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beyond the theme

What shall we do with 10,000 small excavations a year? Quantity and quality in urban archaeology[1]

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In urban archaeology, the work consists in dealing with lots of small scale building interventions in the ground every year. What shall urban archaeologists do with '10,000' small excavations a year? How can we deal with this problem? Is there any sense in putting our energy into the archaeological monitoring and excavating of all these small scale interventions or is it better to wait and concentrate on large areas? The autor, medieveal archaeologist and manager of a government-run archaeological service in Switzerland (Canton Berne), tries to give an answer by looking at in the three perspectives of scholarship, of methodology and of organsation.
Keywords: urban archaeology, rescue archaeology, foundation towns, archaeology, history

In der Stadtarchäologie bedeutet Ausgraben meist, eine grosse Menge von kleinen Baustellen archäologisch zu begleiten. Was sollen Stadtarchäologen mit „10'000" kleinen und kleinsten Ausgrabungen im Jahr? Wie können sie mit diesem Problem umgehen? Macht es Sinn, die Energie in die Überwachung und Ausgrabung aller dieser kleinen Flächen zu stekken statt sich auf die seltenen grossen Grabungsgebiete zu konzentrieren? Der Autor ist Mittelalterarchäologe und Leiter in einem staatlichen archäologischen Dienst in der Schweiz (Kanton Bern). Er versucht diese Fragen aus drei Blickwinkeln zu beantworten, dem wissenschaftlichen, dem methodischen und dem organisatorischen.
***Schlüsselbegriffe**: Stadtarchäologie, Notgrabungen, Gründungsstädte, Archäologie und Geschichte*

1. Introduction

All over Europe, there exist thousands of towns with medieval or even older origin; in Switzerland for instance, a small country with an area of only 41,000 square kilometres, the number of these urban settlements

[1] This text is the written version of a key note lecture held on the Medieval Europe Research Conference Meeting 5 during the Annual Congress of the European Association of Archaeologists at Helsinki in 2012.

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is roughly 150. And all of them contain large quantities of archaeological relevant substance underground. But every archaeologist being in charge of the urban archaeological investigations in one or several of these towns knows the problem: the archaeological work consists mainly in dealing with dozens or even hundreds of small scale building interventions in the ground, year per year, and all one of them with a very limited prospect of epoch-making findings, compared to the very rare large excavations. So, the question arises: what shall we urban archaeologists do with '10,000' small excavations a year? How can we deal with this problem? Is there any sense in putting our energy into the archaeological monitoring and excavating of all these small scale interventions or is it better to wait and concentrate on large areas?

There are three perspectives: is it a problem of scholarship? Do we mean: in terms of scholarship, what is the rationale for having large quantities of small scale urban archaeological excavations? Is it a question of methodology? What is the methodological rationale for having large quantities of small scale urban archaeological excavations? Or is it a question of organisation? How can we sensibly manage large quantities of small scale urban archaeological excavations?

Before starting to reconsider all three questions, there are some essential preliminary remarks. Firstly, it is to emphasise that these ideas are based primarily on the results of urban archaeological investigations in the research area with which I am familiar; that is first of all the canton of Berne[2], then the German-speaking Europe – Switzerland[3], Germany[4] and Austria[5], all parts of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in the Middle Ages (Isenmann 1988; Hirschmann 2009). Secondly, this paper takes a practitioner's view, the perspective of a manager of a government-run archaeological service, responsible for the Canton of Bern, a region of 6,000 square kilometers and about twenty mostly small medieval towns, managing an average of 300 archeological projects per year, large and small: exploratory digs, site inspections, excavations and building research covering all prehistorical and historical periods[6].

[2] *Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern ADB* (Archaeological Service of the Canton of Bern): http://www.erz.be.ch/erz/de/index/kultur/archaeologie.html [accessed 14 February 2013].

[3] *Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit SAM* (Swiss Working-group for Archaeology of the Medieval and Modern Periods): http://www.archaeologie-schweiz.ch/SAM.207.0.html [accessed 14 February 2013].

