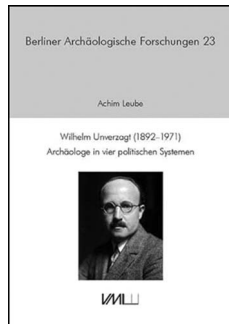




Book Review

ACHIM LEUBE. 2024. *Wilhelm Unverzagt (1892–1971). Archäologe in vier Systemen* (Berliner Forschungen 23). Rahden: Marie Leidorf; 978-3-89646-574-0 hardback €69.80.



With this biography of Wilhelm Unverzagt, Achim Leube has produced an impressive work. Born in the Rhineland in 1892, Unverzagt played a decisive role in establishing and shaping pre- and protohistoric archaeology and he single-mindedly represented the interests of archaeology at universities, in practical monument preservation, at the Academy of Sciences and in his museum work. Wilhelm Unverzagt studied in Bonn, Munich and Berlin during the Wilhelminian era (1890–1918) and volunteered for military service in 1914, from which he was discharged after being wounded. He then joined the civil administration of occupied Belgium, where he was responsible for archaeological monuments and museums. From December 1919 to September 1924, he worked in the Armistice Commission, the Reich Commissariat for Reparations and the Reich Commission for the Restitution of Cultural Property. In 1920, he moved to Berlin. In 1925, Unverzagt completed his doctorate under the German-Swiss archaeologist and biblical scholar known for his contributions to Near Eastern archaeology, Carl Watzinger in Tübingen, a short position as research assistant at the State Museum of Ethnology in Berlin followed. Only a year later, Unverzagt, then aged 34, was appointed director of the museum and thus the successor to Carl Schuchardt, a prominent prehistorian who directed the prehistoric department of the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. He authored excavation reports that included descriptions of postholes in archaeological contexts, thereby establishing a standard method in excavation techniques. Additionally, he was involved in a controversy with the nationalist prehistorian Gustaf Kossinna, who was also based in Berlin, over the ‘ethnic interpretation’ of archaeological finds—a position adopted even by Unverzagt. The museum collection, including Schliemann’s treasures from Troy and the legacy of Slavic culture was at the time one of the most important in Europe. Under Unverzagt’s leadership, the Prehistory Department of the Museum of Ethnology eventually became the State Museum of Prehistory and Early History. The 20 years of his work were shaped by the world economic crisis, National Socialism and war. His plans to remodel the museum failed due to a lack of funding, but the redesigned display collection and the study collection that emerged demonstrated the museum’s pan-European significance—always fiercely opposed to Kossinna’s ideas and his ‘völkische Kreise’ that refers to groups associated with the ‘völkisch’ movement, a German nationalist and ethnocentric ideology that gained prominence in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The word *völkisch* derives from *Volk*, meaning ‘people’ or ‘folk’. In this context, it implies a romanticised notion of a pure, unified ethnic community, often tied to German heritage, culture and race. Unverzagt followed Schuchardt’s line, as he did in his choice of research specialisations. He turned his attention to early historic forts in eastern Germany and dedicated himself to researching

prehistoric and early historic fortifications in the province of Brandenburg. The excavations in Zantoch, Kliestow and Lebus are still important milestones in Slavic research today. Between 1932 and 1938, he worked as a state liaison officer for cultural-historical archaeological sites in Brandenburg. As early as the mid-1930s, Berlin museums took precautions to protect themselves from air-strikes and stored irreplaceable exhibits in large vaults of the mint and the Prussian State Bank. From 1939 to 1945, Unverzagt was busy securing and salvaging the museum's collections. The museum building was destroyed in February 1945. He had to hand over the precious gold finds, which were stored in the Flak tower at Berlin Zoo, to the Soviet commandant's office. After the war, he was dismissed due to his membership of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and the museum and research centre in Lebus were destroyed. Due to his membership of the NSDAP, Unverzagt lost his position as director of the museum in mid-July 1945 in accordance with the regulations of the Soviet military administration. His efforts to take up a teaching position at the Humboldt University Berlin were initially met with approval until the negative outcome of the denazification process in 1946 prevented him from doing so. Unverzagt's basic political stance was national-conservative but not a national-socialist and made no secret of his position. Finally, he joined the party because of repressive measures and wrote in 1945: "My situation became increasingly difficult. Therefore, I did not dare to refuse the written request to join the party in 1938, in the interest of preserving my life's work and continuing my scientific endeavors." Unverzagt had no difficulty in co-operating with the Soviet military administration and, after several attempts to reintegrate him professionally, he was appointed Institute Director at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin (East) in October 1953, of which he was a full member since 1949.

Unverzagt played a key role in determining the development, focus of research in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during these years, and was able to continue his 'Burgwall' research, which had been interrupted by the war. Under his direction, the excavations in the city centre of Magdeburg began in 1948, and in 1960, he resumed his earlier excavations in the castle of Lebus.

Despite his employment in the GDR, he remained a border crosser out of conviction and commuted between West and East Berlin. He served, as a liaison, across the inner German border, was a member of the DAI and RGK, mediated contacts between colleagues and took part in the state-mandated co-operation with the academies in Poland and the CSSR; thus kept the communication open in both direction. The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 did not stop this activity, even though he had to accept financial losses and suffered from the increasing division of Germany. He retired on 31 December 1963 but kept working and researching until his death in 1971.

Leube succeeds in tracing the multifaceted life and work of Wilhelm Unverzagt. Unverzagt tried to adapt to the political circumstances by choosing the path of the lesser evil but was unable to avoid propagandistic tasks: excavations with the SS (Schutzstaffel) on the Bärhorst near Nauen; the establishment of a research centre in Lebus an der Oder under the auspices of the SS; or the excavations for the 'Ahnenerbe' at the Belgrade fortress in 1942 and 1943. After 1945, East Germany made a conscious break with the bourgeois orientation of

archaeology as it had been practised until 1933 and sought a new beginning, in which Unverzagt also found his place with his supposedly innocuous research.

It is a worthwhile study. It offers detailed and knowledgeable insights into a long life of a scholar full of human challenges, which may not be immediately apparent to the hurried reader at first glance. Nevertheless, this publication is recommended for anyone interested in the subject of archaeology and its history. From the wealth of archive material, Leube has managed to stringently portray the work of the archaeologist Unverzagt in networks, in science, in times of major political events and changes, during two world wars, personal successes and disasters. Leube's study brings us closer not only to the teacher and researcher, but also to the man Unverzagt, who could celebrate with Rhineland *joie de vivre*. It was a life and a career with many breaks and contradictions, in which he chose archaeology as his path and tried to fit in and to shape the discipline in the different systems. The author has succeeded in tracing the close interweaving of state, players and institutions. When reading the book, the question inevitably arises as to what importance was attached to archaeology in civic education and training in the respective social systems and how it presents itself today.

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