Programme « AGORA »

End report – part «summary of the research project »[1]

RESEARCH CONTRACT: AG/LL/166

ACRONYM OF THE PROJECT: **NACIP**

TITLE OF THE PROJECT: NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS INVENTORY PROJECT

RESEARCH TEAM :

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This summary intends to gives a synthetic view of the results of the project. This document should be communicated to the programme manager by the coordinator of the project. This document needs to be handed out in FR/NL/EN.

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[1] See art. 5.5.2 of the research contract.

Links to websites where the activities, reports... produced by the research team within the research contract are mentioned

- Website RMAH: KMKG-NACIP

- Website RMAH, archeologen in de reserves: KMKG-NACIP

- Website BELSPO: BELSPO-NACIP

- Website Depotwijzer.be: Depotwijzer-NACIP

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Summary

National Archaeology Collections Inventory Project
AG/LL/166

Britt Claes
Royal Museums of Art and History
Brussels, juin 2016

Introduction
NACIP is a research project funded by the Belgian Science Policy Office. The project was started in July 2012 and finished in June 2016. The project was co-ordinated and promoted by the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH). The project is motivated by a ministerial audit, published in 2009, which pointed out the worrying state of the museum collections at the RMAH (http://www.ccrek.be/docs/Reports/2009/2009_21_Musea.pdf). Several priorities were formulated such as the management of the collections, the establishment of global and uniform inventories and the renovation of the storage rooms in order to prevent further degradation of the artefacts.

The National Archaeology Collection *anno* 2009
In 2009, the situation with regard to the National Archaeology Collection is alarming: this very rich collection, containing archaeological artefacts from Belgium and the surrounding countries (mainly Southern Netherlands and Northern France), doesn't dispose of a uniform and digital inventory and the storage rooms are in a very poor state. The collection's first inventory, started at the end of the 19th century, only lists a very brief description of every item with no information on their whereabouts. The objects did get labelled at that time. It is only since the 1960s that a new inventory system was put in place using separate sheets on which each item is described and sometimes even illustrated. Unfortunately, ten years later, the system is abandoned. To remedy the lack of a decent inventory, the collection's curators set up a new inventory system in the 1980s by listing all cases and trays in which the items were stored and classifying them by geographical localisation. Thanks to this system, the museum's staff and researchers could at least locate (some of) the items they wanted to consult. Nevertheless, no information is listed regarding the identification of the items and their inventory number. It is only since the 1990s that a digital register of the artefacts is established. But then still, the item's descriptions are brief and there is no information on their location in the storage rooms. In the following period, individual initiatives of curators gradually ensure the establishment of more extensive digitized inventories. This is the case, for example, for the Merovingian collection that was accommodated in separate storage rooms from the 1990s. However, an entire overview and a uniform management of the collection remains absent.

The 'National Archaeology circuit' consists of three exhibition rooms that are dedicated to prehistory, to the Gallo-Roman period and to the Merovingians. The items that are not displayed are stored in three large storage rooms that were built in the 1940s at the initiative of the then collection's curator. In 2009 these wooden drawers are no longer adapted to the collection's content and the artifacts are often jumbled up without any logic in terms of period, geographical location and material. In total, more than 2.000 wooden trays carry more than 100.000 artefacts. The poor state of the rooms makes it difficult to preserve the objects in an efficient manner. Good climatic conditions are absent and dust and other sources of pollution cannot be prevented since the objects are rarely covered. A large amount of items are stored on the floor and therefore render circulation in the storage rooms quite difficult. Humidity and mold have moreover already made irrevocable damage to two of the three depots.

Storage room 3 at the start of NACIP

NACIP's objectives
From the start, NACIP's main objectives are the establishment of an exhaustive and digitized inventory of the collection and the reorganization and renovation of the three storage rooms.
The project consists of four work packages that, given the extent of the tasks, were carried out simultaneously:

1) The emptying of the storage rooms and the temporarily storage of the artefacts
This first work package includes the mapping of the existing storage in order not to lose any crucial information about the possible original contexts of the items. The artefacts are then moved out of the depots and temporarily stored. Every movement in and out of the storage is carefully noted so that each object can be located at all times.

