

The Minett as Palimpsest

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The landscape in some parts of the Minett can be considered as a kind of palimpsest. For historians and archaeologists, a palimpsest is a writing medium, for example a parchment or a manuscript, that is used several times by erasing the previous writing. The landscape of the Minett has also changed greatly over the centuries as a result of human intervention. The soil can tell many overlapping and entangled stories. Some things have been completely erased, while other traces of past times have been left.

A historical and archaeological journey through time highlights the many changes that have taken place in the region: from agriculture (before 1850), through the industrial period (1870-1970) and the steel crisis (1970s), to the post-industrial period (since the 1990s).

The transformations of the landscape are also reflected in the various names for the region that have been used over time. Like a palimpsest, some older names have been forgotten, others have been added and some have coexisted since the industrial period. Some refer to geology, others to industrial companies or particular factories, and still others to metaphors.

Transforming the landscape

Human activity in the Minett has played a decisive role in shaping the landscapes of the region, which bear witness to a wide variety of land uses: agriculture, industry, housing, trade, transport, wasteland from past industrial activities, and more recently nature reserves.

Ever since Roman times, southern Luxembourg had been an agricultural region. However, the presence of geological layers rich in iron ore in southern Luxembourg and neighbouring Lorraine contributed to the local expansion of the iron and steel industry at the end of the 19th century. The accessibility of the shallow ore deposit in Luxembourg was an asset for its extraction.

From the 1870s onwards, the region became an area of intense mining and heavy industry. With the advent of these activities the formerly rural and agrarian landscape changed drastically. The ground, like a palimpsest, was “rewritten”, sometimes more than once: by

large infrastructures, the holes and craters of open-pit mines, the new hills formed by slag, and the factories themselves with their tall smoking chimneys. But this process did not stop with the industrial shaping of the landscape; the drastic mutations in some areas of the Minett continued thereafter.

Two examples can help shed light on the transformation of the Minett as a palimpsest constituting its identity: the industrial site of Belval in Esch-sur-Alzette and the Haard open-cast mine in Dudelange.

Belval, located near the town of Esch-sur-Alzette, was a pastoral landscape that people from the surrounding towns visited to escape urban life and the hustle and bustle of industry. In a tourist guidebook from 1907 one could read: “Close to the forest, the ground begins to swell as if silently breathing; a delicious mild air blows towards the weary walker. The tall oak trunks stand motionless in the glowing sun of the summer afternoon, their broad crowns bathed in light; a tangy, pure scent emanates from the resinous wood of the oaks, which tower over the forest edge, and mixes with the spicy smell of the lush thyme that flowers on the ground.”

With the construction of the Adolf-Emil ironworks (1909-1911/12), Belval became one of the most advanced industrial sites in Europe. The area was deforested and the ground was levelled and covered with concrete, pavement, roads and railroads. The Belval iron and steel plant employed thousands of workers and produced hundreds of thousands of tons of cast iron, steel and rolled products.

After the Second World War the industrial site was renewed and extended once more. The peak of the site’s operation was in the 1960s and 1970s. Then a phase of decline began. The production of raw iron ended in July 1997 and the western part of the factory closed its gates. On the eastern part a steel plant with a rolling mill is still in operation today. The former blast furnace plant was left abandoned and took on a desolate appearance, with rusting industrial artefacts of varying sizes littering a large concrete surface.

In 2000, an ambitious urban development project was launched in Belval. The contaminated soil was removed and some industrial structures were preserved as relics of Luxembourg’s industrial heritage. As of 2022, the Belval site is visited daily by thousands of people. It is home to the Cité des Sciences, a campus structured around the University of Luxembourg and other research institutions.

The second example of transformation is the “Haard”, an area of 600 hectares stretching across the three municipalities of Dudelange, Rumelange and Kayl. The Haard was once an open-pit mine where iron ore was exploited from the 1880s to the 1960s.