[4] *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit DGAMN* (German Society for Archaeology of the Medieval and modern Periods) http://www.dgamn.de [accessed 14 February 2013].

[5] *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Mittelalterarchäologie ÖGM* (Austrian Society for Medieval Archaelogy): http://www.univie.ac.at/oegm/ [accessed 14 February 2013].

[6] A Yearbook covers the work of the Archaeological Service of the Canton of Berne: *Archäologie im Kanton Bern*, vol. 1-6, Schriftenreihe der Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern (Bern, 1990-2006).

2. The scholarly perspective

Let's begin with the question of scholarship. There are several responses to the question of the rationale, in terms of scholarship, of having large quantities of small scale urban archaeological excavations every year. The initial and broad answer is this: archeological exploration goes on in towns, because the question of the built history of mediaeval towns and their predecessors is of relevance to scholarship. In wide areas of Europe in the High Middle Ages there were only a few towns, primarily former Roman towns with bishops' seats. In the first half of the 12th century, a movement began in our region which is known to German-speaking scholarship as the "Stadtgründungswelle", or the 'wave of urban foundations'. By the time this wave ebbed in the 14th century, an urban landscape had emerged in much of Europe which was to persist in its essentials right up until the industrial revolution, and which still shapes our cultural landscape to this day (Haase 1969; Pauly 2009; Igel *et al.* 2013). The region of present-day Switzerland will serve as an example for many other European landscapes to illustrate the number of urban foundations which took place during this 'wave' (fig. 1; Baeriswyl 2011b). While there may have been ten towns in the area of what is now Switzerland around 1150 – the red dots – by the mid-14th century, thanks to a wave of new foundations, and elevations of existing settlements to urban status, their number had grown to about 150. These new towns covered Switzerland with a dense network of settlements and fundamentally altered the face of our cultural landscape.

The second answer: it makes sense in terms of historical scholarship to have large quantities in every single town, because in every town there large quantities of historical questions as well, which only can be answered with the help of archaeology. Every town, however small, however big, is an extremely complex entity, and the questions raised by the various aspects its history are correspondingly many-layered. For some archaeologists, particularly those who are first and foremost pre-historians, questions about a town are often confined to those of dating; in other words, to the question, "When did the town originate and were there were any earlier settlements?" And of course, archaeologists are especially pleased to find pre-urban structures if historians of the town in question maintain that it was a new foundation, established on a 'green site'[7]. But this can-

Since 2008: *Archäologie Bern / Archéologie bernoise, Jahrbuch des Archäologischen Dienstes des Kantons Bern*, Schriftenreihe der Erziehungsdirektion des Kantons Bern.

[7] So for example in Lübeck, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, which is not a foundation town on an virign penninsula, but has a Slavian predecessor settlement of substancial size: "Lübecker Schriften zu Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte", 1 (1978).

