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Polish Pyramids or open-pit mine?

Cultural heritage older than Egyptian Pyramids literally stands on the way to coal

A growing range of people: inhabitants of the region, local politicians, even Polish central authorities, begin to realize how destructive open-pit lignite mining is for the environment and economy of Wielkopolska region. And yet ZE PAK S.A. - a private lignite utility and miner - persists in its destruction.

In case of the planned Ościsłowo open-pit mine, the threat that it poses has become even worse – not to the economy, nor to the environment, but to the earliest historical heritage and cultural identity of many Europeans. A year ago in the rural area of Góry in Eastern Wielkopolska (Poland), a set of 5,5 thousand years old megalithic tombs had been discovered. It is located right on top of the brown coal deposit, which ZE PAK S.A. wants to dig out.

Ancient tombs in Góry are the best preserved megalithic constructions in Wielkopolska. Importance of the finding is being compared by archaeologists to Biskupin – the most famous Bronze Age settlement in Poland. The tombs are a historical testimony that the well-developed farming culture had existed on the Polish territory in times when the Egyptian Pyramids were being constructed.

Are the Poles ready to sacrifice a priceless piece of Europe's history, barely researched and still full of secrets? Do the short-term profits of one company justify such a sacrifice? Foundation "Development YES – Open Pit Mines NO" believes that the cultural heritage should be protected from destruction for future generations.

(Un)Fortunate discovery

The megalithic tombs have been discovered during a random search with the use of LIDAR technology – „a mix of laser and scanner”, Krzysztof Gorczyca from the local museum in Konin called it. On the digitally transformed images the archaeologists can see many objects that are invisible to a human eye in nature.

In the recent months the archaeologists have conducted non-invasive research of the findings. The earthen mounds of the Góry megaliths are up to 90 meters long and 1,5 meters high. There are 15 tombs in total, including 14 long-barrows from the Funnelbeaker culture, which had been widely spread through Europe in Neolith, around 4300 BC - 2800 BC, and one tomb built in the early bronze age around 3 thousand years ago, belonging to Lusatian culture. The cemetery in Góry is 500 years older than Stonehenge, which dates back to c.a. 2900 BC and one thousand years older than the Great Pyramid of Giza, which is believed to have been constructed around 2500 BC.

The local people began deconstructing the megaliths around XVIII-XIX century, to use the stones for construction. Nobody thought of the historical importance of the tombs at the time and only inconspicuous earthen mounds hidden in the forest have made it to the present. It allowed for the interior of the tombs to be preserved in a very good shape.

Foundation "DY-OPMN" is the formal and legal representation of the Polish National Coalition Development YES – Open-pit mines NO" – a civil society grassroots movement to prevent plans to build new lignite open-pit mines and supporting the transformation of the Polish economy - from the one based on fossil fuels to a resource-efficient and new renewables-based one.

As the Internauts say, “Everyone knew about those tombs all along”. But it turns out that the information about the megaliths had never left the local communities who had lived in the area for generations. The archaeologists found out about the megaliths on their own thanks to LIDAR and the information has since spread among the history fans all over Wielkopolska, Kuyavia and Europe.

Will megalithic tombs become a historical monument?

There are other Funnelbeaker culture elongated tombs nearby, in the Kuyavian region and in Western Pomerania. In Wietrzychowice (only 50 km from Góry) there is a well maintained cultural park and many activities are organized, bringing tourists and archaeologists from Poland and abroad. It is reasonable to think that similar activity may develop in Góry, if the ancient cemetery is given a chance.

On September 27th the historical monuments conservation authority had formally begun the procedure to put the Góry megalithic tombs on the protected monuments list. The tombs are temporarily protected from that day on – which means the mining company cannot get the permit for the Ościsłowo mine until the procedure is over. Final decision should be issued within a month.

If the historical monuments conservation authority decides that the ancient tombs shall get the protected monument status, then the Ościsłowo mine will not come to life – or at least major changes will have to be introduced to the plan, to leave the ancient cemetery intact. Certainly, the specialist of the historical monuments conservation office care more for the cultural heritage than for one small lignite deposit. We count on them to remain independent in their judgement and decisions.

Numerous problems of PAK ventures

ZE PAK S.A. seems not to be especially lucky of late – both the planned Ościsłowo mine and the expansion of the existing Tomisławice mine are meeting with opposition and serious doubts of environment impact assessment authorities.

Soon after the discovery of the megalithic tombs, in Spring 2017, the full EIA report was demanded for the Tomisławice mine expansion and the Ościsłowo mine project failed to receive environmental permit. The reasons were not even distantly related to the ancient cemetery and centred around the impact of the mines on water resources and especially on the nearby lake district that had been drying up for over a decade due to mining.

This very week the central EIA authority in Poland is supposed to decide on the mining company’s objection. Most probably it will uphold the decision of lower instance EIA office. However, if the decision is positive for ZE PAK, the company will be a step closer to getting a concession for the Ościsłowo mine – unless the new protected monument stops the venture. Will the megalithic tombs win with the mining industry? Right now, it is for the EIA authority to decide if that choice is ever to be faced.

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