“Es zeigt sich hier, wie die Welt unnatürlich wird, wenn der Mensch sie zu gestalten sich erdreistet.“ (1924)

A visitor in 1924 noted that “crumbling red-glowing rock walls, with sparse pines and stunted firs crouching above their crests, accompany the most impossible gorge formations. Here we see how the world becomes unnatural when man dares to shape it. Screes without mouths and basins that wind their way back to their starting points; miniature mountain ranges through which transverse valleys are being formed: wherever you look, it’s wrong according to our natural laws.” The area became so disrupted by mining (both above and below ground) that it began to resemble a devastated, desolate, lunar-like landscape. After the mines were closed in 1972, nature started to reclaim the area.

As a result, fauna and flora gradually returned and in 1994 the Haard was classified as a nature reserve. It is an area where animals and plants are protected and very few buildings are allowed. It is now part of the first “Biosphere Reserve” in Luxembourg, designated by UNESCO in 2020. The formerly devastated landscape has been revived and is now a popular site for leisure and tourism.

(Re-)naming the region

Regional identity is defined as a sense of belonging to a region by people living in that region. Names of landscapes and places play an important role as reference points. In southern Luxembourg, these names have changed several times in relation with the industrial transformation of the landscape. Before industrialisation the whole southern region of Luxembourg, including the Minett, was part of the broader region called “Gutland” (good land) because of its fertile soil and agricultural potential. When iron ore mining started in the mid-19th century the region was known variously as “Erzbassin” (ore district), “Minettsgégend” (Minett region) or “bassin minier” (mining district). These terms referred to the “minette” (the local iron ore, characterised by its low iron content) and the mining activities.

A new name, “Rote Erde” (Red Earth), emerged around 1900. Often this name is associated with the red colour of the soil in the iron ore mining areas. However, it was a coincidence that the colour red became associated with the naming of the Minett. In 1892, the German company “Aachener Hütten-Aktien-Verein Rote Erde” acquired an ironworks belonging to the “Société des Haut Fourneaux de Luxembourg” in Esch-sur-Alzette. The Esch plant, formerly known as the “Brasseur Schmelz”, was now referred to in the press as “Aachener Hütte” (Aachen ironworks) and occasionally also “Rote Erde”.

Another starting point for the characterisation of southern Luxembourg as the “land of red earth” and “land of work” in the early 20th century was the literary output of Luxembourg poet Nikolaus Welter (1871-1951). Welter’s 1906 German poem *An das Land der Roten Erde* (To the Land of the Red Earth) describes the southern region with its mines, blast furnaces, rolling mills and other industrial plants in terms of their technical functions, and glorifies their importance. At that time, the canton of Esch-sur-Alzette was politically firmly in the hands of the socialists, whose colour was also red.

*« Toujours plus haut, toujours plus loin / que le crassier au front d’airain, /
aux gueules rouges qui charbonnent, / à l’haleine qui empoisonne, / »*

Paul Palgen, *Les crassiers*, 1931

Germany’s defeat in the First World War led to a change of ownership in the iron and steel industry in southern Luxembourg; in 1919 the new company “Société Métallurgique des Terres Rouges” (Metallurgical Company of the Red Earth) based in Esch replaced the former German companies. With the term “Terres Rouges”, the French translation of the colour red entered the public discourse, appearing for example in the names of the steelworks and in a new street name in Esch. While the literature of Nikolaus Welter lived on, the poems of Paul Palgen (1883-1966) popularised the notion of the “Terres Rouges” for Luxembourg’s French-speaking population. Guidebooks and tourist advertisements marketed the term “Terres Rouges” to promote an image of the beauty of the industrial landscape in southern Luxembourg to an international audience. With Harry Rabinger’s (1895-1966) monumental painting “Les Terres Rouges”, exhibited in the Luxembourg Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, the idea of the Minett as the “Land of the Red Earth” reached the international stage. This image portrayed southern Luxembourg as the economic and cultural bearer of progress in the now highly modernised country. The term “Red Earth” persisted in the intense industrial period after 1945 and even continues in today’s post-industrial era.

The physical transformation of the landscape and individual places in the Minett went hand in hand with the region’s changing economic, social and cultural significance. The sometimes drastic changes in the appearance of parts of the landscape, as well as the renaming of the area by its inhabitants, contributed to the formation of a distinct regional identity that seems to have outlived the industrial activities from which it originated.