

## PETRI BERLIN – ENTDECKE DIE ARCHÄOLOGIE – UNCOVERING ARCHAEOLOGY Berlin's most modern archeological exhibition and research centre is open

RÉKA GULYÁS<sup>1</sup>

Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 14 (2025) Issue 2, pp. 48–52.

*PETRI, the new and novel institution of archeology was opened on 24 June 2025. The modern building on seven levels is like a spectacular showroom: it is in front of the visitor's eyes that archeological finds that were dug up in the area of Berlin develop into museum exhibits.*

The construction of PETRI was launched in 2019, and in the past six years some 35 million euros have been invested into the most efficient coordination and maximum satisfaction of the needs of the archaeologists, restorers, and scholars working there, as well as the needs of a wide range of visitors. Ninety per cent of the funding for this unique project came from the German federal budget, while the remaining ten per cent was provided by the capital Berlin.

From the large windows of the imposing white building located at the edge of the Fischer-Insel, we get a view of Berlin's downtown area, which has been in constant change for thousands of years (Figs 1–2). Of this long process, PETRI concentrates mainly on the medieval period. In the early 13th century, two small settlements developed on the two sides of the Spree River: Written records refer to the one as Cölln, while the other as Berlin. Initially, they were connected by a dike, later by a long bridge, and from 1309 they formed a union of towns, and finally in 1432 they were united as Berlin-Cölln.



Fig. 1. Entrance to PETRI with the Berlin TV Tower.  
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte / David von Becker



Fig. 2. PETRI, the new archeological laboratory in Berlin.  
© Florian Nagler Architekten GmbH

Preceding the inauguration of PETRI, the streets of Berlin were flooded by giant posters drawing attention to the new institution. One of these marketing devices raised the question whether we were familiar with Berlin's birthday. This seemingly simple question is not easy to answer, but if you visit PETRI, you will certainly have a better idea. The new archaeological centre informs us that, according to the latest research, the writings of a monk called Symeon are the first to mention its predecessors: Cölln in 1237,

<sup>1</sup> Independent researcher. E-mail: [greka67@hotmail.com](mailto:greka67@hotmail.com)

and Berlin in 1244. The exhibition also makes it clear that the area had already been populated much earlier by various peoples. Thus, Berlin's birthday can be defined in several ways and connected to different dates. The name of Berlin originates from the now dead West Slavic Polabian language used along the Elba River. "Ber" refers to swamps, while "lin" means settlement. The widely held explanation that the name comes from the German word for 'bear' (Bär), as suggested also by its heraldic animal, is more likely to be a weird example of folk etymology.

Berlin was thus built on marshy boggy land. By the Middle Ages, however, special construction methods had been developed for this swamp soil. As a consequence, among others, a grand church as well as a Latin school could be erected in the area. Headed by the archaeologist Dr. Claudia Melisch, the foundations were unearthed in Petri Square between 2007 and 2009. In turn, the new archaeological centre, started in 2020, has been established on the medieval ruins. In the same way as centuries ago, the once swampy soil and the proximity of the River Spree necessitated special methods of laying the foundations for the new institution (*Fig. 3*).

PETRI qualifies itself as an archaeological lab (Archäologie Lab) rather than a museum or exhibition space. The press conference held at the inauguration ceremony, coupled with a visit to the site, soon revealed the reason for the decision. Representatives of the media were given the tour that visitors would also be able to take to discover the centre. It transpires that, in this spectacular scientific project, all visitors will receive the same information, but the framing will differ according to age groups and levels of knowledge and interest. While children will be introduced to archaeology and the stages of related scientific analyses and conservation strategies in the framework of a game, adults can study not only the stages of managing finds from excavation to exhibition, but will also learn about the history of science (e.g., the methods of analogous cataloguing and digital archiving). Outside researchers will have the opportunity to attend in-house conferences and even to do their own shorter or longer research projects there.

Now let us take a look at the content offered by the seven floors, including one underground, of the building that occupies a space of 5412 square metres.

