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Interdisciplinarity and archaeology

Scientific interactions in nineteenth- and
twentieth-century archaeology

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Chapter 6

Interdisciplinarity? The word and the practice in the history of Swiss wetland archaeology

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Abstract

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, research into Swiss wetlands has favoured collaborations between archaeology and the natural sciences. While the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ as it is used today could define such practices, this word did not appear in the language of Swiss researchers and science administrators until around the 1970s. Moreover, between the 1970s and the 2000s, a science funding agency like the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) did not use the term ‘interdisciplinary’ to describe collaborative prehistoric research in its reports. This obliges us to treat the question of interdisciplinarity in the history of archaeology as a complex issue, distinguishing the use of the word and the practice over time.

Keywords: interdisciplinary; wetland archaeology; politics of science; history of archaeological practice.

Introduction

The emergence of a word and a practice are not necessarily contemporary. Since the 1860s, prehistory has borrowed as much from the imperatives of collecting, describing and classifying the natural sciences as it has from the comparative imperatives of art history and ethnography (Blanckaert 2017). Thus, prehistorians have long been practising what we now call interdisciplinarity. However, the expression did not appear in the European scientific field until the 1960s–70s (Feuerhahn and Reubi forthcoming). Until the 1960s, Swiss prehistorians and science administrators used other words such as *Hilfswissenschaften*, *Naturwissenschaften* and *Nachbarwissenschaften* in German and *annex- and auxiliary sciences* in French to qualify collaborations between archaeology and other disciplines. Moreover, these expressions continued to be used after the 1960s and were