

# Archaeology in the era of *Baukultur*

Thomas Reitmaier and Andrea Schaeer

*Baukultur* is a new catchphrase that has recently come into usage in the realm of tangible cultural heritage. As a holistic term, *Baukultur* is meant to encompass everything built by humankind, from archaeological finds to contemporary new buildings and, at the same time, flow into other areas such as education. From the national political or administrative level, and increasingly also in wider usage, the new term has started replacing traditional descriptions, especially in political discourse, that were often viewed as backward-looking and suffered from negative perceptions, such as *cultural heritage protection* and *monument preservation*, thus also subsuming archaeology. Is this likely to go well?

## Does *Baukultur* also include archaeology?

The underlying manifesto, the *Davos Declaration*, which was drawn up by Switzerland and signed by numerous countries during the European Cultural Heritage Year 2018, describes its sphere of operation as follows: “*Baukultur* encompasses existing buildings, including monuments and other elements of cultural heritage, as well as the design and construction of contemporary buildings, infrastructure, public spaces and landscapes.” “*Baukultur* encompasses existing buildings, including monuments and other elements of cultural heritage, as well as the design and construction of contemporary buildings, infrastructure, public spaces and landscapes.”<sup>1</sup> The Federal Office for Culture (FOC) adopted the Davos definition in its *Strategie Baukultur*, approved in 2020, and specifies:

“*Baukultur* begins with the open landscape, includes the built environment, but also the unbuilt, the in-between. The entire living space is understood as an indivisible unit. *Baukultur* refers to how we deal with the existing building stock, including archaeological sites and monuments, as well as contemporary buildings, infrastructures, and public space.”<sup>2</sup> And it goes on to say: “Built cultural heritage moulds people’s identities and shapes their living space. With its archaeological sites, monuments, historic gardens and townscapes, it is a fundamental component of the notion of *Baukultur*. Intact cultural landscapes, historic cities, villages, quarters, individual buildings, and archaeological sites are of outstanding importance for the quality of life in Switzerland and for how the country is perceived by the outside world.”<sup>3</sup>

If we follow this view, which is primarily guided by architectonic thinking and space, or the anthropogenic use and shaping of space, then archaeological heritage is equally part of *Baukultur* – regardless of whether it was actually built and designed intentionally or created through other, non-intentional and non-anthropogenic processes. Even the ‘unbuilt’ is an element of *Baukultur*. This is a far-reaching definition that will be conducive to more than a broad understanding and rapid acceptance of the new terminology amongst a larger audience.

The documents cited above are quite unambiguous: from their point of view, archaeology, or at least archaeological sites that are tangible (visible?)

in space, are part of *Baukultur*. The unspecified mention of “other elements of cultural heritage” also allows us to assume that ‘unbuilt’ archaeological heritage can also, at least partially, be found under the term *Baukultur*. We shall come back to that.

*Baukultur*, however, is not to be understood as a mere catalogue of prehistoric, historical and contemporary sites, buildings and landmarks, future buildings, and interior design. *Baukultur* wishes to be more than that: a motto for action, quality awareness, and a planning instrument; indeed *Baukultur* intends to create a *Baukultur*-oriented education and also appeals to emotion through *sense of space* and *beauty*.<sup>4</sup>

## Is archaeology also *Baukultur*?

Let us now switch sides and ask whether the notion of *Baukultur* is able to depict the essence and diversity of archaeology at all. To anticipate the answer, depending on one’s point of view, it is or remains a difficult issue.

Archaeology is much more than archaeological monuments, fragments and ruins (Fig 1). First of all, ‘archaeology’ is a global and widely diversified scientific discipline, whose main sources are physical legacies and traces of human activity from all periods – from the Palaeolithic to the twenty-first century. Accordingly, (until) today it has viewed itself primarily as historical cultural studies.<sup>5</sup> Archaeology conducts basic research on cultural history through the discovery and uncovering (mostly through excavations), description,

consideration and interpretation of these archaeological finds. Drawing on this information, it reconstructs the life and human activity of eras either preliterate or making little use of written language and, in this way, identifies or records cultural, social and historical developments, patterns of behaviour, or individual events. Archaeological methods and theories, or archaeological thinking, constitute a specific, and to some extent forensic, approach to human traces that is always temporally and spatially located, regardless of their classification in terms of cultural history. In no way can the findings of archaeological research be solely considered backward-looking or 'merely' illuminating epochs of the past; on the contrary, by showing, for example, how humans dealt with changed environmental conditions or examining the effects of earlier migration movements, 'archaeology' also provides foundations for today's and tomorrow's strategies for action. As the 'science of things', archaeology also uses tangible evidence to make contemporary events understandable and representational, and is able to document what is not recorded in images, text or sound.

