

Zeitschrift: NIKE-Bulletin
Herausgeber: Nationale Informationsstelle zum Kulturerbe
Band: 34 (2019)
Heft: 3

Artikel: In our midst, under water : managing the serial transnational World Heritage Site "Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps"
Autor: Fath, Barbara
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-864880>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

In our midst, under water

Managing the serial transnational World Heritage Site «Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps»

By **Barbara Fath**, archaeologist and CEO
of the International & Swiss Coordination
Group UNESCO Palafittes

«Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps» was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2011. This serial transnational World Heritage site comprises 111 settlements in the six Alpine countries of Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France, Austria and Slovenia. 56 of these settlements are located in Switzerland, which initiated the candidacy and played a leading role in its implementation. Due to the large number of settlements and the international nature of the site, coordination and management at national and international level pose significant challenges. Eight years have passed since the inscription. The purpose of this article is to do a preliminary stocktaking and to consider the challenges and opportunities for protection, research and outreach of this unique World Heritage site.





Divers from the Bavarian Society for Underwater Archaeology (BGfU) place buoys around Rose Island in Lake Starnberg (Germany). This makes the protection zone visible above the water in the lake, which is much used for water sports, and at the same time draws attention to the World Heritage Site.

© R. Angermayr, BGfU



Fig. 1: Underwater fascination. Pile dwellings from the Bevaix-Sud site in Lake Neuchâtel (Switzerland).

© Béat Arnold, Laténium

Since the discovery of the first pile fields at the end of the 19th century, pile dwellings have fascinated scientists and the public alike. In addition to the dwellings themselves, other objects made of organic materials, including baskets, nets, textiles, wooden objects, bone tools and plant residues, have been preserved in humid environments under water, on lakeshores or in wetlands as nowhere else in prehistory or early history (Fig. 1). These objects provide unique insights into the everyday life, handcraft (Fig. 3) and technologies of the farming communities that inhabited Alpine lakes and wetlands between 5000 and 500 BC. Groundbreaking technological achievements such as the wheel (Fig. 4) and early metallurgy are also part of the world heritage of pile dwellings. The sites are a valuable source not only for archaeology but also for related sciences: with the help of dendrochronology, piles and other timbers can be dated very precisely.

Archaeobotany and archaeozoology, as well as anthropology, provide data on the landscape, economy, mobility and health of the people of the time.

The uniqueness of the «Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps» led UNESCO in 2011 to select 111 of the well over 1000 known sites (Fig. 2) for inclusion in the World Heritage List owing to their outstanding universal value for humankind as a series of transnational settlements.

Joint commitment from the outset – cooperation at all levels

Switzerland initiated and led the World Heritage candidacy. However, all six countries took part in preparing the joint application. By signing the inscription, each country undertook not only to safeguard the shared World Heritage site in accordance with the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of

¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> (20/06/2019)

the World Cultural and Natural Heritage¹ but also to contribute to jointly managing it.

The basis for this cooperation is the Management Plan², which details measures for the preservation, research and outreach of the World Heritage site. Owing to the special requirements of a serial transnational site, coordination of management is also clearly spelled out: each of the participating countries has created institutions or expanded existing structures at local/regional and national level according to the respective circumstances.

In Switzerland, the Swiss Coordination Group (SCG) is responsible for managing and maintaining the World Heritage site. The SCG is made up of representatives from the participating cantonal archaeology departments, as well as one representative each from Swiss Archaeology and the Federal Office of Culture. In addition, a secretariat has been set up both for coordination inside Switzerland and for international cooperation within the International Coordination Group (ICG). The ICG is defined as a working group composed of official representatives from the six countries participating in the World Heritage site. These

officials are responsible for managing protection, research and outreach, as well as for ensuring the flow of information between the countries and serving as contact persons for the World Heritage site.