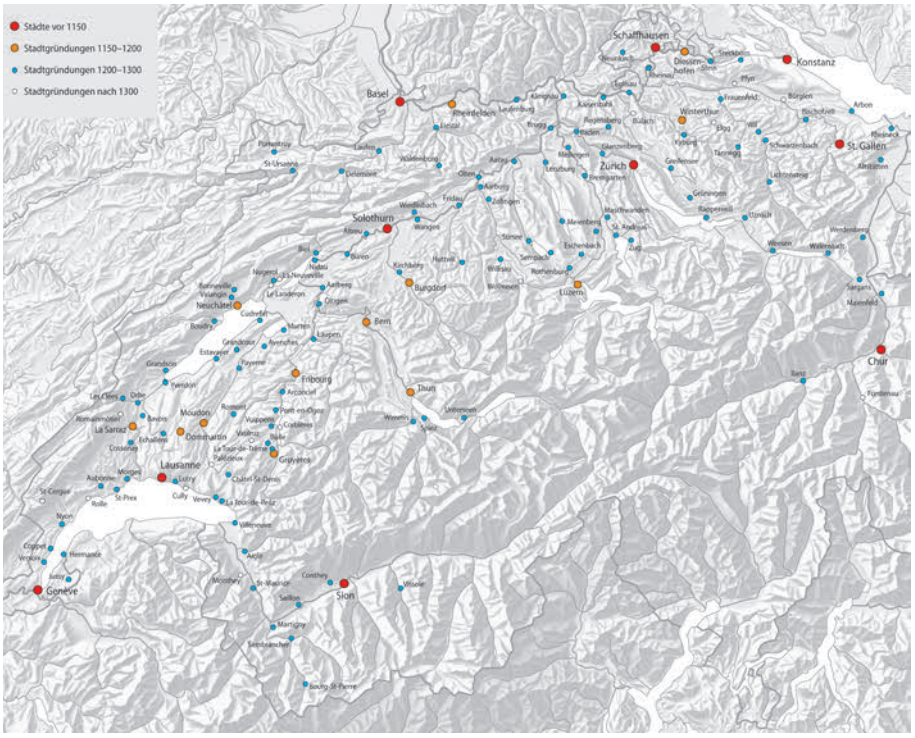

Fig. 1. Map of Switzerland with the Medieval towns. Red dots: towns existing before 1150. Orange dots: town foundations 1150-1200. Blue dots: town foundations 1200-1300. White dots: town foundations after 1300 (© Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern).

not and should not be the only contribution of archaeology to urban history. Questions about a town begin with its natural setting, with the question of topography, of the elevations, slopes and depressions, the watercourses, marshes, flood-plain boundaries, etc., as well as – quite important – the way in which these changed in the course of the emergence, growth and structural/spatial development of the town[8].

Then there is, indeed, the question of an earlier settlement – or settlements – and this involves taking account of the whole prehistoric settlement area, since as well as the case of a village developing into a town, or a town being founded on the site of an existing village, it often happens that the town forms a new element within an existing settlement cluster, and is built in greater or less proximity to settlements already in existence[9]. A classic question is that of origin or foundation, and

[8] For instance Einbeck, Lower Saxony, Germany: Heege, Roth Heege, Behre 2002.

[9] An excellent example is Burgdorf, Canton of Berne, Switzerland: Baeriswyl 2003.

this cannot (just) be a case of confirming or refuting foundation dates known from the written sources. A foundation, even if it took place on a green site, was always a multi-stage process, and it often took several stages, sometimes stretching over centuries, for a village to become a town. These are the key questions for the foundation process: how did a new town come into existence, or how did an existing village become a town[10]? That brings us next to the question of planning and implementation. I will restrict myself here to some key words: original plot structure, layout of streets, course of the town wall, positioning of town infrastructure etc.[11] Infrastructure and the way it changed involves a very wide-ranging complex of questions – regardless of whether an particular infrastructure feature was originally present or appeared only later. Here, too, will be mentioned just a few keywords – though we must bear in mind that behind each of these keywords may lurk a whole research programme (!): town fortifications[12], market infrastructure (Baeriswyl 2006), market houses, municipal weighing facilities, water supply and drainage (Baeriswyl 2008a; *Wasserbau in Mittelalter* 2009), industrial canals, infirmaries (*Städtische Spitalbauten* 2009), town halls, pillories, judicial loggias, maintenance depots, armouries, etc. The religious infrastructure must be mentioned in the same way: cathedrals, churches and cemeteries[13], chapels, monasteries (*Freiburg* 2006; Hecker, Röhl 2010), beguine houses. There is the question of all the buildings belonging to the semi-public infrastructure[14] such as bathhouses, taverns, dance halls, brothels.