### BASEMENT – ARCHAEOLOGICAL WINDOW

From the lounge on the ground floor, visitors are immediately directed to the basement, where they seem to find themselves right in the middle of an excavation (*Fig. 4*). Here they are introduced to the indispensable tools of archaeologists, from the spatula to the brush and various measurement instruments. The reconstruction of the church in three different periods and styles (Gothic, Baroque, Neogothic) can also be monitored with the help of a projected show of the church that once stood in Petri Square or its close vicinity. In the meantime, we can stroll between the remains of the city walls and the town's Latin school. We can peep into the ancient streets whose directions are completely different from those on the surface today.

In the middle of the hall, further information and interactive games are hidden in grey boxes. The storage spaces contain objects from the remains of the former school, such as a bronze clip or a small jewel that



*Fig. 3. Stratigraphy. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte / David von Becker*





*Fig. 4. First floor with the remains of medieval walls, with the reconstruction of the church projected.*

© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte / David von Becker

must have belonged to a six-year-old, and we can also read the school's schedule and internal rules. Although the latter shows that children were forbidden to play in the courtyard, some colourful marbles and other toys have been found on the site.

The designers of the exhibition space did not forget about the blind and the partially sighted, who can hold in their hands the model of the former building, and in several places, information is provided also in Braille about the exhibits. In the cemetery next to the church, burials were conducted from the mid-13th to the mid-18th century. The remains of 3882 persons have been recovered from a total of 3126 graves, with several of them identified as those of children. A new ossuary has been built in the place of the old cemetery, where they will rebury 475 people, identified as the oldest "Berlin citizens" (Fig. 5).

One year prior to the official opening of PETRI, a religious ceremony was held for the reburial of a hundred persons, and the placement into the ossuary of the further human remains is ongoing. Various methods have been applied for the examination of the bones. Their most striking feature, especially in the case of children, is the visible sign of hunger, but there are also indications of tuberculosis and syphilis.

This section of the new centre is concerned not only with burials and the dead. The repeatedly destroyed German capital, which was divided for long years and was often forced to engage in trying to establish its identity, is now redefining itself after 35 years by going back to its partly forgotten roots, such as this medieval city hub and its inhabitants. It is emphasised at the same time that not all of these people had been born in Berlin. Among the first inhabitants, there were Slavs as well, and migrants of various other nationalities were continuously added to them.



*Fig. 5. Ossuary in the basement of PETRI. Berlin's medieval "natives" will be reburied here. Mud bricks will be used for walling up the holes. © BM / Christof Hannemann*

## GROUND FLOOR – BERLIN'S ARCHAEOLOGY

The ground floor is the reception level, where we find the cloakrooms, the restrooms, and some of the technical support facilities.

The first important element of information provision in the building is a map marking the excavations conducted in the area of Berlin over the past decades. The map is continuously extended so that Berlin citizens can follow the finds that archaeologists have discovered in their home town, with the place, age, and the origins of the artefacts. In fact, the idea itself of setting up PETRI was partly due to Berliners' increased interest. Also, in recent years the guided tours of the excavations conducted in the area have always attracted considerable interest. The items stored in the display cabinets illustrate given fields of use: household items are represented by a pair of scissors, hygiene by a comb and a clip, money circulation by coins, trade by scales, while schoolwork by writing utensils, and security and, in a wider sense, the safety of private property by a set of keys.

## FIRST FLOOR – MANAGEMENT OF FINDS

The next two floors are divided into two parts separated by a transparent glass wall. One is a section open for the public, while the other is a closed workplace. Behind the glass wall on the first floor, finds are prepared, cleaned, examined with various instruments (e.g., modern X-ray equipment), and processed. It is emphasised that for dating and defining various features of objects, in addition to the actual find, its context and position are also vitally important. In the display cabinets, we see several modern tools that have been applied in the excavations or in preparing finds for restoration, ranging from a toothbrush to a small device for blowing off dust, and from clips to small scalpels.

## SECOND FLOOR – RESTORATION WORKSHOP

The second floor houses an up-to-the minute, well-lit restoration workshop, complete with microscopes, a potter's wheel, and an air exhaust system (*Fig. 6*). In this space, there is abundant room for laying out the finds and photographing them. On the other side of the glass wall, visitors are introduced primarily to the materials to be restored: in addition to ceramics, they might include glass, leather, wood, stone, bronze, and iron objects. One of the most touching items, which is admittedly closest to the hearts of the exhibition designers and curators as well, is an exquisite child's boot that must have walked the cobbled streets of Berlin in the 14th or 15th century. Besides the artefacts, there is also a digital puzzle for piecing together a broken pot.



