

Interested visitors around the display case featuring the bow case, bow, arrow shafts, and flint arrowheads – the centerpiece of the exhibition. (Image: Archäologischer Dienst Bern, Daniel Marchand)



At the hands-on table, visitors can touch reconstructed sections of the bow case and experience its material qualities and construction techniques firsthand. (Image: Giovanna Di Pietro)

The Schnidejoch Bow Case: The Stone Age was the Plant Age

This project is centred around the “Archäologie aktuell” (“Archaeology today”) exhibition at the Bernisches Historisches Museum, featuring the Schnidejoch bow case that is the only such extant example from the Neolithic era that is made of superimposed strips of birch bark and other plant components. It challenges the notion that Neolithic material culture was dominated by stone and ceramic objects, and highlights the central role of plants, inviting the public to reflect on ancient knowledge about plants and our contemporary relationship with them.

Im Mittelpunkt des Projekts steht die Ausstellung des Bogenfutterals im Bernischen Historischen Museum, das auf dem Schnidejoch-Pass im Kanton Bern gefunden wurde. Es ist das einzig erhaltene neolithische Bogenfutteral aus übereinanderliegenden Birkenrindenstreifen und anderen pflanzlichen Bestandteilen. Das Projekt und die Aufarbeitung hinterfragen die Vorstellung, dass die neolithische Materialkultur von Stein- und Keramikgegenständen dominiert wurde, und hebt die zentrale Rolle der Pflanzen hervor. Damit lädt «Archäologie aktuell» die Öffentlichkeit dazu ein, über das Pflanzen-Wissen unserer Vorfahren und unsere heutige Beziehung zu ihnen nachzudenken.

Publications: Klügl, Johanna. «Das neolithische Bogenfutteral vom Schnidejoch.» Hefte zur Archäologie im Kanton Bern, Bd.15. Bern: Archäologischer Dienst Bern, 2025.

Klügl, Johanna, and Di Pietro, Giovanna. “Drying methods for archaeological birch cork”15th ICOM-CC Wet Organic Archaeological Materials (WOAM) Working Group Conference. Mainz: 2025.

Klügl, Johanna, and Di Pietro, Giovanna. “Atlas of Micromorphological Degradation of Archaeological Birch Bark.” Applied Sciences 11 (18): 2025. https://www.mdpi.com/2076-3417/11/18/8721.

Klügl, Johanna, and Di Pietro, Giovanna. “The interaction of water with archaeological and ethnographic birch bark and its effects on swelling, shrinkage and deformations.” Heritage Science 9 (1): 2025. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-020-00476-y.

Klügl, Johanna, Hafner, Albert and Di Pietro, Giovanna. “On the rolling and plasticization of birch bark.” 14th ICOM-CC Wet Organic Archaeological Materials (WOAM) Working Group Conference. Portsmouth: 2019.

Introduction: Although prehistoric ages are still named after inorganic materials (stone, bronze and iron), archaeologists are aware that most objects in use were made of organic materials: wood, bark, grasses, bone, skins and leather. The ubiquity of their presence in everyday prehistoric life contrasts with their rarity in archaeological finds because they need special environmental conditions for them to survive for thousands of years down to our own day. One example is a bow case found in 2003 in an ice patch at the Schnidejoch pass in the canton of Bern. Dating from 2800 BC and made of birch bark strips, wooden reinforcement rods, leather elements, a piece of rawhide and further organic components, it is the only surviving example of a bow case from the Neolithic. However, the rarity of organic prehistoric objects is matched by our lack of appropriate methods for their restoration and conservation.

Methods: In this project, communication strategies and activities have been developed to raise awareness of the importance of plant materials in Neolithic culture, and to present the biography of this exceptional object.

Results: The object is placed centrally in the exhibition room. Next to it is an animation that tells the story of how the bow case was made and its conservation process. A 3D model allows observers to explore its complex construction and technical details and to gain a deeper understanding of birch bark, its degradation and its conservation. Modern reproductions of parts of the bow case are shown to highlight its complex structure. These may be touched and experienced directly in the exhibition. Finally, guided tours and workshops for school classes and families enable us to engage more directly with the public. The Schnidejoch bow case was the focus of the SNSF project “Unfreezing History”, which provided the necessary knowledge for its conservation. The Archaeological Service of the Canton of Bern is a project partner and the owner of the bow case. It is now on exhibition at the Bernisches Historisches Museum until May 2026 (see the QR-code beside).

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