Measures, experiences and feedback – a look at where we are

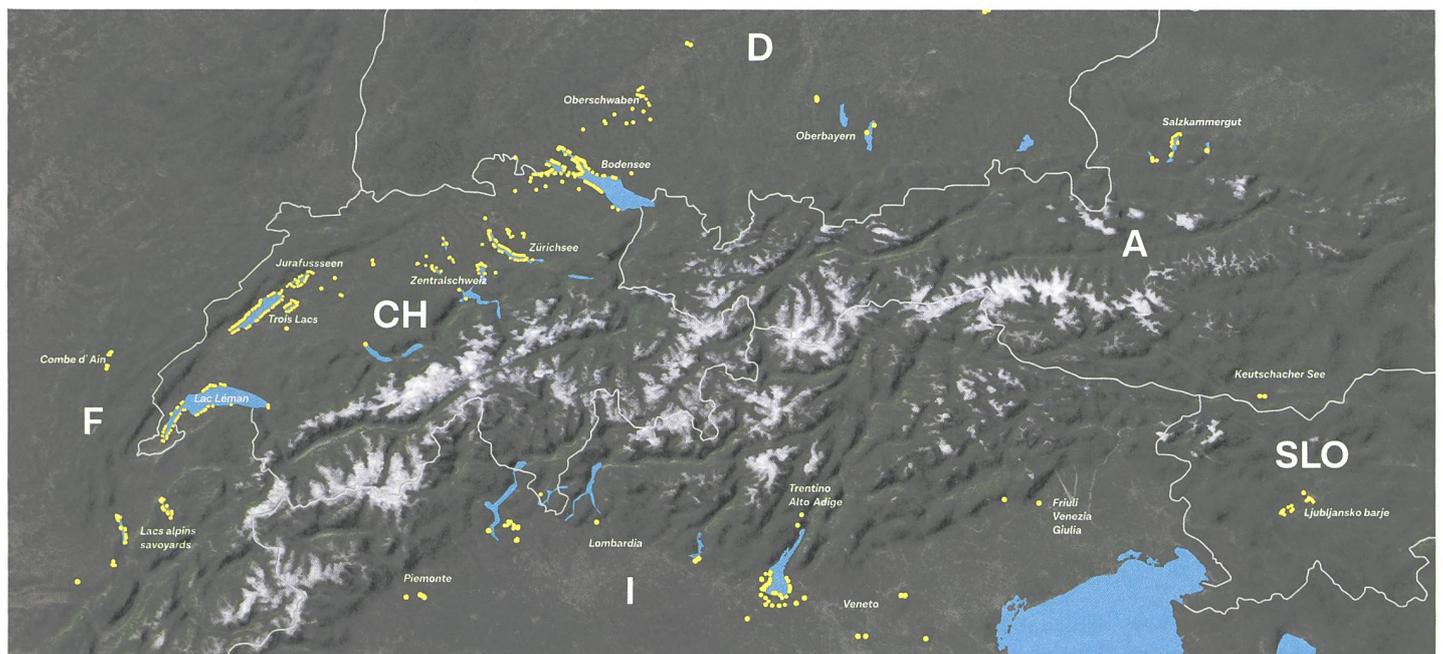
Despite the strong focus on joint management, the different institutional and legal requirements at national and international level pose a significant challenge to cross-border cooperation. However, inquiries regarding best-practice experiences of other serial transnational sites also show that the structures established to date and their effectiveness have an impact beyond their own networks, for example as models for new candidacies.

This feedback from existing and potential World Heritage sites and our own preliminary experiences are crucial to cooperation. They enable structures and processes to be adapted to current circumstances and thus enable sustainable and effective management over the long term. When the Management Plan was revised, it was therefore streamlined, and where appropriate particular measures were translated into broader, clearly defined strategic objectives. This gives the individual countries the freedom

Fig. 2: Survey map of the pile dwelling sites in the Alpine region known to date.

© Association Palafittes, graphic design by Barbara Wais, www.drahtzieher.at

² www.palafittes.org/products-downloads.html (20/06/2019)



they need to jointly implement agreed goals at national level in accordance with their respective circumstances.

Since inscription in 2011, much has been achieved using this approach in terms of protection, research and outreach:

- Common protection standards have been established: in addition to regular monitoring, erosion markers and water-level stations are now in place almost everywhere at all sites so that protective measures can be taken quickly if necessary.
- Pile dwellings have long been a subject of research in the field of wetland and underwater archaeology. Here, inscription as a World Heritage site provided a new impetus, in terms both of expanding the international network and of processing the volume of finds and data – particularly in the field of dendro sciences – as well as their accessibility and quality assurance.³ In addition, the special protection status of the World Heritage site affects the research methods used on-site. Because conventional excavations usually also imply destruction of the original material, intensive effort is being devoted to developing new, less invasive approaches.
- Owing to the seriality of the World Heritage site, joint communication and public relations have been a focus from the very outset. In addition to a common website, this focus has resulted in projects such as the Palafittes Guide app, a number of exhibitions, the palaFITtes.tour that was part of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 and various multilingual flyers, brochures and publications.⁴

³ See article by Beat Eberschweiler, «Who still has a clue?» in this issue of the Bulletin.