2) Identification, inventory and shooting of the objects
The objects are identified and classified according to origin/material, enumerated and then photographed. To achieve this, an Access database has been specially elaborated taking into account five big chapters: inventory number(s), geographical localisation, description, storage (old, temporary and new) and bibliographic reference. This database is based on the museum's central database, Museum Plus, so that the data can easily be transferred after verification. Lay-out and formatting are constantly evaluated and adjusted where necessary. The pull-down menu's are bilingual.

Project employees at work during the inventory of the collection

The inventory of the objects in the storage rooms is completed with the exhibited objects, architectural elements spread over the different depots and smaller more valuable items that are stored in metal drawers (e.g. coins cabinets).

Because many different people (temporary employees, volunteers, trainees and students) are working on the NACIP project a standardized protocol has to be followed by everyone.

3) Renovation of the storage rooms
The renovation works are carried out by the RMAH's own technical staff, in coordination with the *Régie des Bâtiments*, the owner of the buildings.

Many similar archaeological depots have been visited, studied and compared (Flemish Heritage Agency, Royal Museum of Mariemont, Ghent Archaeological Service, British Museum, *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden*) to make sure that the appropriate material is chosen and that the storage in the rooms is optimized.

4) Reinstallation of the collection
After renovation of the rooms, the entire National Archaeology collection is reinstalled in its new storage. For an easy and logical storage and to improve the management of the collection, the different sub-collections (prehistoric, Gallo-Roman and Middle Ages) are separately stored. In each room the boxes are alphabetically grouped per province and per municipality. The shelf number of each item is introduced in the database and labels with this definitive number, province and municipality are applied to the boxes.

Definite storage of the boxes in storage room 2

Results and recommendations

The initial objectives set at the beginning of NACIP have been achieved. Also due to five extra employees of the Belgian Science Policy Office who joined the crew in 2014.

Summary of the achieved results:

- The drawing up of an exhaustive, uniform and digitized inventory of the National Archaeology Collection. Today the database consists of 30.000 subdivisions for more than 135.000 items.

Overview of the number of created spreadsheets for each period:

Prehistory	14209
Gallo-Roman	6817
Merovingian*	6169
Late and post Middle Ages	1493
Mixed	354
Not determined	505
TOTAL	29547

* Not inventoried during NACIP

- A better knowledge of the collection's content by the identification and classification of all artefacts per period and per geographical location. Some forgotten objects were rediscovered and can therefore be studied again.

- The renovation of the storage rooms in accordance with the now existing conservation criteria will prevent further degradation of the objects.

- The logical and correct storage of the objects, which were removed from their old environment and are now stored in over 1.900 new adequate boxes.

Thanks to the obtained results, the National Archaeology Collection can again fully fulfil its mission as part of the Royal Museums of Art and History. This includes the availability of the collection for scientific researchers, both from Belgium and abroad, as well as the valorisation of the scientific research throughout publications and educational activities. Moreover, the reorganisation and renovation of the storage rooms has made a regular control and a correct management of the collection possible again. The museum's staff and researchers now have fully access to a digitized inventory of the collection which will considerably facilitate the search for relevant documents and/or ensembles while every movement in and out can be carefully registered.

Recommendations:

A next crucial step in the inventory process of the National Archaeology Collection is the further verification of the inventoried objects, according to the priorities of the competent minister and the ministerial audit published in 2009. Moreover, it is important for the scientific, cultural and historic identity of this unique Belgian collection to retrieve all long-lost existing scientific documentation (excavation reports, publications, archives etc.) with regard to the items. Over the years, and due to the poor management of the collection, a lot of information concerning the original contexts of the items has indeed got lost.
Furthermore, every artefact will be valued, referring to the ministerial order of 15 June 2007 that stipulates the necessity for the RMAH to draw up an inventory with an appreciation of all its assets.

Finally, all collected data will have to be integrated in the museum's central database so that the information will be available to the public via the museum's online catalogue (www.carmentis.kmkg-mrah.be).

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