



Experiencing Borders

Participation and historical political awareness through public archaeology at the German-Czech border

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Abstract:

Cultural heritage is vital for society, contributing to collective identity and historic awareness. The presentation depicts how political and territorial aspirations in border landscapes impact cultural memory and identity formation by highlighting the relevance of participation in archeological preservation along one of the oldest European border lines.

Changing border regimes impacted lives between Bavaria and Bohemia. While the Golden Road fostered cultural connections between Nuremberg and Prague since the 14th century, the same border interrupted the tradition with the Iron Curtain after WWII.

Cross-border public archaeology, a joint project of German and Czech universities, stimulates dialogue and raises awareness of cultural heritage by engaging citizens in excavations of a medieval urban estate in Bavaria and a village abandoned after 1945 in Bohemia revealing that border politics not only had diplomatic consequences. Here, critical public archaeology can contribute to multidimensional reflection.

Social theoretical frame:

Science communication as an intersection between the science of archaeology and society

We understand the function of science communication as an intersection that seeks to bridge the gap between socially bound science and scientific society.

Via trans-academic communication scientific communication aims to bridge boundaries at the various interfaces of social fields without removing them. These boundaries can be cognitive, cultural, or even temporal. In the best case, bridging takes place bilaterally and therefore poses a major challenge in practice making it an exciting research topic for science communication researchers.

Through the use of responsive or social media, which influence both the knowledge production process itself and its communication, the transition between the boundaries has become fluid or diffuse.

In recent years, this has given rise to a new concept within scientific communication, which is now intended to lead to greater participation in historical research as an independent discipline in selected fields. Public history and archaeology are example disciplines of so-called public science, that are only slowly establishing themselves in German-speaking countries.

Recommended literature:

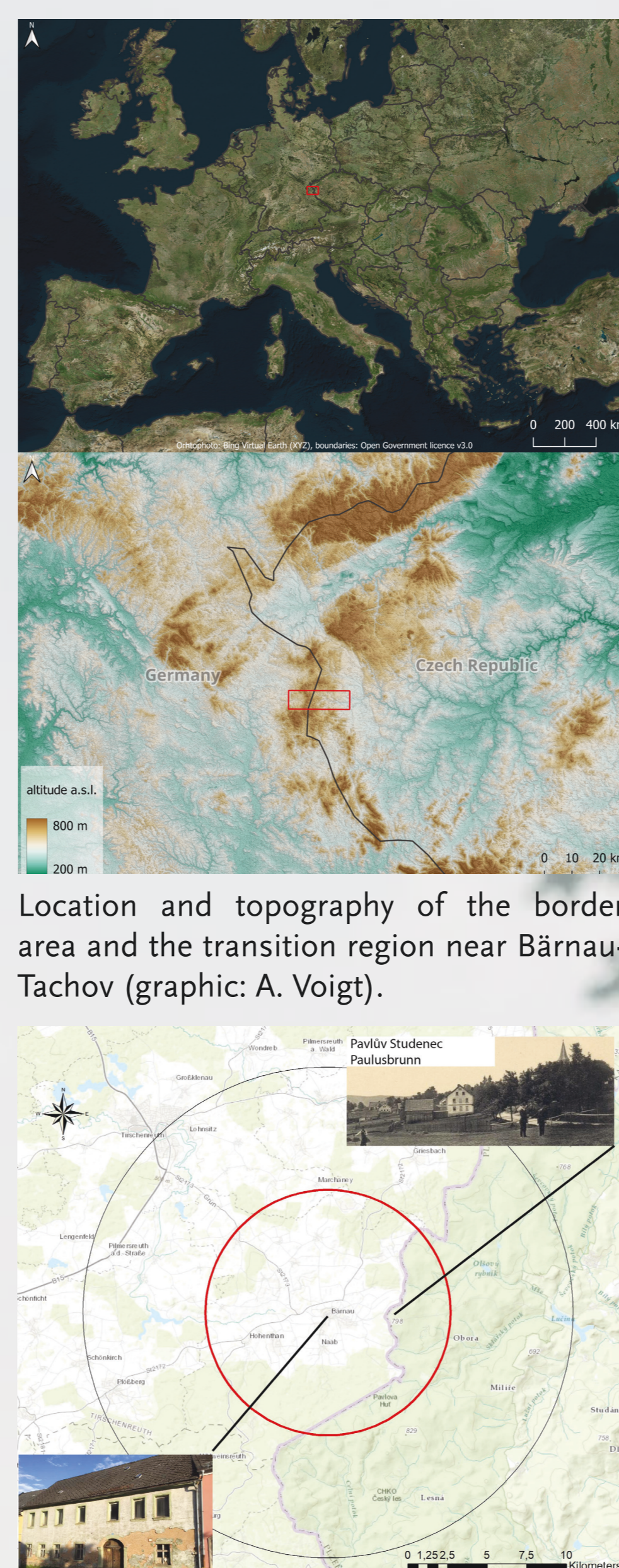
- B. Fischhoff/ D. A. Scheufele, The science of science communication. PNAS 110, 3, 2013, 14031–14032.
- P. Weingart, Wissenschaftssoziologie (Bielefeld 2003).
- P. Pasternack, Wissenschaftskommunikation, neu sortiert. Eine Systematisierung der externen Kommunikationen der Wissenschaft (Wiesbaden 2022).
- in general: P. Bourdieu's Field Theory and N. Luhmann's Social Theory

