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Autor: Fellner, Robert / Matter, Georg
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Archaeology in Switzerland

Background, mission and organisation

By Dr **Robert Fellner**, Archéologue cantonal du Jura, robert.fellner@jura.ch
and Dr **Georg Matter**, Kantonsarchäologe Aargau, georg.matter@ag.ch

Switzerland has a rich archaeological record dating from many periods. New sites are discovered and excavated each year. The cantonal (state) archaeological services carry out or organise almost all of this fieldwork.

The legal framework

Switzerland, like most European states, is a signatory to the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (Malta Convention) and must as such protect archaeological sites or document them before their destruction. However, in this federal state, the responsibility for cultural affairs (including archaeology) lies with the cantons and not with the federal government (Swiss Constitution, Art. 69). The Swiss Civil Code mandates that all «antiquities of scientific value» belong to the canton on whose territory they were found; they may not be collected or sold without official permission (Art. 724). Other national laws regulate specific aspects such as the inventory of cultural assets of national

importance and the protection and trade of cultural heritage.

But in the end, each canton has its own distinct legislation regulating the protection of local archaeological heritage. Most cantons have created an archaeological service to deal with these legal requirements.

The cantonal archaeological services and their missions

Although the underlying legal, financial, personal and structural conditions of the archaeological services differ considerably from one canton to another, each must accomplish the same five missions:

Protecting and preserving the archaeological heritage

A specialised inventory must be maintained to locate, protect and preserve archaeological sites. Whenever possible, sites must be protected from destruction due to building activity, etc. Many sites underground remain undiscovered and are only revealed once construction has started. For this reason, archaeological services must often intervene outside known and protected areas.

Investigating and documenting sites threatened by destruction

If a site is about to be destroyed, it must first be investigated and scientifically documented so that the archaeological findings can be preserved for future generations. The cantonal service organises or itself carries

out the necessary surveys, test trenching and excavations.

Collecting and archiving finds and documents

Excavations usually produce large numbers of artefacts, as well as extensive documentation. Both must be collected, inventoried and archived to make them available for scientific research and to preserve them for future generations.

Analysis and research

Only scientific analysis can transform the extensive and complex findings from an archaeological investigation into ordered and comprehensible results, which can then be preserved for the future and advance our understanding of the past. This mission is often achieved in cooperation with a university.

Communicating the results

The results of the fieldwork and the subsequent analysis are made available to the scientific community and the general public. This guarantees an enduring knowledge gain and a social return on investment.

Differences between cantons

The federal structure of Switzerland has resulted in considerable differences between the cantonal services, although their missions are basically the same. These differences concern not only the legal framework and the financial and human resources avail-

able for archaeology, but also professional standards and methods. Nineteen cantons have their own archaeological service. Their organisation varies considerably, but they usually have both a professional staff and fully equipped storage facilities. They can often use a local museum to showcase their most important discoveries. Some of these cantons make only limited resources available to their archaeological services, which then have to find ways to make do.

Seven cantons have no archaeological service at all. All of them have some kind of administrative body nominally responsible for managing archaeological heritage, but field operations can only be undertaken either by cooperating with another canton or by employing a private archaeology firm – with all that this implies (see infographic).

In most cantons, archaeological operations are financed by the state, with the help of limited federal subsidies. In others, costs may be shared with the building contractors/owners according to the costs-by-cause principle, though allocation mechanisms differ from canton to canton. The financial resources available for archaeology thus reflect specific local conditions, with the exception of archaeological research triggered by federal activities, such as motorway construction. Archaeological work resulting from such activities is mainly financed by the federal government.

Facts and figures

The federal structure of the country and the resulting differences make it difficult to obtain comparable and detailed figures on archaeological research in Switzerland (see infographic). Although incomplete and rather hard to interpret, some interesting data can be found in the statistics booklet published in 2018 by the Federal Office of Culture, which reveals much about the cultural interests of the citizenry, and the 2016 built heritage statistics published by the Federal Statistical Office (see below). ■

Statistics booklet (Taschenstatistik) 2018:
www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/themen/kulturstatistiken.html [in German]

Built heritage statistics (Denkmalstatistik) 2016:
www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/catalogues-databases/publications.assetdetail.6949764.html

Resümee

In der Schweiz sind die Kantone für die Kultur und damit auch für die Archäologie zuständig. Jeder Kanton hat diesbezüglich seine eigene Gesetzgebung; die meisten betreiben für die Bewältigung der damit verbundenen Aufgaben eine Archäologie-Fachstelle, die sogenannten Kantonsarchäologien. Ihre Aufgaben können in fünf Punkten zusammengefasst werden: 1) das archäologische Erbe schützen; 2) bedrohte Bodendenkmäler vor ihrer Zerstörung dokumentieren; 3) die gemachten Funde und die Dokumentation langfristig archivieren; 4) die Grabungsergebnisse wissenschaftlich auswerten; 5) gewonnene Erkenntnisse ans Publikum und an die Wissenschaft kommunizieren.

