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Historical archaeology at the interstices between archaeology and history: a history from things or an archaeology with texts?

Historical Archaeologies

There is no single definition of historical archaeology. Since its inception in the United States in the 1960s it has been defined as archaeology of the modern world (Deetz, 1977; Orser, 1996; Funari, 1999, 44), and is largely synonymous with post-medieval or archaeology of the (early) modern period as practiced in Europe (Courtney, 1999; Gaimster, 2009; Mehler, 2013, 14, Tab. 1; Predovnik, 2008; 2013, 70–71). In the German-speaking countries, historical archaeology has recently come to encompass also the modern and contemporary periods of the later 19th, 20th and even 21st centuries (cf. Jürgens et al., 2020), a remit that in the anglophone tradition is known as the archaeology of the contemporary past (Buchli et al., 2001; McAtackney et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; Dixon, 2011).

European archaeologists have long been reluctant to adopt the term "historical archaeology", and although it has gradually become more widespread it has also become more ambiguous. In various regions and research contexts it can denote (later) medieval, post-medieval, and even contemporary archaeology. In this paper, the term historical archaeology will be used as a shorthand for all of the above. It is thus synonymous with another, far less commonly used umbrella term of "the archaeology of later periods" denoting all archaeological research into the periods following the early Middle Ages (cf. Predovnik, 2008, 82).

Another, broader definition of historical archaeology has been proposed by some, claiming that it is the archaeology of all literate societies (Deetz, 1977, 5; Andrén, 1998). It would therefore apply to many of the well-established archaeological subdisciplines, such as Egyptology, Ancient Greek, and Ancient Roman Archaeology, to name but a few. This methodological definition of historical archaeology underlines the unique position of historical archaeologists, who can work with a variety of sources, from the material to the written and even oral. However, as many critics have noted, the sheer

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invention or introduction of writing in any given society does not automatically mean that the production of written messages is abundant and diverse enough, or that the preservation of written documents is such as to allow for an epistemologically sound analysis and confrontation with material sources (Mehler, 2012, 14). In most Central European countries such a situation only arises in the late medieval period (Mehler, 2013, 13). German researchers refer to such historical situations, which lend themselves to investigation by historical archaeologists, as "densely documented periods" (*dicht überlieferte Epochen*; Igel, 2009).

Historical archaeologies have taken a long time to become established as legitimate subdisciplines of archaeology. They were shaped by the power struggles between the disciplines of history and archaeology, in which the nature of archaeological and historical sources, their epistemology, and interpretative potential were questioned (Predovnik, 2000; 2013). Heated debates revolved around the claims to objectivity and accusations of subjectivity in the production of knowledge, supported with "circular arguments and counterclaims" (Mayne, 2008, 93; Orser, 2002, 271). Historians saw archaeology as a subordinate discipline with highly limited interpretative potential, "a handmaiden to history" (Noël Hume, 1964), while archaeologists pointed out the subjective and biased nature of material sources. Although this debate has gradually died down, these views have not yet been entirely surpassed.

Archaeology and History: Between Othering and Inspiration

Archaeology's relationship with the discipline of history is inconsistent and uneasy (Ribeiro, 2019). On the one hand, archaeology has always sought its own separate disciplinary identity, but on the other hand it is inextricably linked with and has often been inspired by historiography, as they both produce knowledge about the past. The two disciplines explore different sources using different methodologies, but there is a certain epistemological closeness between the two, as they both exhibit a "fundamentally inferential character" (Thomas, 2015, 11; cf. van Wijngaarden et al., 2020).

In the European tradition, archaeology is conceived of as a historical discipline that produces narratives about the past based on the material evidence it investigates. This presupposes a historical understanding of the past focused on historical interpretation, rather than on causal explanations of the observed phenomena. Historical interpretation is hermeneutic in nature and historical understanding takes the form of a narrative within which the observed historical actors, events and processes are contextualized (Ribeiro, 2018, 22–23). Even though historical epistemology is intrinsic to archaeology as a humanistic discipline, it has rarely been theorized explicitly (cf. Frommer, 2007; Ribeiro, 2018).

