Archäobotaniker

Dr. Helmut Kroll

* 24. Juni 1948 † 23. März 2024


Wir werden Dr. Helmut Kroll in ehrenvoller und dankbarer Erinnerung behalten.

Das Direktorium sowie alle Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter des Instituts für Ur- und Frühgeschichte der Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel
Obituary and tribute for Dr. Helmut Kroll, *24.06.1948, † 23.03.2024

Helmut Kroll was an important person with a special personality. With his own charm, he positively brought his great wealth of knowledge of botany into archaeology, in Kiel and far beyond. He has authored many wonderful publications with diagrams, descriptions and measurements that have become an integral part of the archaeobotany toolbox. His scientific competence was supplemented by a social component. His enormous generosity and boundless energy to help and advise have shaped many of today’s archaeobotanists. His death has left a gap that will be difficult to fill.

In 1970, Helmut Kroll started working at the Institute for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology of Kiel University. He was one of the first scientists in the German university landscape who – coming from biology – knew how to combine a cultural and natural science research approach. The archaeologist Georg Kossack, who taught at the Kiel University for 15 years, recognised that the appropriate handling of archaeological sources requires the evaluation of archaeobotanical data. As a young doctoral student, Helmut Kroll participated in the excavation of Archsum on the island of Sylt and this set the course for his future in prehistory and early history.

Helmut Kroll had excellent qualifications for his later research area – the study of ancient plant remains from archaeological excavations. Having grown up on an estate in Angeln, Schleswig-Holstein, he was very familiar with agricultural practice. From an early age, he learned the rules about how to deal with plants and animals. As a school student, a summer job took him to a nursery, where he was able to gain practical experience in plant breeding. Through his time at a classical language high school, he was influenced by cultural history and philology, which was particularly evident in his preference for wordplay. This is exemplified in the weekly plant portraits, displayed in the hallway of the Kiel institute, with knowledgeable representations of the biology, economy and the derivation of the plant names. He was able to trace every animal and plant name back to its origins, for example, for the “Eselsfurz” (donkey fart, *Onopordum acanthium*, scotch thistle), which is more gently called “Eselsdistel” (donkey thistle) in German-speaking flora. Besides the donkey fart, which plants did Helmut particularly like? There are memorable titles of articles with German puns, prickly ones, e.g. “Saflor von Feudvar” (Safflower of Feudvar, *Carthamus tinctorius*), and defensive ones – “Schneiden fürs Dach” (Blades for the roof, *Cladium mariscus*). If you look at his extensive oeuvre, you will find, in addition to the many comprehensive depictions of individual sites, some other mono-species essays, for example, “Melde von Feudvar” (Report from Feudvar, with Melde as a German name for *Atriplex*) or “Bohne von Agios Mamas” (Bean from Agios Mamas). There are also titles, such as “Das ess ich nicht” (I don’t eat that) and “Bier oder Wein” (Beer or wine), which particularly shed light on the cultural and historical aspect of the use of food plants.

While studying biology, his first interest was ornithology. Helmut Kroll spent some time bird watching on Helgoland, among other things. But he also found his way to the fruits and seeds via the stomach contents of the birds. Nevertheless, the birds never completely let go of him; Helmut Kroll also made a name for himself among pigeon and chicken breeders. His wealth of knowledge of Schleswig-Holstein’s flora is based on what he learned from Kiel University professor Ernst-Wilhelm Raabe.
But back to his beginnings in archaeobotany in the early 1970s: in the large-scale “Archsum” project – the aim of which was to show the development of people and the environment on the southern Cimbrian west coast – natural sciences played a special role. At that time, the young student Helmut Kroll was able to pursue his doctorate with direct involvement in an interdisciplinary research project and was hired unbureaucratically without a degree. Helmut Kroll presented the evaluation of the botanical finds from the Archsum project in an exemplary manner. He conveyed within the institute, the university, but also archaeology as a whole, the need to integrate natural sciences more closely into answering historical and cultural questions. The significant successes of this innovation also contributed to important structural changes. At Kiel University, the Institute for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology became a member of both, the faculty of natural sciences and the philosophical faculty. Helmut Kroll’s extensive expertise and his certainty in determining everything related to botany soon led to a reputation throughout Europe. The Kiel institute became a contact point for numerous students and scientists from Germany and many other countries. Helmut quickly became an “institution”. This was mainly due to his charming and open nature, his extreme willingness to help, his ability to bring a wide variety of characters to the table and, last but not least, his phenomenal memory. In addition to scientific topics, he always had entertaining anecdotes ready that enriched exchange with him.