Socioeconomic Spaces Crossing Borders. Archaeological Studies on the Bavarian-Bohemian border 2019 – 2021)

Borders function as both barriers and connectors. They mirror changing power structures, territorial control, and offer spaces for exchange and interaction.

Our interdisciplinary project examined the borderland between Bärnau (Germany) and Tachov/Tachau (Czech Republic) using methods from urban archaeology, environmental history, historical analysis, and LiDAR technology. The region's transformation from open medieval crossings to fortified boundaries and ideological divisions in the 20th century reveals the evolving role of borders.

The Golden Road trade route, medieval in its origins, played a key role in forming a dynamic transition corridor, shaping mixed cultures and sustaining bilingualism in rural settlements. Shared natural resources and continued mobility fostered economic and cultural vitality.

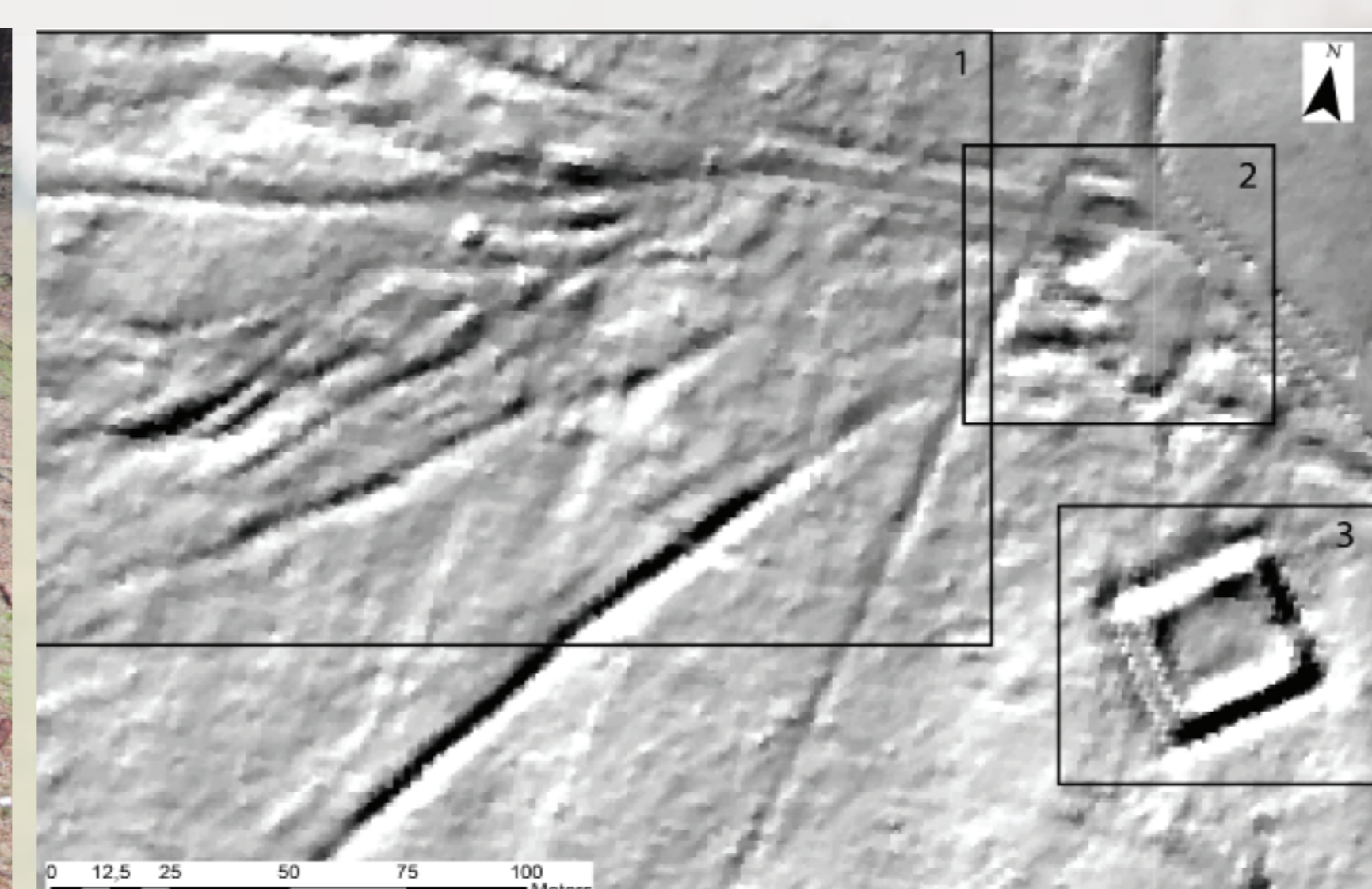


Location and topography of the border area and the transition region near Bärnau-Tachov (graphic: A. Voigt).

The research area Bärnau-Tachov with the archaeologically investigated places Bärnau (Ackerbürgerhaus) and Pavluv Studenec (graphic: M. Preusz).



Relics of the Iron Curtain on the Bavarian-Bohemian border (photo: M. Preusz).