From its antiquarian beginnings, archaeology developed as a separate discipline in the 19th century in parallel with the birth of evolutionary theory, the introduction of the principles of geological stratigraphy, and finally, the rise of cultural history. The concept of archaeological culture as a spatially and chronologically distinct entity, composed of clearly observable material traits and phenomena, took shape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this, a strong influence from anthropology is evident. The connection with history became more pronounced in Central European archaeology only after the Second World War in reaction to the abuses of the concepts of archaeological culture and the so-called *Kulturkreislehre* under National Socialism (Mehler, 2013, 11, with references). These traditions were labelled culture-historical archaeology by later critics, as they favoured historical, particularistic interpretations of past cultures, which were often equated with historically documented peoples. In these narratives, time was conceived as uni-directional, and history was explained in teleological terms (Webster, 2008). For historians, however, the label culture-historical archaeology can be misleading, as it has little in common with the cultural history as understood and practised by historians.

In the 1960s, the so-called new or processual archaeology rejected the particularistic culture-historical epistemology as subjective and non-scientific, propagating the application of the more rigid, positivist epistemology of the natural sciences with generalization, quantification and modelling of data, the use of statistical analyses, as well as the generation of knowledge claims by formulating and testing hypotheses. Processual archaeologists emphasized the need for archaeology to explain cultural processes and not simply to describe the diversity and reconstruct the history of past cultures (Binford, 1968; Clarke, 1973; Renfrew, 1973). While the American processual school led by Lewis Binford advocated the search for universal laws of human behaviour, this idea was not adopted by British proponents of processualism.

The reactions that followed in the 1980s and early 1990s were diverse, but the various critical voices and new understandings of archaeology are usually subsumed under the umbrella term of post-processual archaeology (Hodder, 1982; Preucel, 1991; Yoffee et al., 1993). Whatever their exact intellectual orientation, post-processual archaeologists found common ground in the rejection of scientific epistemology as ultimately de-humanizing (Shanks et al., 1987, 77). They advocated a more interpretative archaeology and embraced qualitative approaches. Historical context and historical particularism returned once more to the remit of archaeological interpretation.

Even though the processual vs. post-processual debate dominates the Western, Anglo-American narratives about the development of archaeological theory and epistemology in the second half of the 20th century, it should be noted that these schools of thought exerted little influence over other national traditions of archaeology (Trigger, 1996, 312–313). Central European archaeology remained firmly entrenched in the

time-honoured tradition of culture-historical archaeology, peppered with occasional nods of compliance with the Marxist, or rather, historical materialist ideology propagated in the former Communist countries (Biehl et al., 2002, 28; Novaković, 2002, 341). This is not to say that Central and Eastern European archaeologists were intellectually isolated or that they did not take part in the methodological and conceptual developments of the discipline. Fruitful connections and collaborations with foreign, Western researchers were not uncommon. An interesting case in point is Polish archaeology, which developed close ties with the proponents of the French Annales School of history in the 1960s (Tabaczyński, 2014).

The Annales School with its structuralist approach, an emphasis on social history, multi-scalar analyses, and the idea of total history has found resonance with many processual and post-processual archaeologists (Bintliff, 1991; Knapp, 1992; Tabaczynski, 2014). One of the most attractive and immediately applicable ideas was Braudel's concept of the three separate, yet intertwined time scales, the short-term (the *histoire événementielle*), associated with events, the medium-term (the *conjonctures*), in which the social and economic processes unfold, and the long-term (the *longue-durée*), related to the geological and environmental histories, as well as the history of mentalities (cf. Ribeiro, 2019, 8–9).

As is so often the case with intellectual borrowings, these ideas were introduced to archaeology with a considerable delay, once they had already been heavily criticized and were superseded by novel approaches within the discipline of history. What Braudel's historical project failed to achieve was linking the short-term to the other two temporal scales, thereby removing human agency from historical explanation. The issue of how human actors shape and transform the very social structures and environment that constrain and guide their actions remained unresolved in Braudel's own work, as well as in its applications in archaeology (Ribeiro, 2019, 9–11).

