

# Ancient Roman spa awaits flooding in Turkey

October 1 2010, by Nicolas Cheviron

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Workers dump sand over the Allianoi, the world's oldest known spa settlement, which is at risk of being submerged under water following the construction of a nearby dam, on September 24 Allianoi, Turkey. The possibility of the ancient city being destroyed by the Yortanli Dam remains a contentious issue in country.

Under a mild autumn sun, workers bustle about like bees at a Roman bath complex sprawling over a green plain in western Turkey in what looks like a regular excavation site.

But the fate awaiting the impressive ancient spa of Allianoi is dark: the workers here are tasked with burying the site and not digging it out to reveal its secrets.

Much to the consternation of [archaeologists](#) and civic bodies, the Turkish government has said it will go ahead with flooding the valley the

site sits in to serve as a dam reservoir with a capacity to irrigate 8,000 hectares (19,760 acres) of farmland.

The work now underway is an effort to preserve the complex for future generations, before officials allow water to accumulate in the reservoir for the Yorganli dam before the end of the year.

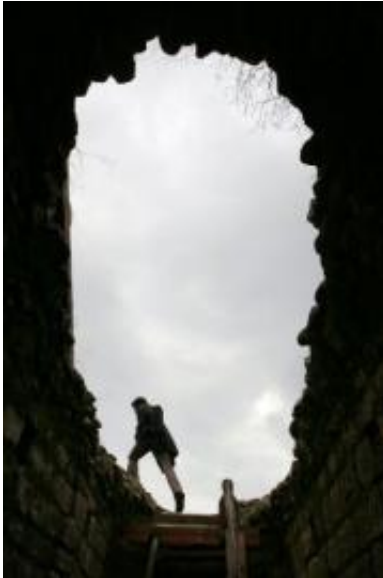
As archaeologists -- denied entry to the site -- mourn the loss of a significant treasure, workers dump wheelbarrows of sand over the foundations of the hospital of Galen, a prominent Roman physician born in the 2nd century AD in the nearby city of Pergamon, or modern-day Bergama.

Soon the thermal bath -- with its five metre-high (17 feet-high) walls and a pool still powered by a hot spring -- will disappear under the sand, after being covered with a pinkish protective coating, along with buildings looking out over a columned courtyard, rooms covered with mosaics and paved walkways.

It is a sad sight for Professor Ahmet Yaras who excavated Allianoi for nine years and who says 80 percent of the site has yet to see the daylight.

"Normally, cultural treasures need to be examined and registered before any action is taken on a site. Here, flooding the site before the excavation is complete is a massacre," lamented the archaeologist.

"There is no other warm bath, health center in the world as well preserved as this... Unfortunately, all this will be abandoned forever," he said.



A visitor exits a gallery in the historical city of Allianoi, in Izmir, western Turkey in 2008. The old thermal city, often compared to Pompei for its extraordinarily conserved state, will soon be engulfed in water of a dam reservoir to the despair of archaeologists.

Furthermore, Yasar expressed doubt that the sand will be enough to preserve the site under 30 metres of water.

"Even if the site were protected, the sedimentation brought by the dam will reach 15 or 16 meters in 50 years time. It would be crazy to try to excavate the complex again at such a depth," he added.

But the fate of the site is not much of a concern for the farmers at the nearby village, who see the Yorganli dam -- completed in 2007 -- as the answer to their irrigation problems.

"They exaggerate, I do not think there is much of the ancient there. It is just a hot spring," said Mehmet Aydin, 52, who grows cotton, tomatoes and corn on his plot.

His remarks almost echo the views of Environment Minister Veysel Eroglu who said in late August: "Allianoi does not exist, it is an invention... There is just a hot spring like many others across Turkey."



A Turkish man visits a thermal bath in the historical city Allianoi, in Izmir, western Turkey in 2008. Much to the consternation of archaeologists and civic bodies, the Turkish government has said it will go ahead with flooding the valley the site sits in to serve as a dam reservoir with a capacity to irrigate 8,000 hectares (19,760 acres) of farmland.

His remarks were roundly criticized while the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the European non-governmental preservation organization Europa Nostra and archaeologists from the European Union urged the Turkish government in a letter to preserve the "common heritage" at Allianoi.

But the game seems to be over: Culture Minister Ertugrul Gunay quashed hope of saving Allianoi last week when he dismissed the idea of questioning the local archaeological commission's decision in late August to bury the site for preservation.

"After all, Allianoi remained underground for a long time and it surfaced

only during drilling works," he said.

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Citation: Ancient Roman spa awaits flooding in Turkey (2010, October 1) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-ancient-roman-spa-awaits-turkey.html>

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