Short Paper

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

Online Activities of the Department of Prehistory during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020/21

Karina GRÖMER, Natural History Museum Vienna, Austria
Stefan EICHERT, Natural History Museum Vienna, Austria

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Introduction

The Natural History Museum Vienna[1] (NHMW) (Jovanovic-Kruspel, 2015) is home to 30 million objects (from botany, zoology, physical anthropology, mineralogy, palaeontology and archaeology). The Prehistoric Collection (Figure 1) holds a considerable share of objects which focuses on the former Habsburg Monarchy territory (Grömer and Kern, 2018; Ott et al., 2011). 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.

The overarching research aim of the Prehistoric Department (Grömer and Kern, 2018) is “Humans and their relationships in Prehistory and the Early Middle Ages”. Among that are four different aspects, such as the studies on the relationship between humans and social behavior in all its forms; studies on the interaction of people in their geographic space, the landscape and the environment; studies on the human – animal relationship and the relationship between people – resources and technology.

[1] https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/en



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 the research and the processes behind 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 – science communication

The knowledge transfer activities by the Department of Prehistory in general are very diverse (Figure 2). Before the COVID pandemic (and between the lockdowns when the governmental covid restrictions were allowing on-site activities), the research results have been disseminated to the general public through exhibitions, lectures and various media work (e.g. Grömer, 2017; Reschreiter et al., 2015). The latter includes radio interviews, television interviews, blogs (e.g., Löw et al., 2016)[2], interviews in newspapers, podcasts, Instagram activities and others. Research content is also conveyed in large events that attract thousands of visitors – the most prominent among them are the "Archäologie am Berg" (Kowarik and Reschreiter, 2008), a two-day event held in Hallstatt in August or September and the "Long Night of the Museums" in the beginning of October. Other activities for dissemination are also historical fashion shows (for research on textile archaeology) that reach a large audience. Targeted activities for schools are e.g., Young Science Ambassador[3] activities and internships for interested schoolchildren and students.

In the various activities, a comprehensible communication of the research content, inclusion and participatory elements are important as well as references to topics of contemporary significance.

At the first lockdown in March/April 2020, when the conferences and public talks, visits to school have been cancelled, specific activities started in order to stay in contact with the common public. The members of the museum have been invited to produce home-made videos on their research activities that have then been placed at the homepage of the NHMW [4] (YouTube videos #nhmfromhome[5]). Some of the videos also have been posted on various social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). The reactions by the public have been very positive. After the first lockdown those videos have been professionalized into the interview series "Science Talks", produced by the NHM media team.

[2] http://hallstatt-forschung.blogspot.com/

[3] https://youngscience.at/de/angebote/young-science-botschafter/suche?tx_contact_contacts%5Baction%5D=show&tx_contact_contacts%5Bcontact%5D=31&tx_contact_contacts%5Bcontroller%5D=Contact&cHash=c705a9d18277804f539fcf6eb5903bec

[4] https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/museum_online

[5] https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/fuehrungen__aktivitaeten/NHMWienFromHome

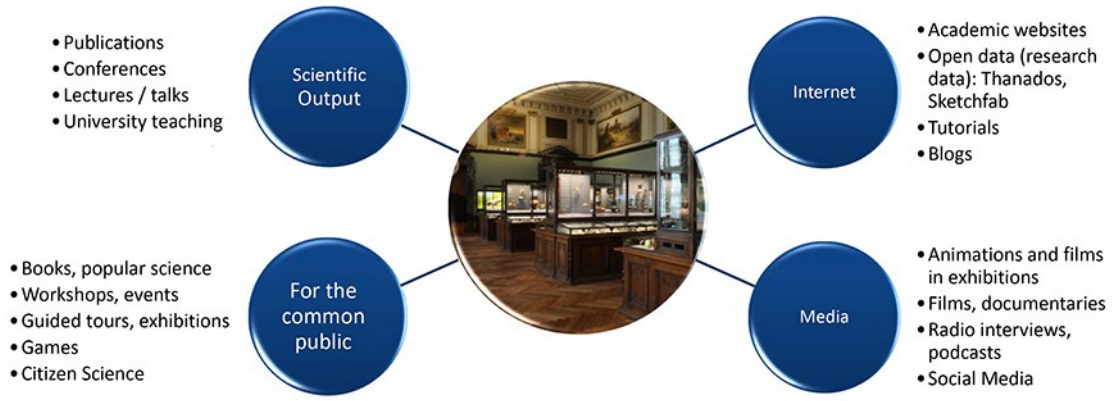

Fig. 2. Natural History Museum, Department of Prehistory – dissemination strategy: academic exchange and knowledge transfer to a wide audience (© NHMW).

During the lockdowns in Austria, event activities such as the "UNESCO World Heritage Day 2021" (18th April 2021) also had to move from "on-location-events" with thousands of visitors to online activities. For this, it was decided to make livestreams from our museum and our branch Hallstatt via different channels. The "Hallstatt TV – 7000 years of salt"[6] was a Youtube livestream, recorded and presented by members of the department and our cooperation partner Salzwelten. "Pfahlbau TV – UNESCO Heritage Pile Dwellings around the Alps"[7] was a livestream via the homepage of the Kuratorium Pfahlbauten and live views on Facebook.

Dissemination of research data – digitisation

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[8] . OpenAtlas[9] 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 anthropolocial and archaeological database of sepultures. All hitherto published Austrian cemeteries from the Early Middle Ages have been digitized using OpenAtlas. With THANADOS[10] 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[11] we – in cooperation with the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Univ. Graz – have delevoped an official QGIS plugin for the processing of Airborne Laser Scan pointclouds that is especially suited for archaeological purposes.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1-AVV6XGxE

[7] https://www.pfahlbauten.at/veranstaltung/pfahlbau-tv-1-%C3%B6sterreichischer-welterbetag

[8] https://github.com/nhmvienna/

[9] https://openatlas.eu

[10] https://thanados.net

[11] https://github.com/stefaneichert/OpenLidarToolbox

Last but not least, our museum has opened its own Sketchfab channel[12] that, amongst others, also presents many archaeological objects as open content to the public.

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[12] https://sketchfab.com/NHMWien