One answer to this problem was the use of studies favouring the small-scale in history. Microhistory is a historical approach based on detailed observation and qualitative analysis of the particular and the unquantifiable as a method to understand the relationship between the agent and the underlying social structures, mentalities, and institutions shaping social practice (Ginzburg, 1993; Ribeiro, 2019, 14). A growing interest in microhistory can be observed in recent years among archaeologists with various theoretical backgrounds and professional interests (Kaeser, 2008; Hupperetz, 2010; Nebelsick et al., 2017; Ribeiro, 2019). In fact, microhistory is often invoked merely as a metaphor for a detailed and contextually rich analysis of archaeological sites or objects. However, as Artur Ribeiro points out, microhistory combines detailed attention for the particular and individual with a concern for the wider structures and processes in society. By adopting the microhistorical approach, archaeology can "become more attuned to a narrative understanding of the past and to a qualitative way of conducting archaeological research" (Ribeiro, 2019, 17–18).

Another conceptual and methodological inspiration that archaeologists took from historians, was the history of the everyday (*Alltagsgeschichte*; Jaritz, 1989). It is a truism that the archaeological record contains remnants of the everyday, often mundane, actions and concerns of past people. Moreover, the perspective of the everyday seems appropriate for investigating the omnipresent and constitutive materiality of human lives (Robin, 2020). This is not a new research orientation within archaeology, and since the 1980s it has been heralded by some historians and archaeologists as an inherently interdisciplinary task (cf. Elkar, 1990, 273, 281, 301–302).

A History from Things

Archaeology is, by definition, the study of past societies through their material remains and traces. To this end, it has developed a unique set of research methods and theoretical concepts, but it also relies heavily on analytical tools, explanatory models, and theories borrowed from a range of other disciplines, the humanities, social, and natural sciences. If anything, archaeology can be defined by this eclecticism. Attempting to explore and understand the totality of human experience in the past, it is forced by the very nature of its subject matter to embrace all possible ways and means in pursuit of this goal.

In the last two decades, the intellectual landscape of archaeology seems to have shaken off the shackles of the processual/post-processual debate and become less polarized, but it could also be described as fuzzy. The recent advances in the analytical techniques offered by the natural sciences, such as AMS radiocarbon dating, ancient DNA and stable isotope analyses on the micro-scale, as well as the developments in remote sensing and computational tools enabling big data analyses on the macro-scale, have redefined many fields of study and revolutionized the practice of conducting archaeological research (Kristiansen, 2014). While these methodological shifts push archaeology closer to the processual ideal of scientific epistemology, interpretative approaches are by no means wholly absent or divorced from the application of archaeological science. The new attitude has been labelled the "new empiricism" (Hillerdal et al., 2015).

In search of new paradigms, archaeology once more exhibits its dynamic, eclectic nature and resilience. While some insinuate the death of archaeological theory (Bintliff et al., 2011; cf. Thomas, 2015), others claim that archaeology should re-invent itself as the discipline of things, advocating a return from concerns and concepts borrowed from social theory, anthropology, philosophy, and historiography to the uniquely archaeological way of exploring and interpreting the past, recognizing that material things are the true, unique subject matter of archaeology (Olsen, 2010; Olsen et al., 2012).

This focus on the material is the very essence of archaeology, but it is shared with a range of other disciplines, such as anthropology, ethnology, art history, material cul-

ture studies, and science and technology studies. Even historiography has experienced a "material turn", with a growing number of historians realizing the importance of material things for the personal and social lives of people, and their relevance to the study of any given society, past or present (Green, 2012).

> Material culture frames all of our actions and experiences and is constitutive of them. Material culture sheds light on our production and consumption of goods, our power relations, social bonds and networks, gender interactions, identities, cultural affiliations and beliefs. Material culture communicates all kinds of human values, from the economic or political to the social and cultural. And whilst historical objects cannot offer a direct and clear window on past worlds they are a powerful form of evidence, and a 'provocation to thought', they are as complex, deceptive, partial and multi-layered as textual survivals. (Hannan et al., 2017)

Material culture is a legitimate object of study for historians who are interested in the totality of the human experience, bringing historiography closer to the objectives and approaches of anthropology and archaeology (Lubar et al., 1993; Auslander, 2005; Harvey, 2009; Hannan et al., 2017). It is important for historians to acknowledge that the study of material culture enriches history and helps build more nuanced and complex narratives about the past than the exclusive use of written documents. It "changes the very nature of the questions we are able to pose and the kind of knowledge we are able to acquire about the past" (Auslander, 2005, 2).