Cultural relics on the Bavarian-Bohemian border in the LiDAR scan 1) Hollow roads of the Golden Road; 2) remain of a custom; 3) redoubt „Tillyschanze“ (graphic: M. Preusz; © ČÚZK und LDBV Bayern).

Stages and conditions of the German-Czech border line from the middle age until today	
14th century Golden Road era	Open, blooming phase of the region. Charles IV establishes region of „New Bohemia“. Attended pan-European road system „Via Carolina“ (fortresses and timber castles)
17th century (30 Years' War)	Semi closed, fortification: smaller earthworks and redoubt „Tillyschanze“
20th century (National Socialism)	Semi closed, fortification: bunker-system on the now Czech side of the borderline
20th century (Cold War)	Strictly closed, fortification: „Iron Curtain“ on the now Czech side of the border line. Political forced abandonment of villages like Paulusbrunn/Pavluv Studenec after 1945 – relocation of local population
today	Open, reemerging cultural contacts, international understanding and cross-border cooperation promoted by local nonprofits like „Via Carolina e.V.“, „Ackerbürgerhaus Bärnau e.V.“, „Geschichtspark Bärnau-Tachov“



Reconstruction of a 12th-century motte-and-bailey castle in the Bärnau-Tachov History Park (photo: Geschichtspark Bärnau-Tachov).

