SEEDS FROM THE IVORY TOWER – HOW ARCHAEOBOTANY GOES PUBLIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND LIFE SCIENCES, VIENNA (BOKU), AUSTRIA

Andreas G. Heiss1
Martin Kohler-Schneider2
Marianne Kohler-Schneider3
Ilona Szunyogh4
Michaela Klement5
Ingelborg Sperl2
Michael Köng6
andreas.heiss@erbsenzaehler.at
marianne.kohler-schneider@boku.ac.at
marisa.kohlerschneider@boku.ac.at
ilonaszunyogh@boehrns.at
michaela.klement@boku.ac.at
ingesperl@boku.ac.at
michael.koenig@foerst.at

Sandra Sam4
M.-Christina Zingerle5
Birgit Schretzmayr6
Ernst Lauermann7
Matthias W. Pacher8
sandra.sam@boku.ac.at
zingerle@studio-exhibit.com
birgit.schretzmayr@mob.niederlandesausstellung.at
ernst.lauermann@noes.gv.at
matthias.pacher@urgeschichte.at

1 University of Applied Life Sciences Vienna (BOKU), Institute of Botany, Gregor Mendel-Strasse 33, 1190 Wien, Austria
2 University of Applied Life Sciences Vienna (BOKU), Head of Public Relations., Peter-Jordan-Strasse 70, 1190 Wien, Austria
3 OFU Landesstelle Wien, Agrarhistorische Dreie, 1040 Wien, Austria
4 Stadtmuzeum Wiener Neustadt on the Thaya, Hauptplatz 24, 3842 Thaya, Austria
5 Studio Exikon, Hoftheater 3/5/G, Vienna, 1190 Wien, Austria
6 Exhibition of Lower Austria "Bread and Wine", 3382 Schafhalben, Austria
7 Ungewohnliches Niederösterreich / Lower Austrian Museum of Prehistory, Schlossgasse 1, 2151 Aspern/Daya, Austria
8 Ungewohnliches Niederösterreich / Lower Austrian Museum of Prehistory, Hauptplatz 1, 2040 Petronell-Carnuntum, Austria

Introduction

When archaeobotany was established at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in 1989 by M. Kohler-Schneider, it was an entirely exotic discipline in Austria, both at the academic level and in the perception of the broad public. Hence, there was a necessity to raise the profile of archaeobotany from the outset – not only through conventional scientific output, but also through targeted public awareness activities. Fortunately, archaeobotany indeed has a lot to offer to a variety of audiences, both within the university and in the society at large.

Within the university, archaeobotanical results are of relevance to several neighbouring disciplines, from agriculture and nutrition sciences to landscape planning. Thus, apart from regular teaching and research activities, building relationships with these disciplines was an important focus of the archaeobotany working group at BOKU. But in order to firmly root the new discipline within the university, this had to be complemented by awareness work on a much broader scale, far beyond the academic confines.

In the society at large, a growing interest in prehistory and history, and an increasing consciousness about food, its quality and provenience have provided a receptive background for archaeobotanical outreach activities. Audiences range from amateur history associations to organic farmers, gardeners, and gardeners with an interest in traditional plant species to the flourishing culinary scene. New trends in museum and exhibition didactics, with their strong emphasis on hands-on activities and re-enactment events have provided additional opportunities to convey archaeobotanical themes to a broad public.

Exhibitions and Museums

Providing scientific advice, tests and exhibition material to museums – from charred seeds to live plant material – has become a regular activity for the BOKU archaeobotany team. Over the years, contributions were made to more than 20 permanent and temporary exhibitions all over Austria.

Highlights include two major exhibitions in Austrian federal provinces: in 1992, M. Kohler-Schneider was responsible for the section “Prehistoric Agriculture and our Old Food plants” within the exhibition “Farmers – our life, our future” in Upper Austria. Very recently, A. G. Heiss has made significant contributions to the provincial exhibition 2013 “Bread and Wine”, in Lower Austria. These exhibitions are major events attracting several hundred thousands of visitors, and they enjoy extensive media coverage.