- The buildings and installations for traffic: streets, squares, bridges, landing-stages, harbours, goods-handling yards (Igel 2009; Krabath, Piekalski, Wachowski 2011).
- Industrial structures, such as mills, industrial canals, weirs, blacksmiths, tanneries, etc. (Röber 1999; Enzenberger 2007; Jeute 2009).
- Another very broad topic is residential buildings[15]: The house itself; buildings on farmsteads and the way they changed; Burgher's houses; huts and other buildings of poorer town-dwellers; buildings belonging to

10 An interesting new example is Heidelberg, Baden-Württemberg, Germany: Damminger 2008.

11 Some interesting German and Swiss examples can be found in *Die vermessene Stadt* 2004.

12 Zürich, Switzerland, is an excellent example for new findings concerning the questions of town walls: Wild, Motschi, Hanser 2004. An almost complete overview of Swiss town fortifications can be found in *Stadt- und Landmauern* 1995-1999.

13 Some exemples: Baeriswyl 1999; Eggenberger, Glatz, Gutscher-Schmid *et al.* 2001; Biermann, Schneider, Terberger 2006; Küntzel 2011.

14 Tuchen 2003. A recent exemple of a excavated bathhouse in Solothurn, Switzerland: Nold 2009.

15 Fouquet 1998; Theune 2010. Two recent exemples: Küng 2006; Teuber 2009.

the noble or patrician classes, bishops' residencies, canons' houses, monastic townhouses, and the town castle (Baeriswyl 2008b).
- Special categories, such as university buildings, Jewish buildings, facilites and cemeteries[16].
- Countryside within the town: land, buildings and other facilites for agricultural use inside the town boundaries.
- Not to be forgotten is the area outside the town walls but under urban influence: Leper colonies, places of execution (Auler 2008-2012), chapels, town boundary markers; Defensive dykes[17]; suburban country estates.

This list of questions stops here. It could go on indefinitely – it just restricted itself to structural, topographical and architectural aspects. Every other aspect of material culture could and should be mentioned, followed by questions which can be answered with the help of archaeobotany, archaeozoology and anthropology, geological and climatological questions, and so on.

Every one of these questions arises in every mediaeval town, big or small. And everywhere, the first step is to answer each question individually, for every town is first and foremost an individual entity with a very individual history, from its history as a whole to the history of its individual elements, right down to the individual histories of the building on, and use of, every individual plot. On this sound footing any further scholarly work will be possible and we can move on to make comparisons.

3. The methodological perspective

There is also the question about methodological procedure: why should urban archaeology undertake such small excavations, and why, on the other hand, so many of them? Why not concentrate the restricted funds for worthwhile huge projects?

Here again, a broad answer to begin with: since urban archaeology in Europe is rescue archaeology, and since the size, number and site of potential digs is not dictated by archaeologists but by the building industry, we haven't any choice[18]. In Europe, up to 99% of archaeology in towns consists of emergency digs. Even if this expression "emergency dig" is

16 A rare exemple of a recently excavated Jewish cemetery of the 14th century: Alder, Matt 2010.

17 An excellent case study from Northrhine-Westfalia, Germany: Kneppe 2004.

18 Scholkmann 1997-1998. An official statement relating to rescue archaeology by the *Verband der Landesarchäologen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*: http://www.landesarchaeologen.de (PDF: 'Leitlinien zur archäologischen Denkmalpflege in Deutschland') [accessed 14 February 2013].

not meant literally, because – as I would like to emphasize from my own experience – thanks to good cooperation with the relevant builders and building-control authorities, it is very often possible to plan and carry out the excavation in advance. Of course, in almost every town there are one-off building projects, involving large areas of land, which can lead to major urban archaeological projects on an equally large scale in their preliminary stages. Nevertheless, for towns in general investigations of this sort are the exception rather than the rule. Building is always going on in old town centres, but many, very many of these building projects affect only a single plot or even only part of one. Then there are cable and pipe renewals, road-surface renewals, pits dug for new trees, fountains, monuments and other urban embellishments. Many of these potential excavation sites are very small and lie scattered all over the area of the old town. But archaeologists have no choice, or their choice is limited to whether to excavate or whether to allow a given small area to be bulldozed away, without archaeological record. Successful archaeology under these conditions only works if, for any given place, the appropriate research questions have been formulated. Since however – as postulated above – there would actually always be enough questions, I believe that even with archaeology in small areas, it is possible to arrive at new findings for urban history.