This convergence of research interests and approaches between the two disciplines of archaeology and history is commendable, yet one fundamental difference remains. While for historians material things may be valid objects of study, they are not in themselves used as independent sources of information about the past. For archaeologists though, things are both the primary source of information and the object of study. One could say that historians – at least the more "materially oriented" ones – write "history with things" whereas archaeologists produce "history from things". The two disciplines, connected in their ambition to understand the past, coexist and complement one another precisely because they look "at fundamentally different data with different methods and different motivations" (Frieman, 2023, 1).

An Archaeology with Texts

If archaeology and historiography are both studying the past and they both, ideally, share an interest in the material aspects of the past, what is the relevance of historical archaeology? Is it a redundant concept or a separate field of study positioned at the interstices of the two disciplines? Historical archaeology is defined by the abundance and variety of

both material and textual sources available to study the past. While this is often hailed as its strength, transcending disciplinary boundaries has been considered anathema by many and has indeed delayed the formation and acceptance of historical archaeology – whether studying the (later) medieval, early modern period, or even the contemporary past – by practitioners of the various disciplines it straddles (Predovnik, 2013, 86).

Historical archaeology is first and foremost archaeology, taking the material remains of people in the past as the starting and focal point of its inquiries. It applies the methodological and conceptual tools developed by archaeology to produce narratives about the past (history) from things. But it can also complement and confront data gleaned from the material sources with other types of evidence (textual, pictorial, oral) to arrive at a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of people in the past. It is thus an archaeology with texts.

Consequently, historical archaeology is often regarded as inherently interdisciplinary (Oliver, 2020, 264), even transdisciplinary (Little, 2007, 14; Predovnik, 2013; Müller, 2015, 8), bringing together "multiple lines of evidence" and enabling "multifaceted, multidimensional, and highly contextualized" analyses (Orser, 2010, 116). It investigates "material histories", starting the exploration from the things themselves, delving into the otherwise undocumented realms of daily life, the objectified cultural and social structures and processes, ideologies, contestations, and power struggles among groups and individuals (Hicks, 2003, 326; Hicks et al., 2006, 2–3). This study of things is framed with the study of textual and oral evidence, so much so that historical archaeology has even been dubbed "text-aided" (Little, 1992) and "documentary" (Beaudry, 1993).

However, the aim of conceptual and methodological synergies and interdisciplinary collaboration implied in the name of the discipline often seems beyond reach. Some claim that historical archaeologists should be both archaeologists and historians, able to study autonomously both archaeological and historical sources instead of having to rely on the textual evidence that has "already been interpreted and assessed by historians with regard to other research questions" (Mehler, 2013, 18). This is hardly a universally attainable goal, though, as it would require from the practitioners of historical archaeology, who are mostly educated as archaeologists, an additional set of skills they simply do not possess (Igel, 2009, 41). Interdisciplinarity through collaboration should be a reasonable alternative. But is it?

It seems that the disciplines of (historical) archaeology and history dwell on separate banks of a great divide (Mayne, 2008, 93; van Wijngaarden et al., 2020). Decades after historical archaeologies first made their appearance, the lack of dialogue and cooperation with historiography is painfully obvious. While it is self-evident that each discipline should have its own sources, methods, research agendas, and therefore a distinct disciplinary identity, the all-too-often exhibited lack of interest and understanding for the contributions of one or the other to the study of the past is not acceptable.

Part of the problem is that archaeologists and historians do not "speak the same language". Material and textual sources are separate and independent strands of evidence requiring separate research methodologies. Their nature, epistemological potential, and relevance for the construction of knowledge about the past have been debated intensely over the years. Anders Andrén (1998, 153–175) suggested that material and textual evidence can be related through five shared methodological tools: classifications, identifications, correlations, associations, and contrasts. Similarly, Patricia Galloway (2006, 42) identified four ways in which archaeologists engage with the two types of sources: by using material evidence to test or confirm literary sources, by using textual evidence to identify and date material evidence, by integrating both strands of evidence to construct totalizing accounts of lifeways, socio-cultural groups or even events, or by trying to identify dissonances between the material and the textual to look for historically undocumented lives and practices.