Excavations like at the Ackerbürgerhaus and the reconstruction of Paulusbrunn/Pavluv Studenec provide tangible insights into these exchanges and promote international understanding through binational collaboration. Despite minimal differences in material culture, future analyses may uncover deeper layers of divergence. Political change often redefined the borderland, yet the Upper Palatinate Forest remained a constant geographic feature.

Ultimately, the study offers broader implications for the societal relevance of archaeology, showing how border regions embody connectivity, coexistence, and resilience in the face of division.

Publication:

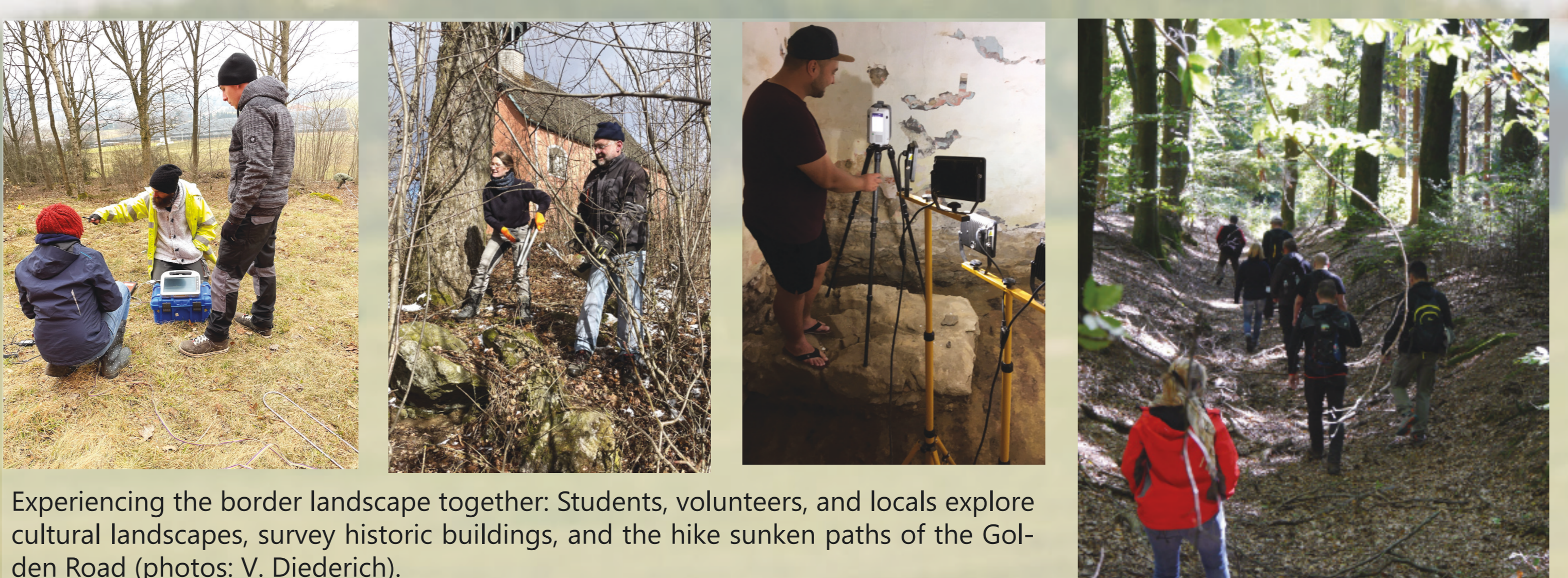
V. Diederich/M. Preusz, Entlang der Goldenen Straße vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit. Ein Beitrag zur Archäologie der bayerisch-böhmischen Grenzlandschaft (Bereich Bärnau-Tachau/Tachov). Siedlungsforschung. Archäologie - Geschichte - Geographie 39, 2022, S. 257-288.

