

The most polluting of fossil fuels is laying siege to our cultural heritage as lignite and coal mines expand while destroying important archaeological sites and its precious findings. As the corona crisis exposes how fragile our world is, defending the legacy of our past will help us lay the foundations of a better future, we can hope that not all is lost.

Discovery in Serbian coal-mine

Coal miners in Drmno, Serbia, recently dug up a surprise. A few weeks ago, three ancient ships, probably dating back to the Roman era, emerged from the Kostolac open pit mine. The ships had been buried in an ancient riverbed under several metres of mud and clay which preserved them for centuries, till mining machines reached them and seriously damaged the largest one.

The Kostolac mine and coal-fired power plant lie next to the ancient Roman city of Viminacium. Once a provincial capital with an estimated 40,000 inhabitants in the 4th century AD, and serving as a base for Roman warships on the Danube, Viminacium was larger than Pompeii. It is now one of Serbia's most important archeological sites, under national protection since 1949.

In 2015, it was added to UNESCO's tentative list to be considered for nomination as a World Heritage Site. However, the extension of the Drmno mine and the construction of a new plant unit (Kostolac B3) are threatening the integrity of the site.

"Coal operations in the area are rapidly expanding, without anyone knowing what their impacts will be," warned Ioana Ciuta, Energy Coordinator with CEE Bankwatch Network. The environmental impact assessment (EIA) carried out for Kostolac B3 acknowledged that construction work may damage or even destroy archaeological sites and recommended that Electric Power Industry of Serbia coordinate its operations with the authority responsible for cultural heritage. However, the mine expansion is already happening without any impact assessment, which is currently the subject of a complaint to the Energy Community Secretariat by Serbia's Centre for Ecology and Sustainable Development (CEKOR) and Bankwatch.

"New groundbreaking archeological findings are reported in Viminacium every other year, this is an invaluable cultural site and should be an important tourist destination. It would be criminal to let it be devoured by a coal mine," Ciuta told META.

Turkish sites endangered by invasive diggings and fumes

On the other side of the Bosphorus, highly symbolic sites for the Mediterranean civilisation are under siege too.

In the Turkish province of Muğla, 880 archaeological sites lie within the impact zone of the Yatağan, Yeniköy and Kemerköy coal-fired power plants, in an area that was licensed for lignite extraction. The most endangered sites are the ones located between Stratonikeia and Lagina, two cultural heritage sites with ongoing archaeological surveys. The ancient city of Stratonikeia is also a Unesco World Heritage candidate, while Lagina is a major sanctuary visited by many local and foreign tourists, not to mention 100,000 pagan pilgrims every year.

Elif Gündüzyeli, Senior Coal Policy Coordinator at CAN Europe told META: “If the coal extraction fields within the archaeological site area become operational, they will disrupt the relationship between archaeological sites and their natural environment, and destroy the region’s social and cultural memory.”

Excavations are not the only threat to the integrity of Muğla’s archaeological treasures. According to CAN Europe, polluting emissions from the chimneys of the three coal-fired power plants have negative impacts not only on human health, but on cultural assets as well.

In the heart of Turkey, 500km away, the archaeological sites around Konya had been downgraded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to allow the construction of coal basins for the Ilgın thermal power plant. Thanks to a legal case mounted by activists and archaeologists to protect the site, the government’s decision has recently been annulled, and the sites are protected again.

While celebrating the victory, Ecology Collective Association warned that, despite the court decision, applications for mining permits in the area continue, and coal companies are trying to take advantage of exemptions within the environmental impact assessment regulation to start excavations without prior evaluation.

Meanwhile, the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan released on 1 May 2020 by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources explicitly states the aim to speed up the processes around mine permit and licenses by easing the bureaucracy. There are no references to climate change in the document but a goal to increase the installed capacity of local coal by 4 GW.

Duygu Kutluay, a Campaigner with Europe Beyond Coal, told META: “It is worrisome to see that Turkey insists on locking its energy future in fossil fuels instead of planning for a just transition out of them and capitalising on its high wind and solar potential. Unless there is a

mindset shift among policymakers in the upcoming years, we'll keep seeing these kinds of conflicts where the country's cultural heritage, rich biodiversity, and the quality of life of its citizens are put at stake in the name of coal mining."

German lignite mine razing churches and towns

Ancient Roman cities and archaeological sites are not the only victims of coal greed. In Germany, entire villages risk being erased from the map to make way of the expansion of the Garzweiler lignite mine, and last year, for the first time in over 200 years, a German church was deliberately torn down.

The symbolism of a sacred building being demolished to extract a polluting fuel that destroys the climate spread quickly on social media and raised a wave of indignation in Germany and beyond. The 130-year-old Romanesque building of St Lambertus became a symbol of the lost heritage and community destruction that accompanies the relentless expansion of coal mines.

According to Europe Beyond Coal, the plan to destroy the villages is rendered even more absurd by the fact that the coal beneath them needs to stay in the ground if Germany is to respect its climate commitments and undertake a just transition towards a greener future. For Werner Rombach, pastor of the destroyed St Lambertus, a rapid energy transition is the miracle we need to save churches and homes, "God's creation" and people's livelihoods from being swept away. Yet campaigners insist that it does not require a miracle to ensure a swift and fair coal phase out. All it needs is the political willpower to put communities and their heritage first, leave an anachronistic fuel to the past, and step into a better, more resilient future.

Source: meta.eeb.org