

# A DAY IN SWISS RESCUE ARCHAEOLOGY

July 2, 2012 Marcel Cornillissen Day of Archaeology 2012, Environmental Archaeology, Excavation, Finds, Historical Archaeology, Medieval, Post Medieval, Prehistory Hospental-Moos, lithics, Mesolithic, Middle Ages, Switzerland, Unterseen

There was a big contrast between this day's morning and afternoon. A large project, renewing all pipes and drains and the street, as well as implementing a district heating system is underway in the medieval town of [Unterseen, Switzerland](#). A small team from the [Archaeological Service of the Canton of Berne](#) is investigating the archaeology as it is being exposed by the building work. Mechanical diggers and all sorts of building machines serve around us as hole after hole are opened and closed at an unrelenting pace. We do a combination of a watching brief and a more traditional excavation. It is a complex construction site, one of the most challenging I have worked on. There are many partners (firms and authorities) on site; there is little space in the old town centre for all these people and their material. Besides, the many shops and restaurant lining the street suffer greatly from the extended work during the main tourist season.

It is thus essential that the archaeology delays the building work as little as possible. To be able to allow some traffic we only truly excavate one of the 16 small fields (7x9m) at once. For the remaining area we react to the construction work. That means we document the archaeology as the builders open new sections of trenches, after which the building continues and the archaeology gets destroyed. We thus strictly limit ourselves to excavating and recording only that which is threatened to be destroyed. It a stressful project and only possible at all – as is so often the case – through good and intense communication between the local authorities, the various building partners and the Archaeological Service. The scientific results are fantastic though, considering the way we work.



© Archaeological Service Canton Berne. June 2012.– Niche in a medieval wall in Unterseen, Switzerland.

We have been able to confirm the old suspicion that during medieval times, the town was not yet characterised by the 'Stadthaus' and the surrounding open spaces as it is today. Instead we now know that, at least along the eastern side of the town, a narrow alley lined by densely packed rows of houses allowed traffic to pass through the town from gate to gate. Of these houses, we only find the cellars. The stone-built cellar walls are often plastered. Some even twice, showing not only the care with which they were constructed, but also their extended use and the way they were cared for. Stairs leading down into them and wall-niches for lamps and candles further help to bring the medieval occupation of Unterseen to life.

These new finds, however, also raise new questions. The building work does not reach the depth of the cellar floors and it is here most finds are to be expected. As a result it remains unknown for now what these cellars, and the houses above them, were used for. Without finds it is also difficult to date them precisely. However, from historical sources we know much of the small market town was destroyed by fire in 1470AD. After that it was decided not to rebuild the central part of the town, but leave open spaces surrounding a large trading house, the precursor of the

current 'Stadthaus'. And indeed we see many signs of fire on the remaining cellar walls and the rubble that fills them. So it is likely the cellars date between the city's founding in 1279AD and 1470AD.

In the afternoon I was able to meet up with a colleague to talk about the start of a next project. Summer 2010 I was involved in another rescue archaeology project in Andermatt and Hospental just below the [Gotthardpass](#) in Switzerland. On the site of a future golf-course, at ca. 1500masl (which must be almost finished now), we discovered a number of archaeological features, dating from the Late Mesolithic (ca.6000BC) to Early Modern Times. The Canton of Uri, who is responsible, has now provided funds for a small post-excavation project. We were able to excavate part of the Late Mesolithic site, [Hospental-Moos](#), before its destruction and this now forms the heart of the project.

Mesolithic sites are relatively seldom in Switzerland and in the Alps. But archaeologists are becoming more and more aware of the prehistoric occupation and use of the Alps. Slowly we see more research and even rescue archaeology in the Alps. Until 2010 no Late Mesolithic sites were known at this altitude in central Switzerland, which makes this site rather special. The fact that practically all artefacts are made of rock crystal makes it even more special. I am very thrilled to be able to analyse these finds.

In a quiet office, we discussed which of the many samples we had taken on site are to be analysed further. Especially at sites of this nature, it is not just the finds and the features that allow us to paint an accurate picture of the past: Soil samples can help us explain the built-up of the soil. Charred plant remains such as seeds, e.g. from hearths, might tell us about what people ate. And like pollen-samples from the soil they can also teach us about the vegetation around the site at the time of occupation. Charcoal samples, often also from hearths, can be used to date the site's habitation.

So my day started on a hectic construction site, where I try to unravel the development of a 1315<sup>th</sup> Century market town. It finished in a quiet office, discussing the last hunter-gatherer societies of the Alps and their environment ca. 7000 years earlier. A challenging and varied Swiss Day of Archaeology!