

National Anthropological Museum: A Review of Sixteen Years of Experience

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The National Anthropological Museum (NAM) is largest bone archival repository in Bulgaria dedicated to preserving bone archival material and serving as a scientific, educational and cultural institution. It is a part of the Institute of Experimental Morphology, Pathology and Anthropology (IEMPAM) of Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). From its creation until now, the museum has been working for the popularization of anthropological knowledge and the affirmation of anthropology in Bulgaria, contributing to increasing interest in cultural-historical heritage and social memory. Established to promote and popularize anthropological research in Bulgaria, the museum has become a center for various anthropological, historical, archaeological and even culture events.

Key words: anthropology, education, National Anthropological Museum, IEMPAM

Introduction

As a unique museum in Bulgaria, NAM was established on March 21st, 2007, as a result of expansion of the traveling exposition of IEMPAM – “The Man in the Past”. In addition to the large number of anthropological studies of Bulgarian population, the museum also provides knowledge about the people who inhabited the Bulgarian lands in the ancient times. Despite the fact that the results of these studies are known to a specialized circle of experts, during all 16 years of its existence, the NAM team and the management of IEMPAM made a considerable effort to popularize anthropological knowledge, which is evident from the overall work of the museum.

Scientific priorities of the National Anthropological Museum

The research activity of IEMPAM and NAM aims to establish both institutions as a scientific unit with complex innovative research on the problems of human and veterinary medicine, anthropology and national heritage [2]

The scientific priorities of IEMPAM and NAM is consistent with the guidelines outlined in the National Strategy for the Development of Scientific Research in the Republic of Bulgaria 2017-2030, “Strategy for the Development of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 2018-2030” and the priorities of the new EU Framework Program for scientific research and innovation 5 “Horizon Europe” (2021-2027) with priorities “Health”, “Food, bioeconomy and natural resources”, “Environment”, “National identity”, “Cultural and historical heritage”.

At the level of its scientific production and popularization, IEMPAM, resp. NAM, are proving themselves as leading institutions in the field of morphology, pathology, anthropology and museum activity with a certain own place in the national and international research area.

Scientific contribution and activities of the National Anthropological Museum

The activity of NAM is popularized through media presentations, public lectures, participation of the team in various events, etc. The museum exposition is established in accordance with two main principles in museology: thematic and chronological [3]. The topic covering the anthropological characteristics of the population of the Republic of Bulgaria is directly related to the chronology, as many archaeological artifacts are added to the main exhibition material - human bone remains, discovered during the archaeological excavations of necropolises, sanctuaries, temples and settlements from the relevant historical periods, studied on the territory of Bulgaria at present [4].

The permanent exhibition of the museum presents cultural practices related to the way of burial during different historical periods, the healing and ritual effects that left traces on the human bone remains, as well as 3-dimensional reconstructions of the head on the skull, visualizing the people who inhabited our lands through different historical periods since ancient times to the present days. A special emphasis in the exhibition is various pathological changes found on the human bone remains. They reveal the prevalence and incidence of various diseases and are reliable and convincing source of what were the living conditions at that time.

In parallel with its permanent exhibition, the museum presents temporary thematic exhibitions, the purpose of which is to attract the public and popularize the anthropological knowledge. They are devoted to three main topics:

The first topic presents anthropology in Bulgaria – “The Monastery of Mostich” (2009), “Prominent Bulgarian Anthropologists – Kadanov and Balan” (2010), “Modern Anthropology” (2014).

The second major topic reveals the cultural practices related to death and the faith of man – “Funeral practices from Prehistory to the Middle Ages in our lands” (2016), “Kremikovtsi Monastery” “St. Vmchk Georgi Pobedonosets” – known, but also unknown” (2020), “Between the two worlds” (2022).

The third topic of the National Anthropological Museum’s temporary exhibitions is the revelation of humanity embodied by medicine – “Diseases and Treatment

through the Ages” (2018), “Great Epidemics in History” (2020), “The Infirmary in Antiquity and the Middle Ages” (2021), *Materia Medica* (2023).

The temporary exhibitions are the object of great visitor interest, both in the museum and when traveling exposition is visiting other regional museums in Bulgaria. The museum also is a venue of two photography exhibitions – “Hello Africa” and “Underwater Addiction”.