Urban archaeological research is often compared with doing a jigsaw puzzle. With jigsaw puzzles you don't arrive at the whole picture by throwing a large score on the dice. Instead you patiently fit together individual pieces, which as you work can be joined up to make picture sections, and so the whole picture gradually takes shape. Three things must be noted: puzzles need time and there are no shortcuts! Each individual piece could be important, even crucial and cannot simply be left out, otherwise there is the danger that the complete picture will not emerge. As you work, individual pieces can take a very long time to find their places and it may seem as if they do not belong. And that is exactly how the archeological exploration of a town works: every excavation area, however small, is a sort of jigsaw puzzle piece; every excavation area, again however small, is potentially important and cannot simply be left out – it may be the key to one of the many areas of the jigsaw; in other words, to one of the individual research questions.

But it is obvious that small excavations do not lead to spectacular results. You have to know the town and the questions that it poses, otherwise this type of archeology doesn't work. You have to stick at it: sometimes it can take decades before the individual puzzle pieces slowly yield a complete picture. So perseverance and stamina are required – not qualities which are highly valued in today's event- and fun-loving soci-

ety, which demands immediate gratification. And even the current 'project culture' in university research does not suit this type of urban archaeology, relying as it does on a long-term approach.

All these unfavourable circumstances have led to the demand – from precisely such university circles, amongst others – for urban archaeology no longer to be done in existing towns but to restrict itself to the excavation of deserted towns, since research there can be 'simpler' and 'more goal-oriented' (Stephan 2000). This is nonsense. In the first place, it is like comparing pears with apples – how does a huge town like Lübeck or Nuremberg (Friedel, Frieser 1999) bear any relation to one of the small abandoned towns all over Europe? Secondly, to make such absurd demands is to simplify the history of the European town in a completely unacceptable way: every town exhibits very individual traits and under no circumstances may we use observations in one town as the basis for hasty conclusions about circumstances in another. Regional and interregional comparison is an essential pillar of research, but this work is still in its infancy and I believe that there are still very few known detailed facts which are capable of bearing any weight.

Thirdly, this attitude does an injustice to the phenomenon of the deserted town, for such a town is not simply one whose growth or existence ended with its being abandoned, like a sort of 'mediaeval Pompeii', but was almost always the product of a complex developmental history, which often did not end with abandonment at all (Küntzel 2008).

There are voices that want to go even further and consider urban archaeology to be fundamentally superfluous. When one takes a closer look at such views, one can see that what lies behind them is often historians' frustration. Often there are two reasons: either it is because the archaeologist in question – as a prehistorian, unfamiliar with questions of mediaeval archaeology, or as a stranger to the town, with no knowledge of its particular history and research questions – does little but present finds of rather modest informational value. For example, some 14th-century bone knife handles from a latrine look nice, but for the history of the town, information about the plot structure revealed by the positioning of the latrine would perhaps be of a little more relevance. Or it is because these historians do not understand the archaeological publications. Perhaps that is their fault to some extent, but probably it is more to do with the fact that many archaeological reports really are hard for outsiders to understand (Steuer 1997-1998; Ericsson 2005; Baeriswyl *et al.* 2009).

There is also a second answer from the methodological perspective. It is a fundamental fact that in the majority of towns only 5-10%, at most,

Fig. 2. Ground plan of Unterseen with archaeological finds and building periods. We hade already excavated nearly 30 % of the little foundation town of the late 13th century and were sure to understand the simple ground plan. Then, in the trenches of a piping renewal in 2012, we found a row of houses (grey underlined) (© Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern).

of the area of the old town has been examined archaeologically. Some areas of every town are often completely unknown[19]. That being the case, urban archaeology should rejoice at every opportunity, however small, of enlarging the explored area thanks to even very small excavations.