Helmut Kroll’s excellent reputation was further established during the excavations with Bernhard Hänsel on the Balkans in the 1980s. The excavation in Kastanas, Greece, a Bronze Age settlement mound on the Central Macedonian plain, was formative for and loved by Helmut Kroll. The open lifestyle of the excavation team, which is common on such excavations, the integration of workers, students, technicians and scientists into the group. The Kastanas archaeobotanical study led to an impressive, excellently illustrated volume, the publication of the excavation results – carried out with a long breath – are exemplary. Feudvar, a Metal Age tell at the tributary of the Tisza into the Danube in what was then Yugoslavia, continued his Kastanas experience. This excavation was later followed by Helmut’s involvement in the investigation of Agios Mamas, the former Olynthus in Greek Macedonia. Helmut Kroll has been one of the pioneers who opened up the field of archaeobotany in Greece through the study of material from various emblematic Neolithic sites in Thessaly such as Sesklo and Dimini, and, besides Kastanas, from other Bronze Age sites in Greece, both in the north and the south such as Agios Mamas and Tiryns. Even if such large projects appear important in the biography, it is also the many activities and reports for smaller finds and rescue excavations that underline Helmut Kroll’s reputation and also increased the quality of archaeological research. Helmut Kroll carried out dozens of archaeobotanical studies in connection with excavations in Northern Germany. In Schleswig-Holstein, he was integrated into the ground-breaking excavations of the Viking Age site of Kosel, where his archaeobotanical investigations made a significant contribution to the reconstruction of the early medieval subsistence economy. He turned to Slavic investigations with the Starigard/Oldenburg site. He was enthusiastically involved in establishing archaeological relationships with Russian scientists through Michael Müller-Wille, thereby laying the archaeobotanical basis for the later successful investigations in the surrounding area and the predecessor settlements of medieval Novgorod.

Helmut Kroll dealt intensively with Iron Age features and finds during his investigations in the Rhineland, for example, in Wallendorf. Finally, part of his cosmopolitanism included intensive participation in the Mont Lassois excavation.
project in Burgundy with Alfred Haffner. With extreme perseverance, the floatation of the botanical samples was carried out on site in an old wash house on the river, where, in addition to the exchange with the international excavation team, there was also an opportunity for direct communication with local citizens, who were astonished by this bearded man who was busy doing strange things.

The first decade of the new millennium finally brought Helmut Kroll back to the Balkans. The excavations with Johannes Müller in the Bosnian Visoko Basin and on the Drina River made it possible to once again bring his extensive specialist knowledge into the scientific discourse on the archaeology of Southeast Europe. Here, the archaeobotanical analyses of the Butmir settlement of Okolište and the Vinča settlement of Jagnilo provided groundbreaking results. The investigations at Transylvanian Iclod also demonstrated how scientific enthusiasm makes it possible to work close, even with temperatures close to the freezing point.

Apples and orchards: due to his “countryside” origins and his enthusiasm since early childhood, Helmut Kroll had a wealth of experience that enabled him to deal with scientific questions in a completely different way. These include, for example, hypotheses on the cultivation and domestication of fruit bushes and trees, which also enabled him to combine Southeast European and Central European research approaches. Accordingly, he has recently not only been involved in archaeobotanical investigations of megalithic tombs and associated Neolithic settlement sites in Northern Germany, but has also intensively promoted cooperation in the joint German-Polish project on the Bronze Age in Greater Poland.

Helmut Kroll’s archaeobotanical and archaeological activities cover the entire time span from the Neolithic to the early modern period and were characterised by work in both Central Europe and the Balkans. In addition, preliminary investigations, for example in Elephantine, Egypt, testify to his cosmopolitan thinking. Helmut Kroll was already pioneering the development of methods in the 1970s. His presentation of the Kastanas results showed how high the information content of exposed profiles on settlement mounds is for various, here botanical, evaluations. By introducing “ubiquity” (“Stetigkeit”) into archaeobotanical analysis, he was able to establish a new methodological standard. It represents a simple statistical measure for comparative projects that is still valid today. The measurement of seeds and fruits was also always an important concern for him, which now receives new impetus in archaeobotany with the use of geometric morphometry.