The annual events, which are organized in collaboration with scientists from the Department of Anthropology and Anatomy of IEMPAM – BAS, have become more popular and attractive during the last sixteen years. One of these events is the participation of NAM in the European Night of Museums, which originated in France. The diverse program and the presentation of interesting facts and events in the field of anthropology attracted the attention of an increasingly large audience. The established tradition of conducting anthropological measurements and interesting thematic lectures become an exciting event at the Night of the Museums, and the National Anthropological Museum has proved itself as an attractive place for visitors, e.g. students, scientists, citizens, etc. (**Fig. 1A, 1B**)

Fig. 1A.



The participation of NAM in the first edition of the “Salon of Museums” in the National Palace of Culture was also significant achievement of the Museum. The event was part of the official cultural program of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and presented to a wide audience the data on the historical and cultural development and religious beliefs during the different eras, the types of people, the knowledge of diseases and injuries that have left traces on the bone remains in the museum’s exposition, as well as medical and ritual effects on them.

The Museum team participate in various current archaeological, anthropological and archaeogenetic studies. New advanced methods for sexing skeletal remains, both cranial

Fig. 1B.

and postaxial, are being developed. Scientists from IEMPAM and NAM participate in rescue archaeological excavations of infrastructure sites of European, national and regional importance. Anthropological research is being carried out on human bone remains (movable cultural values) discovered during archaeological investigations at various places in the country. The research data enrich the idea of the paleodemographic development of the population in our lands. Models of ecological and social adaptation of the various human groups of the past are being developed, which allow the complex study of man with the constant interaction of his nature and culture.



One of the most actively developing activities of the museum are educational programs with children and students (**Fig. 2**). Since the beginning of 2017, the NAM team together with scientists and researchers from the Department of Anthropology and Anatomy at IEMPAM reate and implement educational programs in “Biology and Health Education” and “History and Civilization”. They were structured in several modules – “The Way of Man (Anthropogenesis)”, “The Human Body” and “Young Researcher”, Laboratory “Face from the Past”.

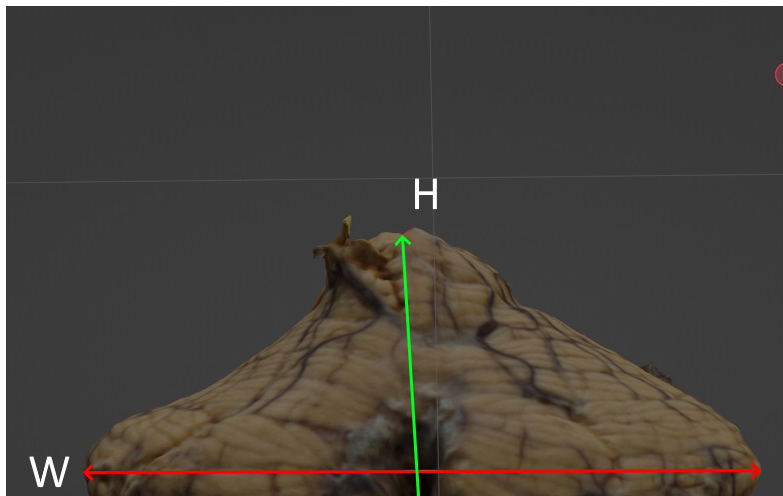


Fig. 2.