Undoubtedly, connecting information from the material and textual sources is fraught with difficulties. Identification of material remains with places and people mentioned in documents is rarely possible, and the same problem arises with the use of documents to date archaeological finds and contexts. Another hurdle is the incompatibility of the resolutions of archaeological and historical chronologies. Whilst historians mostly operate with exact dates, archaeology relies on relative sequences of observed contexts and finds and defines time through spatial distributions of material remains. The advances in "absolute" dating methods, such as dendrochronology and AMS radiocarbon dating with Bayesian modelling, which have revolutionized prehistorical archaeology, are less relevant to historical archaeology, as the dates they can provide are still too coarse for direct correlation with the historical chains of events. Even when exact dating of an archaeological find or feature is achievable, e.g. through dendrochronology, a critical interpretation of the date is required, taking into account the biography of the dated object and its relevance for the archaeological context in which it was uncovered.

There are no simple solutions, but there is room for dialogue. Archaeologists and historians study the same past but approach it in different ways and from different viewpoints. Confrontation and correlation are possible, provided the nature of the diverse strands of evidence we investigate is duly considered. Archaeology is not a translation of history to another medium, it is not a mere illustration and objectification of history. Its strength lies in the themes that it studies, in the uncovering of the material, often banal facets of human agency, but also in the exposure of the entanglements of the material with the ideational (cf. Frieman, 2023).

Historical archaeology with all its chronological and thematic subdivisions has become a legitimate, vibrant disciplinary field and can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant. It is not a mere "handmaiden of history", a set of techniques procuring data to

resolve historical research questions. The historian Alan Mayne (2008, 94) pointed out the true research potential of historical archaeology in these poignant words:

> Relishing and puzzling through the ambiguities of diverse but intersecting data sets and scales of reference has the effect of decentering historical understanding and thereby stimulating analytical innovation. The study of people, objects, places, activities, and events that had seemed to be on the edges of historical significance is helping to reformulate historical understanding by adding agency, complexity, and hence relativist sensitivity to our grasp of the influences and horizons that constituted the social world of the past.

A common claim made by historical archaeologists is that their research gives voice to the voiceless, the illiterate masses who are absent from or are not represented adequately in documentary sources. It is "a perfect way in which to study the lives of men and women who had been largely forgotten in history or who had been pushed aside as insignificant by past historical observers" (Orser, 2002, 305). This remains a point of contention, however. On the one hand, it is belied by many excellent historiographical studies of marginal and subordinate social groups and individuals (Mayne, 2008, 94), and on the other hand, subaltern voices are "frustratingly elusive" in the archaeological record and have "left as faint a trace in the material world as they did in the written documentation" (Hall, 2000, 19; cf. Predovnik, 2000, 38).

Equally questionable is the notion that material evidence bridges the gap between the past and present, somehow compacting time (Mayne, 2008, 103), as objects possess their own temporalities and biographies. It is certainly true that archaeological artefacts exist in the present, yet the belief that we can experience and understand them as people in the past did is fundamentally flawed. This is not to say we cannot interpret them through careful observation and recording of their material and spatial contexts, merely, that we should never expect the past to be "familiar" and easily knowable through our encounters with its material traces (Tarlow et al., 1999).

Conclusion

There are many varieties and ways of doing historical archaeology. Some practitioners are more historically minded than others, some more theoretically explicit than others, some favour the anthropological or sociological approaches, while others embrace the full potential of engaging with the natural sciences in analysing the material evidence. This diversity is not a sign of the discipline's weakness or lack of identity but rather one of strength, as archaeologists endeavour to enrich and complement our understanding of the not-so-distant past.

The title of this paper presents a false dilemma. Historical archaeology is – or, ideally, should be – both a history from things and an archaeology with texts, but it can only strive to achieve that in close collaboration with historiography. Not in the naïve sense that it should either succumb to "the tyranny of the historical record" (Champion 1990) or that, to avoid it, it should eschew the documentary evidence and historical interpretations altogether. Instead, it should confront the material and textual evidence, and look for gaps and inconsistencies, but also for converging strands of evidence to construct nuanced and insightful interpretations of the past. Often, unresolved questions will be the outcome of such an exercise, and this is to be welcomed since finely tuned and appropriately formulated questions are the fuel that drives research forward. We should not expect definite and clear answers but rather the messiness inherent to material culture and fragmentary documentary evidence. Therein lies the potential to understand the past – not as it really was, but as it might have been.

