry of limestone is protected as a reserve of ornamental stone for restoration of cultural heritage, and not for an industrial exploitation as a source for lime industry, as it would be the case in other circumstances. Finally, the historical building of the former “grande carrière Wincqz” in Soignies is in restoration to become a large “stone center”, dedicated to job training but also for information and documentation for researchers.

Ancient industrial buildings linked to the exploitation and transformation of stones and marbles are protected as cultural heritage. One of them, the ancient power-station of the Sprimont quarry, an Art Nouveau building of the beginning of 20th c. is now a museum for geology and stone industry. Another stone museum is present in Maffle (close to the town of Ath), with valorisation of ancient buildings, including disused lime-kiln and a drowned quarry. A marble museum was created, some 30 years ago, in the village of Rance, where famous red marbles were extracted (for example, for the castle of Versailles); many activities for children and adults concern geology and palaeontology, and marble art and industry. Many other small museums are dealing with more local stone varieties.

Many official and industrial efforts are made to maintain the knowhow of extraction and transformation of stones and marbles, and to record all the possible testimonies of the art and industry. Among other, the association “Pierres et Marbres de Wallonie” is active for more than 25 years for the promotion of regional stone varieties. Many publications, both for the general public and for the professionals, were published on all the aspects of these materials, both ancient and contemporary uses [1]. Many documents have also been prepared to be offered as free access [2].

References:

[1] Marchi, C. and Tourneur, F. (2002), Living stones. Ornamental stones in Belgium: a general perspective. – Sprimont (Pierres et Marbres de Wallonie), 134 pages.

[2] www.pierresetmarbres.be available in four languages: French, Dutch, German and English.