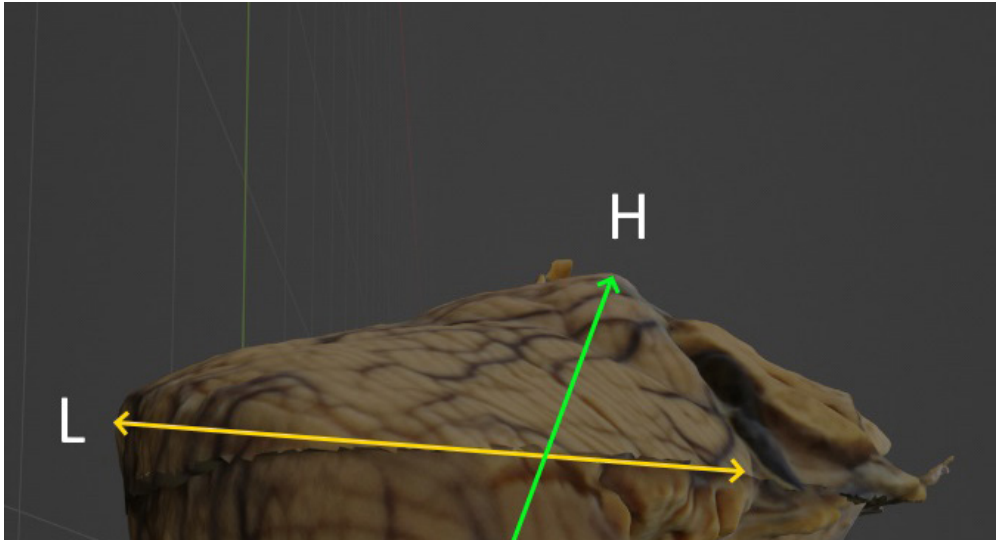


Fig. 3

In the first module “The Human Body”, the program has been expanded with museum lessons aimed at introducing students of different age groups to the most complex functioning organism – the human body.

In the second module – “Young Researcher Laboratory”, students from Sofia schools take on the role of investigators taking their own fingerprints, examine them and compare them, participate in various examinations and find the answers to the tasks themselves, such as: to determine the height of the medieval Bulgarian by measuring long bones, to examine the density of the bone under a microscope, etc.

In the third module “Face from the Past” students from Bulgaria, Poland, Italy, Portugal and Spain may attend a lecture “Everyday Life of the Anthropologist” that is presented in a hybrid form. The lecture is focused on the contribution of anthropology in elucidating the past of man and the field work of a specialist-anthropologist.

With the support of the Ministry of Education and Science, the museum conducts a summer anthropology school “Man and his Health”, in which high school students, learn the secrets of anthropology by lectures and practical activities revealing the physical development of man and the conditions that influence him. By involving the participants in classes on anthropometry and anthroposcopy, body composition analysis using the bioimpedance method, laboratory analysis of food, etc. attention is also paid to socially significant phenomena related to human health. The implementation of the educational museum “My Body” provide new opportunities for the National Anthropological Museum in interactive learning in schools, with aim of upgrading the knowledge obtained at school. The program is designed for students from 5th to 11th grade.

The emphasis in conducting modules is on students acquiring knowledge of basic historical problems and processes for mastering skills that allow them to navigate the huge flow of information and necessary for them in the process of building their personal development. The inclusion of practical modules has proven

to be the winning model for attracting a teenage audience that wants not only to be informed and observe, but also to empathize and participate in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Last but not least, the National Anthropological Museum is the venue of traditional National Conference with International Participation, Morphological Days, organized by IEMPAM and Bulgarian Anatomical Society (**Fig. 3**). The conference demonstrates that morphological science has spread beyond the classical macroscopic and microscopic morphology by developing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research with molecular and cellular biology, chemistry, computer sciences and modelling, archaeology and national identity [1].

Conclusion

From its creation (2007), NAM has gone through many obstacles, but we can say that our ambition to become recognizable to the general public is almost fulfilled. Efforts in this direction can be seen from the reviews in the internet, on the website of the museum, as well as on our pages in social networks and navigation applications.

One of the main museum contributions is the research on the bone remains found during numerous archaeological expeditions that provides new knowledge for scientific literature. On the basis of these scientific studies, NAM is unique institution for anthropological restoration and conservation, development of methods for preservation of museum artefacts, the creation of museum expositions, as well as other museum activities.

Over the years, through its good cooperation with various educational institutions (schools, universities), the National Anthropological Museum has become an educational center where the knowledge of history, biology and art is complemented with the new knowledge. NAM is the only museum institution in the country for anthropological studies of the past and the recent population of the Republic of Bulgaria. The museum presents bone artefacts from archaeological excavations, original plastic reconstructions of the head on the skull of great Bulgarians as well as thematic exhibitions from many regional history museums in the country. NAM provides exhibits to the National History Museum and regional museums useful for preserving and popularizing the national historical heritage and strengthening the museum's work.

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