Smallers, yet very colourful and well-received exhibits with archaeobotanical contributions were both shown in 2011, in Lower Austria: “Kraut und Rüben – Menschen und ihre Kulturpflanzen” (Cabbage and Turnips – People and their Cultivated Plants), focusing on cultivated plant diversity, and “Drei Farben – Magic.Zauber.Gehemnis” (Three Colours – Magic.Enchantment.Secret / Red.Green.Black), with a section on magical plants. In both instances, archaeological articles were published in the accompanying catalogues. An international touring exhibition on “The Iceman – the Oldest Glacier Mummy” has been provided an archaeobotanical section as well.

Activities with Children

Archaeobotany was featured at an interactive station within a special archaeology exhibition “Knochengerüster – Zeittipps” at the ZOOM – Children’s Museum Vienna, in 2005. Recently, within the framework of the “Children’s University”, archaeobotany students at the BOKU have produced an illustrated booklet for small children: “Who has invented bread? – a story told by Emmie, the little cereal grain”.

Media Work

Archaeobotany as a discipline and archaeobotanical results of regional relevance have been regularly featured in Austrian media. Recent highlights include M. Kohler-Schneider ‘s presentation of archaeobotanical results from the Waizenfeld region, within the famous Austrian TV series “Universum”. The specific issue reached 694,000 spectators at its first broadcast in 2009, and another 610,000 in 2012. A further highlight was A. G. Heiss’ appearance on ORF science-talk, a series portraying young scientists and their research fields, in January 2013. BOKU archaeobotany and its specific fields played a role in a further five TV-broadcasts during the last years. Appearances on radio broadcasts were more numerous, mostly within science series. In the wake of some TV and radio broadcasts, there was a request for print and online media contributions as well.

Press releases from the BOKU Public Relations Department relating to spectacular archaeobotanical finds have aroused considerable media interest. For example, a press release on the discovery of a charred grapevine pip in the Weinviertel region, within the famous Austrian TV series “Universum”. The specific issue reached 694,000 spectators at its first broadcast in 2009, and another 610,000 in 2012. A further highlight was A. G. Heiss’ appearance on ORF science-talk, a series portraying young scientists and their research fields, in January 2013. BOKU archaeobotany and its specific fields played a role in a further five TV-broadcasts during the last years. Appearances on radio broadcasts were more numerous, mostly within science series. In the wake of some TV and radio broadcasts, there was a request for print and online media contributions as well.

Press releases from the BOKU Public Relations Department relating to spectacular archaeobotanical finds have aroused considerable media interest. For example, a press release on the discovery of a charred grapevine pip in the Weinviertel region, within the famous Austrian TV series “Universum”. The specific issue reached 694,000 spectators at its first broadcast in 2009, and another 610,000 in 2012. A further highlight was A. G. Heiss’ appearance on ORF science-talk, a series portraying young scientists and their research fields, in January 2013. BOKU archaeobotany and its specific fields played a role in a further five TV-broadcasts during the last years. Appearances on radio broadcasts were more numerous, mostly within science series. In the wake of some TV and radio broadcasts, there was a request for print and online media contributions as well.

Conclusions

Archaeobotany has a lot of interesting stories to tell and may fascinate a wide number of audiences – to its own benefit as an accepted academic discipline. Successful outreach activities require:

- Researchers with a high degree of personal motivation, with good communication skills and a sense for attractive stories
- The university’s commitment to communicating science and a well organised PR-department
- Strong partners in museums, media, and other cooperating institutions

For an overview of further selected activities, see http://tinyurl.com/ic6pm55 and http://tinyurl.com/kmg4uv5

Gardens and Experimental Fields

Open air museums and institutions displaying experimental archaeology activities provide a very attractive framework for archaeobotanical themes. The BOKU archaeobotany workgroup has been involved in the planning, establishment and regular supervision of gardens in four Austrian open air museums. For instance, the cereal fields and vegetable gardens in the “Freilichtmuseum Elaure”, Lower Austria, were designed and installed between 1998 and 2000 by a group of landscape planning-students under the supervision of M. Kohler-Schneider. Since its foundation, this garden has received regular inputs from the working group, e.g. through the production of an illustrated guide and through regular guided tours, especially during the “Gemenenfest Elanau”, an event attracting several thousands of visitors twice a year. The garden displays live cultivated plants of the 2nd/3rd century AD, within the setting of a reconstructed early medieval farmstead.

Likewise, the long-term cooperation with the Lower Austrian Museum of Prehistory has recently resulted in a complete redesign of the Neolithic and the Bronze Age section of their outdoor section, again putting up with the current data on prehistoric agriculture.