⁴ Selected further information: www.palafittes.org; Peter J. Suter, Helmut Schlichtherle et al. *Pfahlbauten / Palafittes / Palafitte / Pile dwellings / Kolišca*. Bern: Association pour l'inscription des «Sites palafittiques préhistoriques autour des Alpes» au Patrimoine Mondial de l'UNESCO, 2009; Archäologisches Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg and Landesamt für Denkmalpflege (Eds.) *4000 Jahre Pfahlbauten*. Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2016; Barbara Fath, Renata Huber, Carmen Löw, Gishan Schaeren (Eds.). UNESCO *World Heritage «Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps»*. Basel: International Coordination Group UNESCO Palafittes, 2019.

People protect only what they know – communicating and protecting a hidden world

Recent studies⁵ show, however, that public awareness of pile dwellings as a World Heritage site is still quite low. This may be due to their poor visibility and accessibility under water and in bogs. Furthermore, the serial nature of the World Heritage site almost certainly adds to its elusiveness. Both these factors make outreach especially challenging.

In terms of the added value of the World Heritage site for tourism, however, low visibility also offers a certain degree of protection, especially on the often highly frequented lakeshores: people who wish to learn more about pile dwellings must turn to information boards or museums; it is only rarely possible to visit the actual World Heritage site. In order to reconcile the interests of both cultural heritage and tourism, close cooperation and development of sustainable concepts are especially important. At the same time, achieving greater awareness is entirely in the interest of the site and its protection, since doing so fosters not only a sense of ownership but also of responsibility and appreciation for our shared world heritage and its preservation (Fig. p. 28).

Certain policy measures have already been initiated. At national level, for example, following France, Italy and Slovenia, Switzerland – the fourth of the six countries participating in the World Heritage site and one of the very few landlocked countries in general – has now also adopted the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage⁶. At local and regional level, participating communities are increa-

⁵ Umfrage zur Bekanntheit der Schweizer Welterbestätten im Auftrag der Rhätischen Bahn und World Heritage Experience Switzerland (Survey on the awareness of Swiss heritage sites on behalf of the Rhaetian Railway and World Heritage Experience Switzerland), conducted by blues eyes marketing, 2018.

⁶ www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-73184.html (20/06/2019); www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20180084 (01/07/2019); <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000126065> (20/06/2019)

Fig. 3: Outstanding preservation of organic materials: here, for example, basketwork with ancient patchwork of linden bast and twigs of silver fir from the Arbon-Bleiche 3 lakeshore settlement (3384–3370 BC; Thurgau).

© Amt für Archäologie des Kantons Thurgau, www.archaeologie.tg.ch, Daniel Steiner



