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The Highest Abattoir of the Tyrol at the Schneeberg/Moos in the Passeier Valley/South Tyrol

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On the food supply of the miners during the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era.

The SOUTH TYROLEAN MINING MUSEUM has been carrying out archaeological research into the Schneeberg mining complex around Moos in the Passeier valley since 2009. The mining district, which is situated between the Passeier and Ridnaun valleys, is not only one of the oldest and longest-running districts of the Tyrol, but can also be counted among the most spacious of its kind and boasts the most extensive tunnel system of South Tyrol (Stedingk et al., 2002).

The Schneeberg experienced its heyday during the transition from the late Middle Ages to the modern era around the year 1500, after the focus of its production had shifted from silver to lead. The years from around 1450 to 1550 are regarded as the golden age of mining at the Schneeberg. In 1486, around 1000 people were working around the Schneeberg area (for further reading: Sribik, 1928). The mining of silver in the North Tyrolean districts of Schwaz and Brixlegg in the 15th and 16th centuries would not have gained its worldwide recognition without the lead ores from the South Tyrolean deposits in the Gossensaß and Schneeberg regions (for further reading: Haditsch, 1992; Atzl, 1957/58; Baumgarten et al., 1998; Egg, 1992; Mutschlechner, 1993a) The year 1486 is regarded as the climax of mining in the respective district, with 1000 people working in ca. 70 tunnels (Mutschlechner, 1990a).

In the course of the third field campaign of the research project in the year 2011, the so-called “Fleischpankl”, the abattoir of the mining district, which can be recognized in the oldest illustration of the district in the Schwaz Mining Book of 1556, was examined. It can be assumed that the miners supplied themselves with products from the neighbouring valleys (Passeier, Ridnaun) and the Sterzing area during the initial years of the mine in the Middle Ages (Mutschlechner, 1993b). Due to the increase of the workforce, provisions for the numerous pitmen largely had to be imported during the transition from the late Middle Ages to the modern era. The range of foods was rather modest and monotonous: flour, lard, bread, cheese, pulses and meat.

Still, many pitmen quit working at the mines because of supply shortages. In order to assure that the mines went on working, the grand entrepreneurs introduced the so-called “Pfennwerthandel” (“penny-value trade”, translators note), for which the main entrepreneurs installed several subsidiaries in Sterzing where the miners spent parts of their wages to purchase the required goods at fixed, mostly cheaper prices. Food was bought wholesale by the entrepreneurs, which enabled them to sell at somewhat lower prices. The miners wages were partly or sometimes completely paid in goods like staples, wine, cloth, shoes and various others (Mutschlechner, 1990b).

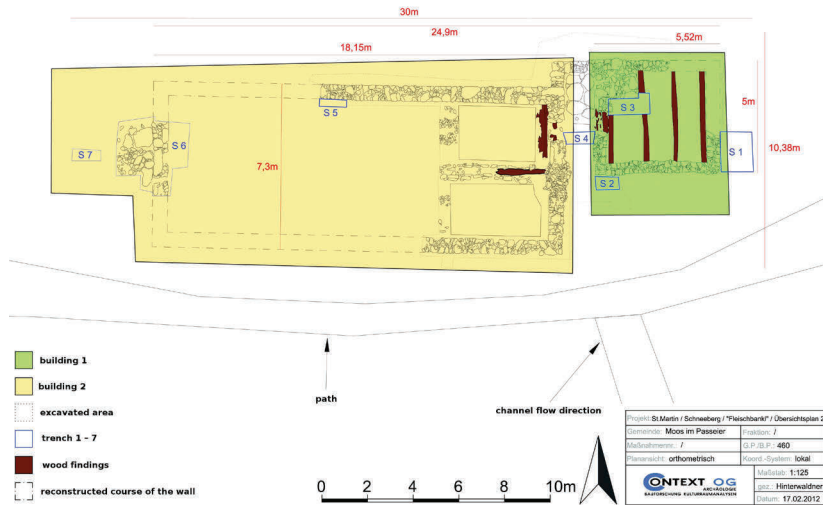


Fig. 1: The “Fleischpankl”, abattoir at the Schneeberg/Moos in the Passeier Valley/South Tyrol (CONTEXT OG).

During the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era, the miners at the Schneeberg, who also worked in winter, regarded meat as their main food, a diet complemented by staples like rye and wheat porridge, bread and lard. It should be noted that the required quantities of meat could not be covered by the supplies of the Tyrol. As a result, contracts related to deliveries of livestock from Hungary, Salzburg, Carinthia and Styria have been documented for the years 1591, 1597, 1622 and 1659. Herds of up to 300 Hungarian oxen were annually driven up the Schneeberg. The first mentioning (enfeoffment) of the butchers shop at the Schneeberg goes back as early as 1486 and can be found in the book of fees of the Sterzing mining court among the enfeoffments of mining rights (Mutschlechner, 1985; 1987; 1990b; 1990c, 1992; 1993b).