Just as in a jigsaw the whole picture becomes recognisable only after a certain number of pieces have been assembled, so there are many questions that we archaeologists can actually only answer when we have excavated as much as we can. Paradoxically, however, we ought to formulate hypotheses as soon as we can, because these lead to the research questions without which we can't continue our work successfully. Despite this, it is a fact that archaeologists tend to put forward wide-ranging hypotheses which are based on archaeological investigation of little more

[19] This applies even to towns where a lot of archaeological work is done like Freiburg im Breisgau or Lübeck.

than 5% of a town's area. Rather bold! One can be in for some surprises when fresh excavations are done. But that of course is not a bad thing – quite the contrary, since it's what allows research to progress. Such surprises, it should be said, can happen even in towns which we thought we knew, since nearly a third of their area had been excavated like the little foundation town Unterseen in Switzerand[20] (fig. 2).

4. The technical and organisational perspective

For urban archaeology to be successful over the long term, on the scene continuously and over decades in the way envisaged above, it requires appropriate organisational, political and, not least, financial integration. It is necessary, firstly, to have an urban archaeologist who knows the town, its history, the research questions and the areas which have already been excavated. Secondly, this archaeologist needs time and continuity to look into these questions by carrying out excavations over years or even decades in this individual town. Thirdly, he needs a small team of technical colleagues who can ensure a constant presence at the many ongoing building projects, which are often working against deadlines. And that cannot be done without appropriate financial resources. Fourthly, there must be a good line of communication to the municipal building authorities, who alert the builder to the archaeology and the archaeologist to the impending building project – preferably as early as the planning permission stage. Networking with local or regional historical associations, municipal or state archives, heritage societies, and the relevant authority for the preservation of historic monuments is indispensable. This helps the mutual exchange of information about research questions and building plans. Shrewd public relations, without trying to hit the headlines, make the local population aware of their roots, for example by taking school classes, local sections of political parties, associations, service clubs, municipal bus drivers, etc., etc., on tours of the excavation sites and the town (fig. 3; Baeriswyl 2011). Good relations with architects and builders help them to get their planning right. For that reason, A lot of them will get in touch of their own accord next time a building project is being planned – if the archaeological service has shown that it is a dependable partner. Local tourism organisations and

[20] The pre-2012 current state of research in Gutscher, Studer 2003. The current state of research since the excavations of 2012 in Herrmann 2013, in print.

Fig. 3. The local population is normally interested and fascinated by archaeology and love to visit excavation sites. Here a view from Biel-Gerberngasse, an excavation site in a suburban handicraft aerea just outside the walls of the foundation town of Biel in the canton of Berne (2011; © Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern).

teachers' associations, in particular, are excellent at 'spreading the word': regular lectures, courses and workshops help to disseminate knowledge about archaeological results. The backing of people in political office is indispensable; when a mayor realises that chairing an archaeological press conference or opening a public excavation day is very effective with the media, that can help enormously. Having students and school children take part in excavations doesn't only help to provide enough manpower, but with luck it will foster contacts with the local or regional university. Often it will be one of two of these students who will later, in the context of an MA theses or dissertation, write the academic papers which are actually vital for sustainable archaeology, but which the urban archaeologist can seldom manage to write himself.

Second answer: it does not greatly matter how urban archaeology is integrated organisationally. There exist state archaeological services which have been responsible for the towns in their region, their Bundesland, their county or their canton. But there are also many urban archaeologists who are employed by the town, while others are employees of the local or regional museum.

Private archaeological firms, on the other hand, are not ideal, at least in Switzerland. They can hardly ever guarantee the continuity which I am calling for. And there is another problem: since archaeologists in these firms need to be all-rounders, they are almost always pre-historians, and many of them do not have the expertise to deal with urban archaeological questions and problems.