Public Archaeology in the border region and at Paulusbrunn/Pavluv Studenec- a village deserted in Cold War

The dissemination of archaeological research increasingly relies on multidimensional approaches to science communication and public engagement. Within the scope of this binational project, a range of participatory and educational strategies have been implemented to foster inclusive knowledge production. These include community involvement in fieldwork, encompassing both excavation and geoarchaeological prospection, thereby enabling local actors to actively engage with material heritage.

Instruments such as evidence-based reconstructions and experimental archaeology, particularly as practiced in the Geschichtspark Bärnau and the ArchaeoCentrum Bavaria-Bohemia, serve not only as interpretative tools, but also as pedagogical instruments that contextualize archaeological findings through reconstructed early medieval and medieval environments.

Community-led events, including the summer festival commemorating the deserted village of Pavluv Studenec and the biannual guided hike along the cultural relics of the Golden Road, foster sustained public dialogue and experiential learning. These activities, reinforce archaeology's societal relevance beyond academia and promote transgenerational engagement with shared heritage.



Experiencing the border landscape together: Students, volunteers, and locals explore cultural landscapes, survey historic buildings, and the hike sunken paths of the Golden Road (photos: V. Diederich).



Artistic visualization and reconstruction of the village church in the deserted village of Pavluv Studenec during the annual summer festival with a photo show and interviews including contemporary witnesses (photos: Kirchenrekonstruktion M. Horáček, Zeitzeuginneninterview: V. Diederich).

Oral History plays a vital role in understanding life in deserted villages like Pavluv Studenec. Given its challenges of reliability and subjectivity, Oral History must be critically assessed and contextually embedded to ensure its scientific value.

However, the reconstruction efforts in Pavluv Studenec benefited from historical photographs dating between 1930 and 1948. Combined with eyewitness accounts, these visual documents enable researchers to identify and relocate structures no longer visible in the landscape and to reconstruct their functions.

Visualizations and artistic representations contribute to the communication of scientific methods and also make complex historical contexts aesthetically and emotionally accessible to the public.

Together, these integrated approaches not only extend conventional archaeological methodologies by enabling the spatial interpretation of archaeological data, but also demonstrate how borderland archaeology can transcend disciplinary boundaries and enhance public understanding through multisensory and collaborative frameworks.

Public Archaeology - excavating in the Ackerbürgerhaus in Bärnau

„Ackerbürger“ refers to a historic social class in German towns. The people held citizenship but earned their livings primarily through farming. A literal translation of a Ackerbürgerhaus would be “house of a citizen-farmer.”

This heritage-listed building located in the small town of Bärnau (ca. 2,000 inhabitants), has stood abandoned since 1987. In recent years, however, a local association has taken significant steps toward its restoration. One seminal component of this process is the accompanying archaeological excavation, 2019 - 2022).

The investigations have yielded remarkable insights into the history of the house and the broader urban development in Bärnau. In particular, structural and ceramic findings point to urban-like settlement patterns that predate the documented granting of town privileges by Emperor Charles IV in 1353.

Among the finds from the middle ages until modern times, which are primarily related to household use, reflect aspects of regional everyday culture. Stylistic features such as “silver mica” and so-called “carnies rims” suggest hybrid design influences and point to cultural exchange between Bavarian and Bohemian ceramic traditions.



Location of the Ackerbürgerhaus marked on the city map from 1840 (Bayerisches Landesvermessungsamt München, Nr. 558/03).



Public archaeology at the Ackerbürgerhaus Bärnau. (all photos: V. Diederich, plan: Architektur- und Ingenieurbüro Roeder und Solffrank).

