

World Heritage Property “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps:” Knowledge Transfer or Tourism Promotion?

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Abstract The “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” has been a serial transnational World Heritage site spanning six countries since 2011: Switzerland (which submitted the nomination), Germany (the states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), France, Italy, Slovenia, and Austria. A total of 111 pile dwelling settlements are inscribed by name on the World Heritage list. They are located in the shallow areas of the circum-Alpine lakes, in regions covered by bogs and on wetland meadows. Analysis of the organic material that has been preserved there offers insights into significant developments in human history. In the context of changing environmental conditions, the emergence of land cultivation and cattle breeding, the invention of the wheel and wagon, and the introduction of copper (and later, bronze), metalworking can be examined in detail along with the societal upheaval caused by these breakthroughs. Close collaboration between the fields of archaeology and natural sciences is essential in this process.

Keywords Transnational serial heritage, prehistoric pile dwellings, heritage and tourism management, subterranean sites on lakeshores and in marshland.

World Heritage “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” and its “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV)

The serial and transnational World Heritage property “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” was inscribed in the World Heritage list in 2011. There are 111 sites in the six circum-Alpine countries of Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France, Austria, and Slovenia representing the more than 1,000 currently known pile dwelling sites in the Alpine region.

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The inscription of the “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” in the World Heritage list and its “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV) was mainly based on the unique preservation conditions at these sites, one of a total of ten defined criteria for assessing the OUV. In the case of the prehistoric pile dwellings, the OUV is mainly linked with criteria IV and V, which describe the importance of the site complex as archaeological sources for our understanding of the development of early agrarian societies in the Alpine region. Under anaerobic conditions in a constantly wet environment, organic materials in particular have been preserved alongside numerous other artifacts. Architectural elements and construction timbers, food remains and provisions, everyday objects as well as tools and textile remains have all been recovered.

These are excellent prerequisites for modern bioarchaeological and palaeoecological investigations. Precise dating of the wood using dendrochronology enables the development of individual settlements to be reconstructed and the interaction between humans and the environment to be traced in detail. This can also contribute important evidence to the current discussion of human-environment relations and climate change. The pile dwellings provide insights into the world of early European farmers, their everyday lives, agriculture, animal husbandry, and technical innovations in a timeframe from the 5th to 1st millennium BC (see fig. 1).



Figure 1 Chalain (Jura, France), Station 19. Excavating a travois made of ash and a yoke made of oak, around 3000 B.C. © CRAVA Photo: Pierre Pétrequin

Management between protection, research, and communication

The UNESCO World Heritage center requires a long-term management plan when World Heritage sites are applied for. The management of a World Heritage site is always quite complex due to various factors including the responsible institutions. In the case of the pile dwellings, this is exacerbated by the fact that the listing is a serial and transnational site complex. This is why there are coordination groups at national and international levels in addition to regional ones, in which the site managers exchange ideas and jointly develop concepts and implement projects. The primary domains of site management are protection, research, and mediation of the property. The concept for communicating knowledge about the World Heritage site, its OUV, and the need for protection to be in a position to pass it on to future generations plays a crucial role because the “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” lie hidden under water or in bogs and are not visible above ground (see fig. 2).

Special attention is paid to imparting specialized knowledge to young scientists. With this in mind, the State Office for Monument Preservation at the Stuttgart Regional Council organized an international workshop for young students and post-graduates in cooperation with the International Coordination Group of the World Heritage “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” and the Swiss Coordination Group UNESCO Palafittes: “An introduction to archaeological and natural resource management in wetland environments.” Twelve young scientists from five countries



Figure 2 Schreckensee (Baden-Württemberg, Germany). The prehistoric pile dwelling settlements are located on the peninsula. © Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart/Otto Braasch



Figure 3 Recovery of a wooden slab wheel at the pile dwelling site of Alleshausen-Grundwiesen (Baden-Württemberg, Germany). © Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im Regierungspräsidium Stuttgart/H. Schlichtherle

around the Alps took part in this workshop in August 2012 in the Northern Federsee fen (see fig. 3).

The focus was on practical fieldwork, an insight into the archaeological findings, and the possibilities of scientific methods. Speakers in different disciplines from various institutions in Baden-Württemberg and Switzerland rounded off the program.

In 2021, the Kuratorium Pfahlbauten (Austria) organized an introductory course in research, documentation, and protection of archaeological underwater sites related to the UNESCO World Heritage “Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps” in Upper Austria in the form of a summer school. Eleven young divers from eight countries took part in the program. Over the course of two weeks, they were introduced to scientific diving in a lake (Lake Mondsee), the handling of wetland finds in the laboratories of the federal State Museum of Upper Austria in Linz, and dealing with management and public relations in the context of underwater sites.

