

“Closed but active” Archaeology at the Natural History Museum Vienna

Online activities of the Department of Prehistory during the Covid-19 pandemic 2020/21

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Introduction

The Natural History Museum Vienna is home to 30 million objects (from botany, zoology, physical anthropology, mineralogy, palaeontology, and archaeology). The Prehistoric Collection holds a considerable share of objects which focuses on the former Habsburg Monarchy territory. They illustrate the important cultural flows and groups that inhabited Central Europe over the last few thousand years or came in from other regions. The NHMW hosts important finds (Venus von Willendorf, prehistoric gold artefacts, the Situla of Kuffarn, the artefacts from the salt mines and cemetery Hallstatt, cult wagon from Glasinac), which are essential not only for Austrian archeology, but also on a European level and beyond. Current research of the department members focuses on significant Austrian sites, such as the UNESCO world heritage sites and regions Hallstatt (Bronze and Iron Age salt mine, cemetery and landscape), the Wachau region with Willendorf (palaeolithic hunter-gatherer site with Venus figurine) and the Prehistoric pile dwellings around the Alps (in cooperation with the Kuratorium Pfahlbauten). Textile research and music archaeology are also among the latest research tasks.



Fig. 1: Natural History Museum, Department of Prehistory: Collage of the collection and research (© NHMW).

In recent years, digitization has been a strong focus, in order to make our research and the processes behind it more accessible to the public. This goes hand in hand with an increased awareness of embedding research into the needs of society (global challenges and sustainability goals).

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 had a strong impact both on the research and dissemination activities

Dissemination activities

The knowledge transfer activities by department members in general are very diverse (Fig. 2). Before the Covid pandemic (and whatever was possible also in 2020), the research results are disseminated to the general public through exhibitions, lectures, media work (radio interviews, television interviews, blogs, interviews in newspapers, podcasts, Instagram appearances, etc.). Research content is also conveyed in events (e.g. “Archäologie am Berg” in Hallstatt, Long Night of the Museums, historical fashion shows, etc.), as well as in the context of Young Science Ambassador activities and internships for interested schoolchildren. In the various activities, a comprehensible communication of research content, inclusion and participatory elements are important to us as well as references to topics of contemporary significance.

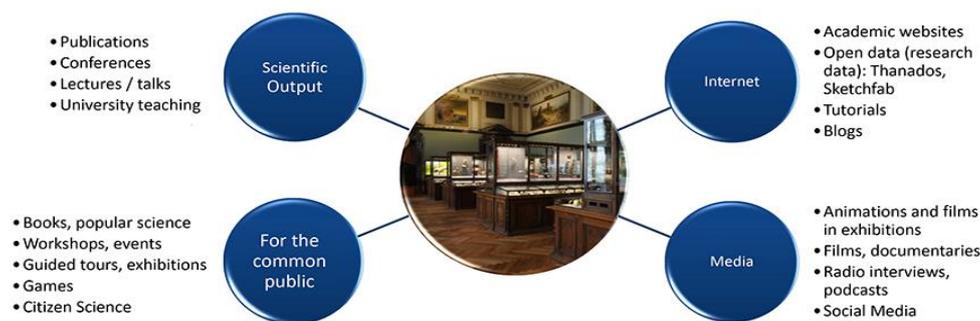


Fig. 2: Natural History Museum, Department of Prehistory - dissemination strategy: academic exchange and knowledge transfer to a wide audience (© NHMW).

At the first lockdown in March/April 2020, when the conferences and public talks, visits to school have been cancelled, specific activities started to stay in contact with the common public.

The scientists have been advised to produce home-made videos that have then been placed at the homepage of the NHMW (YouTube videos #nhmfromhome) and the videos also have been posted on various social media platforms. The reactions by the public have been very positive. After the first lockdown those videos have been professionalised into the interview series “Science Talks”, produced by the NHM media team.

During the lockdowns, event activities such as “UNESCO World Heritage Day 2021” (18th April 2021) also had to move from “on-location-events” with thousands of visitors to online activities, such it was decided to make a live-stream from our museum.

Other activities of our department concerned the digitisation and online dissemination of research data. This goes hand in hand with software development and evaluation of new methods to present and provide our research results and the underlying data to the public.

We develop and maintain three ongoing open source software projects (<https://github.com/nhmvienna/>) . OpenAtlas (<https://openatlas.eu>) is a database application for the work with historical, archaeological, prosopographical, chronological and geospatial information. It is used as a tool for the data acquisition and management for various in-house and international projects. One of them is THANADOS – the anthropological and archaeological database of sepultures. All hitherto published Austrian cemeteries from the Early Middle Ages have been digitized using OpenAtlas. With THANADOS (<https://thanados.net>) an open source web application has been developed that presents all the gathered data online as open data with digital catalogues, interactive cemetery plots, visualisations etc.

With OpenLiDARtoolbox (<https://github.com/stefaneichert/OpenLidarToolbox>) we – in cooperation with the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Univ. Graz – have developed an official QGIS plugin for the processing of Airborne Laser Scan pointclouds that is especially suited for archaeological purposes.

Last but not least, our museum has opened its own Sketchfab channel (<https://sketchfab.com/NHMWien>) that, amongst others, also presents many archaeological objects as open content to the public.

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