

Digging the Web: German Archaeology on the Internet

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Abstract

This paper gives a brief summary of the kind of archaeological information available on the internet in the German language (and who is offering it), how museums, institutions and individuals represent themselves and their work on the web, and what is done to make these sometimes almost hidden parts of the web more easily accessible to everybody interested in German archaeology. Furthermore the acceptance of this electronic medium by German archaeologists is discussed.

1 Virtual library section "German Archaeology"

A network for fast information exchange like the internet should be accepted very quickly as an ideal tool for the exchange of scientific information and debate on a global range. This should be especially so for the world wide web, which combines the advantages of nearly unlimited publication space and fast and easy accessibility of information. The described acceptance has obviously been gained within the English speaking world, where scientists and among them also archaeologists began early to use the new medium and to profit from its specific possibilities. For Germany the picture looks a bit different: the use of electronic networking does only grow slowly among archaeologists. This article offers a survey of the recent development and describes how and by whom the internet is used in the field of archaeology in Germany.

While in late 1994 a vast amount of archaeological information in English was already available at the resource <http://spirit.lib.uconn.edu/ArchNet/ArchNet.html>, all that could be found on the net concerning archaeology in Germany were some very short and not very informative research reports as Gopher texts. These were not even published by archaeological research facilities or institutes themselves but centrally by universities' administrations. To meet this lack of presence, an archaeological on-line service was initiated at the Freiburg Institute for Prehistory and Early History (<http://www.ufg.uni-freiburg.de>) and installed on the net in May 95.

Besides the usual information about the institute, from the beginning this on-line service has offered a resource list with links to international information resources. Due to the usual growth of lists like this, it was soon necessary to categorize the resources

geographically and thematically. Moreover, a short summary of the linked resource was added to each link. After some time a few information pages from German university institutions could also be listed, but compared to other sections of this resource guide the German section was still very small. After a systematic survey for German archaeology websites, it became possible to publish a somewhat more extensive resource list. For the first time the list could serve as a guide to German archaeology on the web. This list was the beginning of the one that can be found today as the Virtual Library section "German Archaeology" (<http://www.ufg.uni-freiburg.de/d/link/vl-de/>).

2 German websites for archaeologists

The websites for archaeologists in Germany today vary widely in quality and relevance and have little in common. A closer look at these resources will show what kind of information is published, and also by whom and in which way this is done.

Web sites of university institutions are the most varied ones in aspects of size, quality and relevance. While some institutes only leave a "digital stamp" with their postal address on the net, others offer an elaborate information system. Most archaeological institutes at German universities have their data collected by the university administration which publishes it centrally in printed form and on the web. Unfortunately, such information is normally not very useful for scientists. The latest development, however, shows that more and more institutes are getting involved in on-line activity so that now the possibilities are increasing to get organizational information as well as reports on excavations, presentations of artefact collections and other on-line publications.

Most of the websites with archaeological content are maintained by museums. The priority of these sites is clearly to present their exhibitions and collections. With these sites the quality of presentation also differs greatly. Often all offered is their postal address and opening hours, but at the other end of the range there are also some very successful sites which introduce the museums' conception and present actual exhibitions on-line with informative texts and pictures, giving the reader the impression or at least a foretaste of visiting the "real" museum (<http://www.dhm.de/museen/federsee/>).

Another source for archaeological websites are the state monument protection agencies ("Landesdenkmalämter"), of which so far only three are present on the net. The one of Baden-Württemberg (Southern Germany) (http://www.bawue.de/~wmwerner/index_e.html) is represented not by an official site, but by one which came into existence due to the private initiative of one of its staff members. These pages, however, show such a quality of content and design that this fact can be neglected. The opposite example is the site of the state monument protection agency of Saxony. Although this is an official site, its very colourful and fancy design reminds one of a private homepage (<http://www.riesa.de/homepages/lfa/lfa.htm>).

The few archaeological societies on the web offer mainly information on the society's history and activities, as well as an invitation to become a member.

The on-line publications of popular science magazines are also a source for archaeological information. They often offer the possibility to read abstracts or even complete articles, originally published in print. Some of them are illustrated with high quality pictures or even short movies, thus offering additional information to the printed material. Possibilities for database searching and links to sites dealing with related subjects are further services of these sites (see for example: <http://www.wissenschaft.de/bdw/highlights/high12-96.html> or <http://www.geo.de/magazin/reportage/oetzi/>).

Last but not least the private homepages in all their variety are to be mentioned: One can find hobby archaeologists offering a "hotlist" of their famous links, treasure hunters giving tips - very often concerning the use of metal detectors - and professional archaeologists and excavator's private

pages with complete excavation reports (<http://www.handshake.de/user/odin/denkmal.htm>).

On the whole it can be said that today there is a great number of archaeological websites in Germany, differing vastly in quality and content. The situation has definitely improved within the last year, but from the scientists' point of view it is still not quite satisfactory.

3 Scientific information standard

The unsolved problem is how to introduce a scientific information standard which should be obligatory at least for official on-line information services. Obviously one has to define the requirements in advance and then see whether this standard can be met (and if there is actually the will to do so).