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Historična arheologija na stičišču arheologije in zgodovine: zgodovina iz stvari ali arheologija z besedili?

Ključne besede: historična arheologija, srednjeveška arheologija, posrednjeveška arheologija, arheologija in zgodovina

Članek obravnava razmerje med arheologijo in zgodovinopisjem z vidika historične arheologije. Ta ni enovito znanstveno podpodročje in jo je mogoče opredeliti na različne načine. V tem članku izraz historična arheologija zaradi priročnosti uporabljamo kot krovno poimenovanje za (poznejšo) srednjeveško in posrednjeveško arheologijo ter arheologijo sodobnosti.

Historična arheologija je prvenstveno arheologija, saj se osredotoča na materialne ostanke in gradi znanstvena spoznanja o preteklosti (zgodovino) iz stvari. Vendar lahko podatke, pridobljene iz materialnih virov, dopolnjuje in sooča z drugimi viri (besedilnimi, slikovnimi, ustnimi), zatorej je arheologija z besedili. To predstavlja metodološki in epistemološki izziv. Mnogi opozarjajo na nevarnost »tiranije zgodovinskih virov«, nekritičnega zanašanja na besedilne informacije in dajanja prednosti le-tem v primerjavi z materialnimi podatki.

Številne (historične) arheologe so navdihnili različni koncepti in pristopi iz zgodovinopisja, kot so denimo kulturna zgodovina, analovska šola družbene in ekonom-

ske zgodovine, Braudelov koncept dolgega trajanja, zgodovina vsakdana (*Alltagsgeschichte*) in mikrozgodovina. Obratno pa večina zgodovinarjev spoznanj arheologov ne upošteva. To je vredno obžalovanja, saj materialni viri ponujajo pomembne uvide v nekdanje življenjske svetove in jih ne bi smeli prezreti.

Historical archaeology at the interstices between archaeology and history: a history from things or an archaeology with texts?

Keywords: historical archaeology, medieval archaeology, post-medieval archaeology, archaeology and history

This paper explores the relationship between the disciplines of archaeology and history through the lens of historical archaeology. This is not a unified subdiscipline and has indeed been defined in various ways. Here, the term will be used as a shorthand for (later) medieval, post-medieval and contemporary archaeologies.

Historical archaeology is first and foremost archaeology focusing on material remains and producing knowledge claims about the past (history) from things. But it can complement and confront the data gleaned from the material sources with other types of evidence (textual, pictorial, oral), so it is an archaeology with texts. This represents a methodological and epistemological challenge. An uncritical reliance on textual information over the material has often been warned against as "the tyranny of the historical record".

Many (historical) archaeologists have been inspired by various historiographical concepts and approaches, such as cultural history, the Annales school of social and economic history, Braudel's concept of the *longue-durée*, the history of the everyday (*Alltagsgeschichte*), and microhistory. Conversely, the knowledge produced by archaeologists tends to be disregarded by most historians. This is unfortunate, as the material evidence offers important insights into past lifeworlds and should not be ignored.

O avtorici

Katarina Predovnik je izredna profesorica za arheologijo na Oddelku za arheologijo Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, kjer poučuje arheologijo mlajših obdobij. Kot raziskovalka se posveča materialni kulturi visokega in poznega srednjega veka ter zgodnjega novega veka in teoretskim vidikom arheologije mlajših obdobij. V zadnjih letih raziskuje predvsem slikano namizno keramično posodje iz 15. do 17. stoletja v osrednji Sloveniji in vodi terenske raziskave na območju opuščenega srednjeveškega trga Gutenwerd na Dolenjskem. Je (so)avtorica treh znanstvenih monografij, več znanstvenih

člankov ter članica mednarodnih uredniških odborov več uglednih znanstvenih revij. Bila je članica in zakladničarka Izvršnega odbora Skupnosti za raziskovanje srednjeveške Evrope (MERC) v okviru Evropskega združenja arheologov (EAA), trenutno pa je zakladničarka EAA. Je tudi članica Stalnega odbora mednarodnega kastelološkega združenja Castrum Bene ter znanstvenih sosvetov Nemškega kastelološkega društva in Avstrijskega društva za arheologijo srednjega in novega veka.

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