Aufgrund der föderalen Struktur der Schweiz sind die Kantone unterschiedlich gut aufgestellt. Sieben Kantone verfügen über keine Fachstelle, die aus eigener Kraft operative Aufgaben übernehmen kann. Vier Kantone haben eher schwach dotierte Kantonsarchäologien, während in vier weiteren Kantonen vergleichsweise grosszügige Mittel zur Verfügung stehen. Die übrigen 11 Kantone bewegen sich dazwischen.

In den meisten Kantonen übernimmt der Staat die Kosten für die Archäologie; in einigen werden die Kosten mit der Bauherrschaft geteilt (Verursacherprinzip). Die Rolle des Bundesstaates bleibt begrenzt; er subventioniert einen Teil der kantonalen Leistungen und finanziert Untersuchungen, welche durch Bundesaufgaben – z. B. Autobahnbau – ausgelöst werden.

Résumé

En Suisse, la culture, et donc aussi l'archéologie, est du ressort des cantons. Or ceux-ci ont tous leur propre législation. La plupart ont créé, pour assumer les tâches liées à ce domaine, un service spécialisé en archéologie. Les tâches de ces «services cantonaux d'archéologie» se résument en cinq points: 1) protéger le patrimoine archéologique, 2) établir des documentations sur les vestiges archéologiques menacés avant leur destruction, 3) archiver sur le long terme les objets découverts et la documentation, 4) analyser scientifiquement les résultats des fouilles, 5) transmettre au public et à la communauté scientifique les résultats obtenus.

En raison de la structure fédérale de la Suisse, la situation peut différer fortement d'un canton à l'autre. Sept d'entre eux ne disposent pas d'un service spécialisé capable d'assumer à lui seul des tâches opérationnelles. Quatre cantons ont des services d'archéologie assez faiblement dotés, alors que quatre autres disposent de ressources plutôt généreuses. Les onze cantons restants se situent entre les deux.

Dans la plupart des cantons, l'Etat prend en charge les coûts liés à l'archéologie; dans un petit nombre d'entre eux pourtant, les coûts sont partagés avec les maîtres d'ouvrage selon le principe dit du pollueur-payeur. Le rôle de la Confédération reste limité: elle subventionne une partie des prestations cantonales et finance les fouilles liées à l'accomplissement de tâches fédérales – par exemple à la construction d'autoroutes.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK



European conventions
Venice, Malta, Faro

Swiss Constitution, Swiss Civil Code, Federal Act
on the protection of nature and cultural heritage,
-on the protection of cultural property, -on the
international transfer of cultural property



Cantonal laws



PROTECTION
PRESERVATION



INVESTIGATION
DOCUMENTATION



COLLECTION
ARCHIVE



ANALYSIS
RESEARCH





COMMUNICATION








Source: Taschenstatistik Kultur in der Schweiz, 2018; Denkmäler in der Schweiz:
erste Ergebnisse. Denkmalstatistik 2016 und Statistik des Kulturverhaltens, 2018

ARCHAEOLOGY IN SWITZERLAND

Infographic ikonaut

-  Archaeological service with generous resources
-  Archaeological service with average resources

-  Archaeological service with limited resources
-  No archaeological service

-  Archaeology museum
-  Institute of Archaeology (University)
-  Private archaeology firms



70%
of the 8.3M inhabitants visit a historical site each year.

≈ 100'000'000

Swiss francs are spent yearly on archaeology.

≈ 12.- / 

per inhabitant, or the price of 3 coffees in Switzerland.

15%

of museums exhibit archaeological, historical or ethnographic objects.



25%
of entries are generated by these.

≈ 39'000

known sites exist within the national territory of 41'285km².



≈ 2'000

archaeological investigations take place each year.