Generally, a scientist on the internet can expect detailed information on research topics, tools for information retrieval and the possibility of information exchange and discussion. With regard to university institutes this means that information about research topics and projects, but also about organizational and teaching issues needs to be offered. To make their service really useful for scientists, institutions should publish not only short summaries but also detailed research reports, lists of their staff, information on recent, current and future projects as well as on international contacts of their scientists. Another very important point is the possibility of direct communication between colleagues. A prerequisite for this is the publication of e-mail accounts of the scientific staff, doctorands and students. From the students' point of view information about the institute's equipment, recent and current lectures and organizational news as for example the teachers' office hours are as important.

How does the information service of Freiburg University meet the mentioned requirements? Besides the mandatory information (i.e.: addresses, staff information, publication lists, main research fields and so on) the institute's own information offering consists mainly of on-line publications. But the priority of this website is clearly information retrieval, or rather information supply. This also means that this is the most extensive part of the site. It consists of resource lists which are categorized by geographic and thematic criteria. These lists are far from being as extensive as those of ArchNet or ARGE, but their links are accompanied by more or less detailed summaries in German, thus allowing a first evaluation of the content of the linked page,

which leads to an increased acceptance by German users.

As this service does not want to compete with ArchNet or ARGE but aims at supplementing those services, it focuses on German Archaeology. Thus the resource list, which is part of the world wide Virtual Library Subject Tree, is a central catalogue of all German archaeological information resources on the web. Mere institutional information is registered in alphabetical order by residence in the categories "university institutes", "state monument protection agencies", "museums" and "archaeological societies". Information relevant for research is categorized by subdisciplines ("prehistory", "classical and roman archaeology", "underwater archaeology" and so on).

This resource guide is widely accepted by users: on an average there are 75 different users visiting our site per day, about 50% of them come from Germany. The catalogue "German Archaeology" is visited 70 times a day. The comments of users, other on-line services and the press are altogether very positive.

Many other archaeological websites do not maintain resource lists for German Archaeology on their own but link to the Freiburg resource guide. This indicates that the Freiburg catalogue is acknowledged to be a competent and comprehensive information supply. Most of archaeological webmasters inform the maintainers of the catalogue about major changes or new pages on their sites. Newly established sites are also regularly reported to Freiburg. This cooperation has not been organized, but is based on mutual interest. One advantage for the archaeological webmasters is that by being listed in the Freiburg resource guide their sites become easily accessible to a large audience. Furthermore, by linking to Freiburg there is no more need for them to maintain such a list on their own. On the other hand, as the maintainer of such a catalogue one depends on being informed of changes and new sites, because it is almost impossible to keep track of all listed resources. And if such a service is not up to date it will lose the users' acceptance.

4 Archaeologists and the internet

This last section will deal with the motivation of German archaeologists to use the possibilities of the medium internet or rather with the reasons why they don't use it.

A look at the nature of the available on-line resources shows that only a small part of it can be called a

publication or a knowledge database. Obviously there is a certain caution in German archaeology, regarding the publication of research reports on the internet.

A large amount of available on-line publications is contributed by young archaeologists - doctorands, assistants and students. One reason for this may be their familiarity with personal computers. For them these machines, having almost completely replaced the typewriter, are part of their daily work. For the elder generation it is often more difficult to adapt to the new technique. For them the image of some years ago still prevails, that computers are big machines that can only be used by specialists and for special purposes such as calculating statistics. Now they see themselves confronted with the omnipresence of personal computers, which are used for all kinds of purposes, but still are more difficult to handle than a typewriter. Often they develop a certain caution towards computers and therefore are not willing to publish their laboriously acquired research results on the even less seizable medium of the internet.

Another reason for the few archaeological publications on the net is the organizational or bureaucratic impediments. German universities are certainly very well connected to the internet. This is especially true for natural sciences, which traditionally are at the head of technical development. But university administrations recognize only slowly that other disciplines, too, can take advantage of being connected to the net. Furthermore it must be noted that some directors of archaeological institutes do not exactly promote a connection. They often have doubts concerning data security and - even more important - financing the equipment.

But these obstacles are not all that need to be overcome. As soon as an institute is connected, someone has to be found who is able and willing to establish and maintain a website. This work is mostly done by students who create web pages privately and make them available to the public with toleration by the directors. Normally they are not paid for their work. On a long term this leads to a problem with continuity, as a successor needs to be found, when the unpaid initiators and maintainers end their study or lose motivation. Otherwise - as often happens - the project will die. At some universities, however, there is a real competition between all institutes on having the best web site - but this is rather the proverbial exception which proves the rule.

Finally one can state that the medium of the internet is being accepted with hesitation but is used by more

and more German archaeologists. Existing archaeological information services have become more and more useful, user-friendly and extensive in the last two years. In this time many new sites appeared and it can be expected that "being on the net" will soon be as natural for German archaeologists as it already is for many of their English speaking colleagues.

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