Volunteer archaeology is a wonderful help but from an academic point of view, as well as from the point of view of excavation techniques, there are grave doubts about leaving urban archaeology entirely to amateurs. Professionalism can only be guaranteed by professionals (even if one must admit that the reverse is not always true) and excavation techniques have become so professionalised that amateurs are often in danger of merely dabbling.

Third answer: a particular urban archaeology service can function properly – and make that large quantity of small scale excavations, if it is set up properly in terms of personnel and finance. The greatest danger for archaeology as a whole, including urban archaeology, is the enormous amount of building activity taking place over wide areas of Europe, with which archaeologists are completely unable to keep up. Even a well-functioning urban archaeology service cannot adequately keep an eye on every building site and, even if an excavation has gone excellently, what normally happens is that documentation and finds end up in store and are neither properly evaluated nor appropriately publicised.

5. Summing up and looking ahead

Finally, let us draw the different perspectives together. An urban archaeology service which is optimally integrated and organised, which works continuously and with the necessary patience and persistence, will extract within a space of ten or twenty years an enormous amount of information and insight. That is the situation in many urban archaeology services in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. In many places like Berne, Zürich, Basle, Constance, Vienna, Brandenburg an der Havel or Lübeck, the relevant organisation has become sufficiently large for it to be possible, from time to time, at best annually, to publish a report in which the excavations are briefly presented. Sometimes it is occasionally even possible to evaluate individual excavations; perhaps someone from the urban archaeology team is prepared to do it in his spare time – he is unlikely to manage it during his working hours – or a student is able to write a Master's thesis or dissertation, or in one-off cases, there may even be

third-party funding available for evaluation and publication. And so we now have the situation in which there exist, in manuscript form, in short reports, occasionally properly evaluated and published, a great number of case histories detailing the building and utilisation of town halls, market places, town gates, parish churches, town fortresses and other structures on individual land plots in individual towns.

But that is as far as it goes. The next step in the academic process is not being taken. The regional, interregional, national and Europe-wide comparison of these dwelling houses, town halls, market places and parish churches is not happening, or is happening only on a very small scale. That is an extraordinary shame. I am convinced that, with archaeological research at its current stage, it would already be possible, today, to answer pivotal questions about the emergence and the structural and topographical development of the town and its constituent parts. But these comparisons cannot be the job of the urban archaeological organisations, because they are limited by the political boundaries of the public bodies they serve, and they have other tasks. This is where the universities should be stepping in. And this is where there is a tremendous gap: on the one hand are urban archaeological agencies and organisations unearthing new sources and insights in vast quantities, while on the other hand there seem to be no large-scale research programmes to put this wealth of sources and insights to use and take up the task from the point at which, today, urban archaeology ideally leaves off. How could we change that?

"10,000 excavations", the catchword for large quantities of mostly small scale urban archaeological interventions, make sense if the relevant urban archaeology agency is set up, in terms of scholarship, methodology and organisation, in such a way that it has "10,000" research questions available and tries, through continuous, properly methodical and well-organised work, to answer them. "10,000 excavations" in one town make sense because it is the only way in which a picture of that town will gradually emerge. And finally, "10,000" excavations in every town make sense, because while every town is an individual entity, it is also part of a general European culture and can therefore contribute to the answers to large questions. This can only happen, however, when someone else also takes up these questions and makes use of the treasures amassed by archaeological agencies and institutions.

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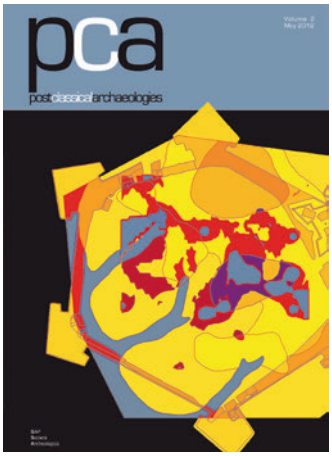

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