From a relatively early stage, Helmut Kroll also started to train others. Many came because they knew that Kiel not only had an extensive comparative collection of macroremains but, above all, also had a specialist with at least as extensive knowledge of the morphology as well as the ecology and economy of cultivated plants and their companions. Given the relatively small number of archaeobotanists and the specific needs, this was mostly individual training: scientists came from Serbia, the Netherlands, Italy, France or Bulgaria to learn from Helmut Kroll. “The smaller the comparison collection, the more precise the identification at species level” is a fitting saying from Helmut’s mouth that everyone who was in Kiel took to heart. The lectures that he held at the Free University of Berlin together with the archaeozoologist and friend Cornelia Becker are still famous today.
He was also constantly committed to communicating his expertise to the public, through numerous excursions, for example, to the open-air museums Haithabu and Starigard/Oldenburg, the Kiel Botanical Garden or through inspiring botanical excursions. Part of this exchange of knowledge was also the exhibition that he curated in the Brandenburg Archaeological Museum. The texts on the boards were written in the typical Helmut Kroll style, meaning they were short, easy to understand and yet scientifically correct. He has become known in the scientific community as well as among the general public for his rich and often original lectures.

Helmut Kroll was a pillar in the international community. In 1992, he brought the conference of the “International Work Group for Palaeoethnobotany, IWGP” to Kiel, where the journal Vegetation History and Archaeobotany was chosen as the official organ of the IWGP. In 1995, he took over the compilation and indexing of the current archaeobotanical literature from Jürgen Schultze-Motel, which has been published annually in this journal since 1992. To this end, with the support of Rainer Pasternak and Aleksandar Medović, he farsightedly established a digital database for the literature of the years 1981-2001. The increasing importance of archaeobotany, which today accompanies almost every archaeological excavation, the growing community and, last but not least, the acceleration in publications associated with digitalisation, have made a change necessary. Today, the flood of publications can no longer be catalogued by a single person; Helmut Kroll’s database has been transferred to a wiki database, ArchbotLit, at Kiel University, which enables the authors to integrate their articles themselves.

Helmut Kroll’s efforts at the IWGP conferences will never be forgotten when, with his characteristic charm and secret joy, he went around with a collection bag to be able to thank the organisers of the conference for their efforts. Moreover, he regularly collected signatures for postcards addressed to sick colleagues who were unable to attend the conferences. The community was important to him and supported him. He dealt with his serious illness with admirable sovereignty and it did not prevent him from attending international and national conferences right up to the end, such as the 19th IWGP conference in České Budějovice in 2022 or the meeting of the AG Archäobotanik in Herxheim in November 2023, in order to follow the latest developments with undiminished interest and to discuss expert questions, but not without interjecting critical comments.

Even after his retirement, Helmut Kroll was a constant companion, continued to be curious and open, shared his wealth of knowledge with the participants at the Palaeo-Ecological Colloquium in Kiel, and came to the laboratory to provide binocular identification aid.

Seasonal social gatherings for personal and scientific exchange were always important to him, which we are happy to continue in his memory. In particular, his pronounced love for strawberries with vanilla ice cream, cream and meringue, seasoned with a pinch of pepper, retains a firm place in the Kiel department culture. Many small, lovely touches made working with him so nice and enlivened the sometimes monotonous process of selecting the plant remains. This is how Edeltraud Tafel, his long-time close colleague, remembers: “I think of him as a happy, positive, life-affirming, diversely interested and warm-hearted person. I was always very impressed by his wealth of knowledge in many areas and his phenomenal memory. He had the talent to pass on his knowledge in his own unique way. He enjoyed making our workplace beautiful too;
many people will probably still remember the “blue room with the chandelier”. Celebrations at the institute were also unthinkable without the splendour of the flowers from his garden and the contents of his “hope chest”. Over the years, he has had a significant influence on the spirit of the institute and was its kind soul. He could tell stories in a captivating way; I have always admired his humour and his imagination, his eloquence and his joy of formulation, which are always noticeable in his publications. He approached people with open curiosity and managed to bring together a wide variety of characters to one table.”

Helmut Kroll spent his entire professional life at Kiel University. As he put it himself: “Where others changed jobs, I changed my bosses and sometimes my office too.” We owe a lot to Helmut Kroll. Not only the establishment of the archaeobotanical department in Kiel, including an impressive collection of around 11,000 tubes filled with recent seeds and fruits from plant taxa of various origins, the training and support of numerous students and scientists, intensive public relations work, but above all his presence and participation in numerous national and international working meetings, workshops and conferences. His death has left a gap in the archaeobotanical “family” and far beyond, which will be difficult to fill.

This obituary brings together contributions from different people. These are (in alphabetical order): Almuth Alsleben, Walter Dörfler, Dragana Filipović, Andreas Heiss, Susanne Jahns, Wiebke Kirleis, Aleksandar Medović, Kelly Reed, Anna Elena Reuter, Edeltraud Tafel and Tania Valamoti. Individual insights come from the foreword of the Festschrift for Helmut Kroll¹.

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