*Fig. 6. The second floor with the restoration workshop.*  
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte / David von Becker

## THIRD FLOOR – SHOWROOM

The next floor is occupied by the showroom, where some ten thousand important items have been transferred from the building of the Charlottenburg Museum für Ur- und Frühgeschichte. Among them there are pieces from the excavations in Troy, as well as a ceramic pot from Lovasberény in Hungary, dated to approximately 800 BC, and a 13th century stone well discovered on the Fischer-Insel in the vicinity of the museum. In addition, the finds from Molkenmarkt, where Berlin's most significant excavation is being conducted, will soon be taken to PETRI, where they will be restored and processed in-house before finding their permanent home in Berlin museums.

## FOURTH FLOOR – THE SCENE OF SCIENTIFIC PROJECTS

On this floor, visitors will receive the digital image of the find that they discovered as “archaeologists” in the basement. Behind the glass wall, they can see the catalogue system which is hundreds of years old but has been kept and is still used today together with a new digital databank. In the same way as in supermarkets, here objects are given scannable bar codes. This makes it easier to find them in the storage space and to identify and catalogue them when they are transferred to museums. In a well-defined separate area, two guest researchers are ensured their comfortable work space, where there is ample room for their laptops and the items of their interest.

## FIFTH FLOOR – THE SCENE OF EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND SPECIAL EVENTS

The uppermost floor is also divided into sections, but here solid walls rather than transparent glass partitioning is used for separating the premises. One of the rooms is reserved for museum pedagogy sessions. In fact, the press conference was attended by a Berlin class that has a museum study specialization. The other room is intended primarily for conferences and workshops, but community archaeology events and training courses for teachers and experts are also welcome. Attached to it, there are smaller premises for catering, for storing audio and projection technology and for other functions. Within the building, this floor offers the best view: from the loggia and the windows, you have a panoramic view of downtown Berlin (Fig. 7).

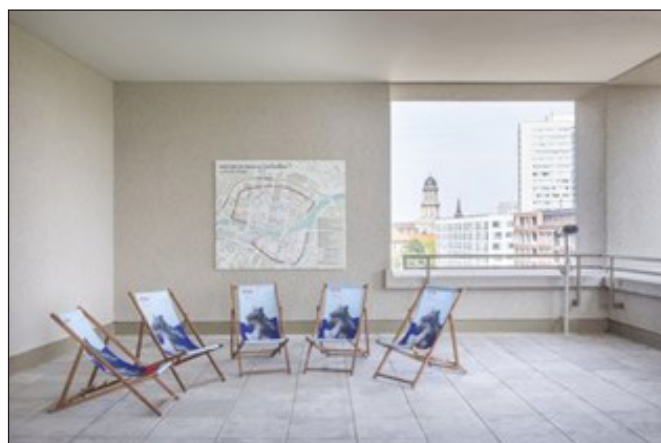


Fig. 7. A view from the fifth floor. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte / David von Becker

The concept of PETRI might seem excessively simple to experts who are familiar with the various stages of archaeology and with the significance of associated sciences. However, by introducing these details so transparently to children and adults alike, PETRI will certainly contribute to boosting the prestige of archaeology and associated disciplines. Following a visit to PETRI, visitors will probably look at excavations and museum items and exhibitions with new eyes. Insistence on the word “laboratory” is understandable because PETRI introduces work during and after excavations primarily with an educational objective. Technical facilities are crucial for a good laboratory, nevertheless, what matters most is what they research and how. PETRI’s future will also depend on the themes they will introduce to the public in addition to the institution’s basic concept.

Further information on PETRI, including images and videos are available at:

[PETRI Berlin](#);

[PETRI Berlin. Entdecke die Archäologie | Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte](#) (with an English version)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Melisch, Claudia Maria (2011). Historische Chance – Eine umfangreiche, mittelalterliche bis neuzeitliche Skelettserie vom ehemaligen St. Petri-Kirchhof in Berlin-Mitte. *Mitteilungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* Bd. 32, 2011, 107–120.