The regular exchange of experience on the topics of preservation and protection of wetland sites takes place via the international conference “Archéologie et érosion,” which occurs every 10 years, as well as via the regular international conferences on

the preservation of archaeological remains in situ (Preserving Archaeological Remains In Situ (PARIS)).

World Heritage and tourism—an ambiguous relationship

Article 27 of the World Heritage Convention calls on UNESCO to “strengthen, by all appropriate means, in particular through education and information programs, the appreciation and respect by their peoples of the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2.” Furthermore, “the States Parties undertake to keep the public fully informed of the threats to this heritage and of the measures taken pursuant to this Convention.”

In practice, World Heritage sites are marketed as cultural highlights by the tourism industry. The term ‘tourism’ appears in connection with the possible threats to a World Heritage site and there is often talk of touristic overuse. Two good examples in the circum-Alpine region are Venice and the Dolomites.

Due to their hidden and scattered location (see fig. 4), the pile dwellings are not directly affected by over-tourism. Nevertheless, the pile dwellings are not entirely unaffected by increasing tourism on the circum-Alpine lakes, the surge in water sports activities, shore and beach use, and leisure boating. Increasingly low water levels or heavy weather events caused by climate change are intensifying these threats to the sites.

A prerequisite for high-quality tourism is sensitizing the local population to the topic of World Heritage. Usually, World Heritage is seen in a tourism context, but not as an obligation and opportunity for the preservation of cultural assets. Closely related to this is the anchoring of the topic of World Heritage in the respective school curricula. In this context, the challenge is to encourage co-operation with different institutions, each pursuing different objectives, to achieve a common goal.

Mediation, valorization, and participation—a holistic package

Due to these developments, good mediation and broad communication of the World Heritage site complex, its OUV, and, above all, its need for protection are of particular importance and, in view of the effects of climate change, of particular urgency. Innovative concepts are therefore necessary, which are being developed by the site management together with application partners and participating cities, municipalities, associations, and museums: Immediately after inscription, management and communication structures were created in all six countries, including the “Pfahlbauten-Informationszentrum” in Baden-Württemberg as part of the department of monument protection and the “Kuratorium Pfahlbauten” in Austria. These institutions are not only charged with site management, but also coordinate all previously mentioned partners.

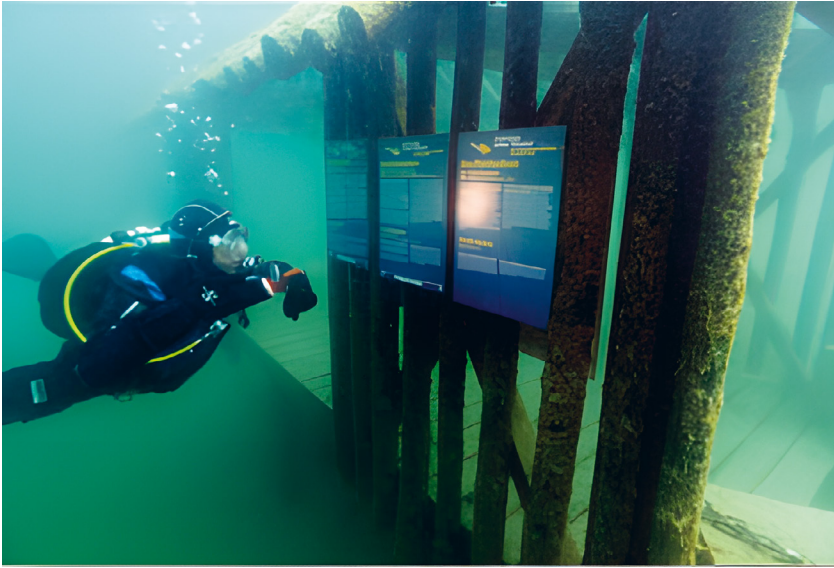


Figure 4 Mediation under water at the theme diving park at Lake Attersee.
© Kuratorium Pfahlbauten

In addition to the mediation concepts of the management structures, the museums also play an important role in mediation. Although pile dwelling artifacts in museums are not part of the World Heritage designation, which only applies to the sites themselves, the artifacts and their integration into museum communication concepts offer a vivid and accessible source of information for visitors. Close co-operation between World Heritage management, museums, and tourism offers advantages on all sides: museums, as well as educational trails and other educational programs, are tourist destinations that attract additional interest through World Heritage. Tourism can be an important point of communication and a multiplier that also reaches target groups outside of those usually interested in archaeology and culture.

The fourth partner is the municipalities on whose territory the sites are located and associations that volunteer their time in the field of pile dwelling World Heritage. In Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, these communities have joined together to form the “Pile Dwelling Working Group” (AG Pfahlbauten) and represent an important pillar of the Pile Dwelling Network.

In addition, conscious cooperation between tourism, heritage conservation, and all other partners can develop strategies from the outset to avoid the effects of excessive tourism and sensitize people to what is exceptional and in need of protection.

Further reading

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