Within the framework of the archaeological investigations of the year 2011, the position and essential aspects of the ground plan of the ensemble as depicted in the Schwaz Mining Book (1556) (Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Dip. 856) were verified. The butchers shop is situated in the central zone of the so-called “upper mountain”. Its position was selected due to the fact that the snow melts early, which makes it easily accessible. All preserved masonry areas were built with lime mortar. These findings not only represent the so far earliest evidence of this building method but also indicate the intention of long-term use. At the present moment it is impossible to assess the original height of the masonry.

The archaeological evidence of the objects in question proves that the “Fleischpankl” (“meat bench”, translators note) was an ensemble which originally consisted of two separate buildings. The complete ensemble was 30m long and had a maximum width of 10.38m. The smaller room in the east (5 x 5.52m) can be interpreted as a living area. Its northwestern corner area shows a stone fundament, which was connected with the exterior wall area of the building by means of a

butt joint. Stove tiles (flat tiles) prove that this space was originally occupied by a tile stove. Parts of its firemouth are still preserved in the wall substance facing the hallway area. To the south of this area, in the central area of the western wall of the living quarters, lies the door space. Further openings in the wall were situated above the preserved wall substance. The masonry of the living area descends in the northeastern corner, where a massive mortar packet, in which only scattered rests of stone substance can be found, replaces the masonry.

Adjacent to the west of the residential building lies the slaughter room (18.15 x 7.30m). Between both rooms an L-shaped wall section forms a hallway which closes this area to the north. Butt joints connected with both buildings show that this section of masonry was inserted later, thus implying that there once were two separate buildings. The northern half of the building shows a panelled floor reaching as far as the door space of the living area. Individual panels of the same kind can be found in the stratigraphically overlying rubble and indicate that the whole corridor was originally covered with slates. Thus, these partial findings do not represent a hall area but a concluding corridor to the north, which served as a vestibule. The sediment area, which is stratigraphically situated under the panelled floor, the unpanelled sediment of the hallway and the adjoining exterior areas at the same level do not only contain bovine teeth, but also 15th and 16th-century pottery tempered with graphite.

Characteristic features indicating vegetation and relief, as well as construction findings in the south east of the ensemble show that the slaughter room had access to water, which is absolutely necessary for a butchers shop. This access was connected to the conduit system of the mining district and secured the supply of the slaughter room. There is a clearly visible modification in the structure of the eastern wall, where there was a secondary water seal. In the central interior area, the former water inlet continues with a U-shaped wooden gutter, whose direction follows the principal axis of the slaughter room. Remains of the stone wedge trace its course even in the areas without preserved wooden substance, which run as far as the large door space of the western wall (S 6). The function of the central wooden gutter was to dispose of the sewage to the west, through the outlet in the wall.

The frequent occurrence of bovine teeth proves the function of the ensemble as the butchers shop of the mining district, which makes it a unique finding of an abattoir in a mountain area of this altitude. The picture of the "Fleischpankl" in the Schwaz Mining Book (1556) (Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Dip. 856) shows two construction elements. Due to the perspective, it cannot be judged whether the vestibule connected the two rooms as early as 1556. A further ground plan can be detected in an old map of the district from 1799 from Josef von Senger (after: Tasser, 1994), which depicts two separate buildings. The reason for this might be that the illustrator simply did not include a picture of the vestibule. What the cut does show, however, is that the building still existed at the end of the 18th century. Considering the background of the first shutdown of the mine in the year 1798 (Haller & Schölzhorn, 2008) and the fact that there were only "free diggers" left in the district, it can be concluded that the abattoir was already closed before the turn of the century. This would also explain the sealing off of the inlet pipe on the western side of the slaughterhouse, which suggests a non-water related use of the ensemble.

Finally the ensemble was systematically demolished, which is proven by the large mortar packet in the northeastern corner of the living area, where it descends into the ground without showing a significant percentage of building stone; this conclusion is also supported by the fact that there is no wall rubble in the immediate surroundings of the ensemble. It is not unreasonable to create a causal connection between the demolition of the “Fleischpankl” and the womens house, which was built in the close vicinity of the slaughterhouse in 1896 (Haller & Schölzhorn, 2008). This process might have included a secondary use of wall stones taken from the butchers shop. The present status of the artefact analyses (stove ceramics, pottery, fragments of crown glass, etc.) supports dating the findings from the 15th and 16th centuries to the 19th century.

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