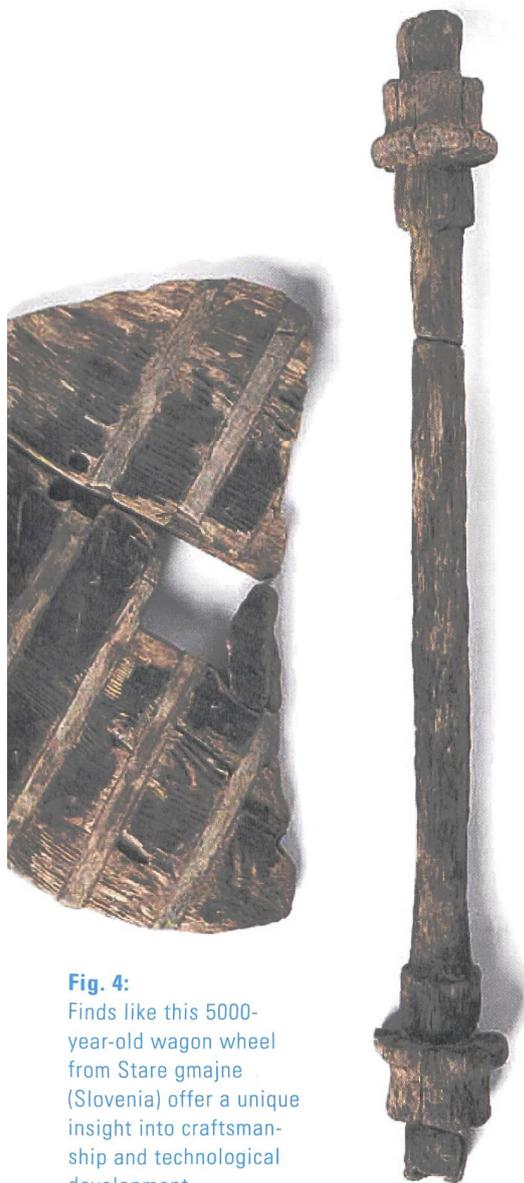


Fig. 4: Finds like this 5000-year-old wagon wheel from Stare gmajne (Slovenia) offer a unique insight into craftsmanship and technological development.

© Grega Babic, Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana

singly interested in getting in touch with one another, exchanging initial experiences and tackling projects together.

These developments are not only positive for the joint management and promotion of the «Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps» World Heritage site. They are also true to the spirit of UNESCO, whose various programmes and conventions are aimed primarily at supporting cultural diversity and solidarity across borders. ■

Resümee

Seit 2011 sind die «Prähistorischen Pfahlbauten um die Alpen» als serielle und transnationale Stätte Teil des Unesco-Welterbes. Die Stätte umfasst 111 Fundstellen in Seen und Mooren in der Schweiz, Italien, Deutschland, Frankreich, Österreich und Slowenien. Die Vielzahl der Fundstellen sowie die internationale Ausrichtung der Welterbestätte stellen besondere Anforderungen an Koordination und Management.

Um diesen Anforderungen entsprechen zu können, wurden in allen sechs Ländern entsprechende Strukturen geschaffen. Nach der gemeinsamen Kandidatur, die auf Initiative der Schweiz erfolgte, schlossen sich ausserdem alle beteiligten Länder zur International Coordination Group ICG zusammen. Diese übernimmt auf internationaler Ebene die Koordinierung in den Bereichen Schutz, Forschung und Vermittlung. Hierbei stellen unterschiedliche institutionelle und gesetzliche Voraussetzungen in den beteiligten Staaten eine besondere Herausforderung dar.

Die Einrichtung gemeinsamer Monitoring- und Schutzstandards, Datenaustausch und Qualitätssicherung in der Forschung sowie gemeinsame Projekte in Kommunikation und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit können als erste Schritte einer erfolgreichen internationalen Zusammenarbeit gewertet werden. Anfragen zu Best Practice, die erfolgte Ratifizierung der «Konvention zum Schutz des Kulturerbes unter Wasser» durch die Schweiz sowie das Engagement einiger beteiligter Gemeinden sich grenzüberschreitend auszutauschen, zeigen, dass die Einschreibung bereits einige Entwicklungen im Sinne der Unesco auch ausserhalb der Welterbestätte angestossen hat.

Résumé

Depuis 2011, les «Sites palafittiques préhistoriques autour des Alpes» sont inscrits au patrimoine mondial de l'Unesco. Ce site sériel et transnational comprend 111 sites archéologiques situés dans des zones lacustres et marécageuses de six pays: la Suisse, l'Italie, l'Allemagne, la France, l'Autriche et la Slovénie. Le grand nombre de ces sites et leur caractère international ne manque pas de poser des défis particuliers en matière de coordination et de gestion.

Afin de relever ces défis, les pays impliqués ont mis en place des structures appropriées. Après leur candidature commune, due à l'initiative de la Suisse, ils ont uni leurs forces pour former un Groupe international de coordination (International Coordination Group, ICG). Ce groupe assure la coordination internationale des mesures de protection, de la recherche et de la valorisation du patrimoine. La diversité du cadre légal et institutionnel des pays concernés représente un enjeu de taille.

La mise en place de normes communes de protection et de contrôle, l'échange de données, l'assurance de la qualité dans la recherche et les projets en matière de communication et de relations publiques menés en commun représentent autant d'étapes en vue d'une coopération internationale réussie. Les questions posées concernant les bonnes pratiques (best practice), la ratification par la Suisse de la Convention sur la protection du patrimoine culturel subaquatique, l'engagement de certaines communes à échanger des informations au-delà des frontières, tout cela montre que l'inscription au patrimoine de l'Unesco a déjà suscité des développements qui s'inscrivent dans l'esprit de l'Unesco, aussi en dehors des sites eux-mêmes.