The sources – indeed, treasures – of archaeology are, as already mentioned, the material legacies of humankind: the rubbish of civilisation. Archaeological elements, which always consist of finds and findings, are extremely diverse and do not only manifest themselves as site monuments or ruins. Other manifestations that are difficult to describe as a 'site' or a built object are nonetheless entirely characteristic, for example: individual objects that have, intentionally or not, landed into the ground; or remains of complex structures, of which only individual fragments have survived; and graves as well, with or without funeral architecture. Archaeological heritage also includes leftover items stored in natural features, such as: occupation layers, flotsam or shipwrecks in bodies of water, objects or mummies enclosed in glacial ice, pollen from the first cultivated cereals, as well as simple layers of soil and

soil discoloration that are the final witnesses to human activity (Fig. 2).

If we return to the interpretations of *Baukultur*, we now come up against their limits, at the very least linguistic, if not also intellectual. Are the above-mentioned archaeological finds and structures a central part of *Baukultur* or are they more of a sideshow? And what about the stories derived from these things, what about our history – has our past always been nothing more than *Baukultur*? Reduction to a single term clarifies inadequacies and, at the same time, comes up against the limits of current and past realities.

#### **Beyond the boundaries of *Baukultur***

One lesson learnt is that what, on the one hand, is meant by (or together with) *Baukultur* cannot be synonymous with, on the other hand, what constitutes the complexity and nature of archaeology(ies). If at all, *Baukultur* almost certainly overlaps the most with archaeological activity and archaeological heritage whenever it primarily deals with very tangible issues of ground monument preservation and building archaeology, that is to say, with the protection, preservation, and documentation of archaeological heritage, as well as communication about it and its scientific or social valorisation. But wherever archaeology is primarily about science, and archaeological heritage is primarily 'specific to archaeology', the notion of *Baukultur* remains an alien one. Ultimately, however, all archaeological sites and finds – whether preserved in an unimpaired state in the ground, or excavated out of necessity or as a result of the urge to research – are to be understood as unique fonts of knowledge that enable every generation to ask new questions and access the past, and thus make *Baukultur* somehow understandable only then.

#### **Archaeology stands for itself as a brand**

Opportunities are certainly being offered by the intention to create a positively connoted roof for cultural heritage protection, monument preservation, and archaeology through *Baukultur*; thereby replacing

the (supposedly) insistent or persistent, or even obstructive aspects of these sectors with forward-looking, contemporary, and effective features. In particular, we must mention the holistic, spatial approach with a decided cultural geography dimension, which allows archaeology, both as a science and as the preservation of archaeological areas, to have a broad, interdisciplinary, and diachronic field of action and sphere of activity that have always been inherent to its nature and offer new opportunities to establish linkages.

On the other hand, the question arises as to whether the notion of *Baukultur*, which currently has a primarily intellectual cast and only features few positive emotional and practical experiences, will be able to reach the population group who are actively interested and committed to cultural heritage at grassroots level. We must not underestimate the fact that in wide social and political circles, the homeland and the protection of cultural heritage are issues of great ideational or, even, ideological value.

If we look at the public perception of archaeology, its disappearance behind the new, still very abstract terminology would appear, to say the least, problematic. As an actual brand, *archaeology* does enjoy a (continually increasing) positive perception, and even exerts some fascination, despite, or perhaps because of, all the clichés. Even though archaeological area protection is usually labelled with the tag of construction obstruction/prevention, the image of archaeology and its practitioners is generally different from that of monument preservation or cultural heritage protection. Archaeological discoveries are inspirational; they are widely communicated in the media, mostly in positive fashion. Visiting days at excavations, or the presentation and exhibition of new finds, always give rise to great interest (Fig. 3). Archaeological sites and museums are amongst the most popular attractions and excursion destinations for both local people and visitors across the country. Moreover, books, games or

films with an archaeological content in the widest sense of the term are also very popular; when people are asked about their dream job, not a few name the profession of archaeologist. Archaeology is therefore a strong, well-established brand with positive emotional connotations for many people,<sup>6</sup> which must continue to be cultivated and exploited intensively. From this perspective, for archaeology to dress up in new linguistic clothes would be inappropriate. Quite the opposite, *Baukultur* should take advantage of the Archaeology brand.

