

Thematic sessions

Building maintenance in ancient times (up to the early modern period)

Philippe Bernardi, Charles Davoine, Hélène Dessales and Maxime L'Héritier

The Athens Charter for the conservation of Historical Monuments particularly recommends a regular and permanent maintenance. From a broader point of view, ensuring the preservation of any building with a definite use requires a more or less regular – yet often strictly codified – upkeep. The formalisation of these practices took a long time, from their first juridical theorisations – often influenced by custom – in post-medieval times, to the pregnant debate of the 19th century between the supporters of John Ruskin and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc setting regular maintenance against complete reconstruction. The slow development of the lexicon is a testimony to this evolution. The French word “*entretenir*” meaning “maintaining in good state” only appears in the 15th century, such as the English word “maintenance”. “Keep up” (1660’s) and “upkeep” (1849) appear with the same meaning even later.

Yet, ensuring the longevity of many buildings to prevent them from decaying was a necessary and very concrete preoccupation in the ancient times. Today, specific budgets dedicated to the upkeep are planned in advance, sometimes even during the building construction. But how was it managed before the mid-19th century theorisation? Maintenance regroups ordinary actions, which are usually not mentioned in historical sources. Tracking them down is not obvious because of their scarcity but can sometimes be done thanks to a close study of technical or juridical vocabulary as well as of accounting deeds which recorded the expenses. Archaeologists and historians nowadays more frequently look into architectural studies over the long time scale: damages, repairs, adjustments or reconstructions belong to a monument’s life. Construction archaeology and material studies (stone, tiles, glass, metal...) have known a true development over the past twenty years and now allow highly complementary combined studies to grasp the material reality of this upkeep, exploring a field of research inconceivable only a few years ago.

The object of this session is to build an intrinsically and highly interdisciplinary reflexion on the illustrations of these practices before the mid-19th century, to comprehend the technical, human and institutional processes used to organize, manage and plan this maintenance. Such a thematic is highly transversal and fall under many fields in construction history: institutions, juridical and financial responsibility, building yard organisation, work and craftsmen and their competences and know-how, materials and technological processes. Upkeep modalities might also vary according to the type of building. Studying how theses practices were implemented offers new perspectives towards an original vision of monuments as permanent building yards.