



Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps

States Parties: Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Slovenia, Switzerland

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UNESCO - Statement of Outstanding Universal Value



This serial property of 111 small individual sites encompasses the remains of prehistoric pile-dwelling (or stilt house) settlements in and around the Alps built from around 5000 to 500 B.C. on the edges of lakes, rivers or wetlands. Excavations, only conducted in some of the sites, have yielded evidence that provides insight into life in prehistoric times during the Neolithic and Bronze Age in Alpine Europe and the way communities interacted with their environment. Fifty-six of the sites are located in Switzerland. The settlements are a unique group of exceptionally well-preserved and culturally rich archaeological sites, which constitute one of the most important sources for the study of early agrarian societies in the region.

Brief synthesis

The series of 111 out of the 937 known archaeological pile-dwelling sites in six countries around the Alpine and sub-alpine regions of Europe is composed of the remains of prehistoric settlements dating from 5,000 to 500 BC which are situated under water, on lake shores, along rivers or in wetlands. The exceptional conservation conditions for organic materials provided by the waterlogged sites, combined with extensive under-water archaeological investigations and research in many fields of natural science, such as archaeobotany and archaeozoology, over the past decades, has combined to present an

outstanding detailed perception of the world of early agrarian societies in Europe. The precise information on their agriculture, animal husbandry, development of metallurgy, over a period of more than four millennia, coincides with one of the most important phases of recent human history: the dawn of modern societies.

In view of the possibilities for the exact dating of wooden architectural elements by dendrochronology, the sites have provided exceptional archaeological sources that allow an understanding of entire prehistoric villages and their detailed construction techniques and spatial development over very long time periods. They also reveal details of trade routes for flint, shells, gold, amber, and pottery across the Alps and within the plains, transport evidence from dugout canoes and wooden wheels, some complete with axles for two wheeled carts dating from around 3,400BC, some of the earliest preserved in the world, and the oldest textiles in Europe dating to 3,000 BC. This cumulative evidence has provided a unique insight into the domestic lives and settlements of some thirty different cultural groups in the Alpine lacustrine landscape that allowed the pile dwellings to flourish.

Criterion (iv): The series of pile dwelling sites are one of the most important archaeological sources for the study of early agrarian societies in Europe between 5,000 and 500 BC. The waterlogged conditions have preserved organic matter that contributes in an outstanding way to our understanding of significant changes in the Neolithic and Bronze Age history of Europe in general, and of the interactions between the regions around the Alps in particular.

Criterion (v): The series of pile dwelling sites has provided an extraordinary and detailed insight into the settlement and domestic arrangements of pre-historic, early agrarian lake shore communities in the Alpine and sub-Alpine regions of Europe over almost 5,000 years. The revealed archaeological evidence allows a unique understanding of the way these societies interacted with their environment, in response to new technologies, and also to the impact of climate change.

Integrity

The series of prehistoric pile-dwelling sites represents the well defined geographic area within which these sites are found to its full extent, as well as all the cultural groups in it during the time period during which the pile dwellings existed. It therefore comprises the complete cultural context of the archaeological phenomena. The sites selected have been chosen to be those that still remain largely intact, as well as to reflect the diversity of structures, groups of structures and time-periods. As a whole the series and its boundaries fully reflect the attributes of Outstanding Universal Value. The visual integrity of some of the sites is to a degree compromised by their urban setting. Many of the component sites can also be said to be vulnerable to a range of threats ranging from the uses of the lakes, intensification of agriculture, development, etc. Monitoring of the sites will be crucial to ensure their continuing integrity.

Authenticity

The physical remains are well preserved and documented. Their archaeological strata, preserved in the ground or under water are authentic in structure, material and substance, without any later or modern additions. The remarkable survival of organic remains facilitates the highest levels of definition in relation to the use and function of the sites. The very long history of research, co-operation and coordination provide an unusual level of understanding and documentation of the sites. However the ability of the sites to display their value is difficult as they are mostly completely hidden underwater which means that their context in relation to the lake and river shores is important in order to evoke the nature of their setting. This context is compromised to a degree on those sites that survive in intensely urbanised environments. Because the sites cannot be overtly presented in situ, they are interpreted in museums. An over-arching presentation framework needs to be developed that allows coordination between museums and an agreed standard of archaeological data to ensure understanding of the value of the whole property and how individual sites contribute to that whole.

Protection and management requirements

The series of pile dwelling sites are legally protected according to the legal systems in place in the various States Parties. There is a need to ensure that the highest level of legal protection available within each of the States Parties is provided. The common management system integrates all States levels and competent authorities, including the local communities, in each country, and connects the different national systems to an international management system, through an established International Coordination Group, based on a Management Commitment signed by all States Parties. Common visions and aims are translated into concrete projects on international, national and regional / local levels in a regularly adapted action plan. Funding is provided by Switzerland for the Secretariat and by the States Parties for the different projects. Proposed actions that may have a significant impact on the heritage values of the archaeological areas nominated for inscription are restricted. There is a need for consistent application of protection arrangements across the six States Parties to ensure consistency in approaches to development, particularly in terms of lake use, mooring arrangements and private development, and to heritage impact assessments. Given the extreme fragility of the remains, and the pressures on sites especially in urban areas, there is a need to ensure that adequate funding is in place for on-going monitoring.

(source : <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1363/>)