But it is just as certain that *Baukultur* and its broad self-image are forcing archaeology to reflect in greater depth on its own position and fields of action, and to develop

its own strategies and measures. Hence in the coming years, despite numerous new challenges, it will become increasingly important for archaeology to present itself even more widely or become involved more comprehensively, on the one hand, as a bearer of knowledge and know-how for a responsible handling of the archaeological cultural heritage of our past; on the other hand, modern archaeology must deal more intensively with the essential questions facing our present and future worlds, in close dialogue with society and politics. Thanks to its methods and as the ‘cultural studies of things’, it will in any case be able to make an important contribution to this — and thus also gain its place within *Baukultur*.

- 1 Davos Declaration 2018, p. 10, Article 4 [highlighting by author].
- 2 BAK, Strategie Baukultur 2020, p. 17 [highlighting by author].
- 3 BAK, Strategie Baukultur 2020, p. 18 [highlighting by author].
- 4 Archijeunes (ed.), Elemente einer baukulturellen Allgemeinbildung, Zurich: Park Books 2021.
- 5 Petra Wodtke, Archäologie als Kulturwissenschaft, in: *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 2, 2013, pp. 1–13; Stefanie Samida, Manfred K. H. Eggert, Archäologie als Naturwissenschaft? Eine Streitschrift (Pamphletliteratur series, 5), Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag 2013.
- 6 Cornelius Holtorf, Archaeology is a Brand! The Meaning of Archaeology in Contemporary Popular Culture, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press 2009.

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## Abstract

### L’archéologie à l’époque de la culture du bâti

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Depuis peu, la *culture du bâti* s’est implantée en tant que nouveau terme destiné à désigner le patrimoine culturel matériel. Ce concept n’englobe pas uniquement les nouvelles constructions et les réalisations historiques. Ainsi, la *culture du bâti* associe *in fine* la totalité de l’environnement conçu (« bâti ») par l’être humain, et par conséquent également le patrimoine archéologique. Jusqu’à ce jour, les représentant-e-s de l’archéologie ont de la peine avec ce nouveau concept et considèrent que le caractère spécifique de l’archéologie ne s’y reflète pas ou peu.

L’archéologie incarne d’une part une science historique, dont les sources primaires et l’objet sont issus du patrimoine culturel matériel de l’humanité – des tout premiers outils à l’époque contemporaine. La spécificité de l’archéologie considérée comme une science culturelle globale

est insuffisamment représentée par le concept de culture du bâti. Aussi, les effets de ce nouveau concept sur les tâches et les objectifs de la sauvegarde du patrimoine archéologique (enfoui) ne peuvent être présagés que de manière lacunaire. En fin de compte, l’importante diversité des témoins archéologiques n’est incarnée que de manière insatisfaisante par le terme réducteur de *culture du bâti*. Là où l’archéologie est avant tout science et que les sources archéologiques constituent des concentrations de connaissances pour les générations futures, le concept de *culture du bâti* ne répond que de manière imparfaite à sa nature profonde.

Une crainte supplémentaire découle de la perte des points forts traditionnels de l’archéologie. Ainsi, la perception largement positive de l’archéologie dans le public, en regard de la sauvegarde du patrimoine, ainsi

que l’identification de cercles importants de la population avec notre héritage archéologique courent le risque de se noyer dans le concept de la *culture du bâti*, à ce jour presque dépourvu de tous contenus concrets.

Ceci étant, la perception novatrice, offensive et prospective de la culture du bâti présente également des atouts dans le domaine de l’archéologie. C’est notamment le cas au niveau de l’approche holistique et interdisciplinaire de la *culture du bâti*. Dans ce domaine s’ouvrent des atouts et des pistes qu’il s’agit de définir plus clairement et de mieux exploiter.

Pour l’archéologie et ses protagonistes, la tâche prioritaire demeurera dans tous les cas de s’affirmer davantage dans le cadre du savoir-faire et de la connaissance de notre passé.