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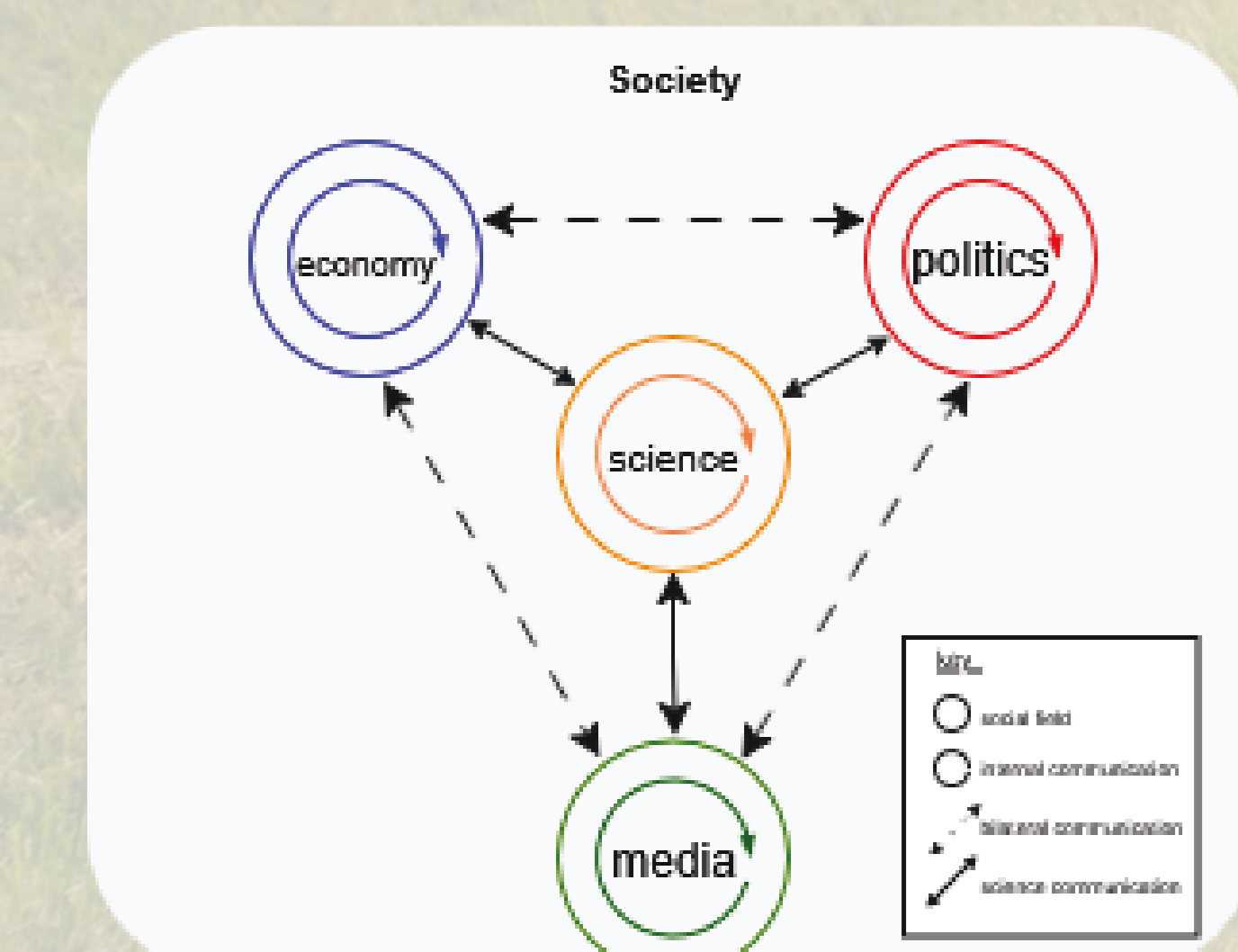


Illustration of the communication network between archaeology and the social subsystems of media, politics, and economics (graphic: adapted from Könnecker 2016, V. Diederich CC-BY-SA 4.0).

