

Paris' First Subterranean Map: Deep Mapping and the Paris Catacombs

The aftermath of a series of sinkholes in the 1770s in Paris revealed that the French capital was a floating city. Generations of quarrying the limestone and gypsum deposits left Paris sitting upon a labyrinth of overlapping ancient tunnels and cuttings out of which the very stone used to build the city was pulled. As the city expanded from the first century to the eighteenth, much of the city was unknowingly constructed on top of less than sturdy ground. When it appeared that the city might collapse into the Earth, Louis XVI called for the creation of the Inspection Générale des Carrières de Paris (General Inspection of Paris Tunnels, IGC). The first job of the IGC was to map the underground tunnels to understand precisely where they went and their state of repair. This underground map of Paris was even more detailed than any map of Paris' surface or indeed of any map in the world at the time. After this map was created, it was overlaid over a map of the surface city. The cartographers then left the tunnels, and the work of stonemasons began as they entered the freshly mapped tunnels to build new underground support structures and cut new tunnels to map the streets of the world above.

This paper will use the concept of deep mapping to understand the creation of the catacombs of Paris as the tunnels under the city were actively transformed from forgotten quarries to a place of municipal burial for the city and finally a site of leisure and tourism. Through a critical analysis of who was employed to map out the underground of Paris, this paper seeks to understand how the mapping of the subterranean created a space underneath the city that became a somber place of burial and a place for dark leisure and whose experiences of the underground were allowed to generate this sense of place. By focusing on the masons and cartographers who entered the tunnels themselves, this paper will ask whose imaginations were

considered and whose were ignored for the creation of this new public space under the city and indeed how it even came to become considered public. After tracing the history of the tunnels as understood by the people who mapped them, this paper will further use deep mapping to answer how and why the catacombs began to be experienced as a place of touristic leisure. Finally, having moved through the history of the catacombs from an unknown and forgotten underground space to one of the most popular tourism sites in Paris this paper will argue that the subterranean and particularly how it is imagined by people is a useful and important lens for imagining human habitat and its relationship to the natural and built environment. This paper aims to demonstrate the history of the Paris catacombs provides a useful case study for understanding the geographies of the past and provide an avenue for imagining a new type of geospatial relationship to the humanities through imaginations of the subterranean world.