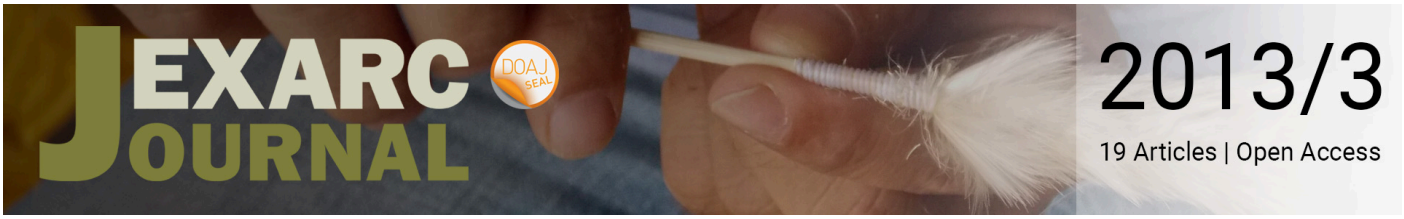

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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: Reaching Visitors Through Dialogue, Play and Experimental Archaeology. OpenArch Congress Archeon

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This three-day conference (23-25 April 2013) was part of the OpenArch project, a project that spans five years and aims to raise the standard of scientific research and public presentation in the open-air museums throughout Europe, with a focus on the interaction with the visitor. Therefore, the title of this conference was: *The Dialogue with the Visitor*.

> By engaging people in different ways and at different times, even when they have not visited the museum (yet), you can teach them, make them interested, and make them understand more.

The focus was on themes such as how to tell a story and the visitor's experience in general, as well as on the major role open-air museums can play in providing the opportunity to research skills. During the conference, speakers from various disciplines and backgrounds engaged and interacted with the visitors and each other on diverse subjects, through presentations and demonstrations.

On day one, a general lecture was held in the morning, where the former director of *Naturalis*, Wim van der Weiden, told us about how to "reach the unreachable". In his talk, he showed that it is very important but also very difficult to reach the vast amount of people that never go to a museum, and when they do visit, that it is hard to engage them.

He emphasized the importance of knowing your public, which consists for the most part, 85%, of 'paddlers' (casual visitors), followed by 10% 'swimmers' (interested visitors), and finally only 5% 'divers' (really interested, come to a museum to learn more). If you know what your public is like, you can provide them with the appropriate (type of) information to keep them interested. In order to 'reach the unreachable', Van der Weiden showed that if you really want to get people interested and engaged, it is vital to give your visitors an opportunity to identify themselves with what the museum is showing or telling, and to relate to the actualities. Finally, he also made clear that museums are about people, not the objects in them; a theme that would form the basis for many if not all talks during this conference.

After Van der Weiden, day one went on with two parallel sessions, of which I attended one focusing on theatre and websites and another on the dialogue with and experience of the visitor. I first listened to Gunter Schöbel, who showed what the experimental archaeology in his open-air museum, the Pfahlbaumuseum in Unteruhldingen, consisted of and how they try to engage their visitors. Although the subject of the talk seemed very interesting, the presentation failed to engage the audience, perhaps as a result of issues with the speaker's language skills.

The second morning session presentation I joined was by Paul Stork, who talked about how to build a visitor-friendly website. He told us that in order to make a good website, some key aspects should be kept in mind, such as making it super simple for people to find what they are looking for, knowing the public you want to reach and how, and that it is important the website conveys the same message or atmosphere as the museum or park it is for. When these points are followed, there is less chance that people will be disappointed in your website and they will be more likely to visit it again. It was a very interesting talk that really gave hands-on information to ensure a better online experience for visitors.

In the afternoon, two more talks were held in the session I was attending. The first, by Don Blaauw, argued that multimedia and technology do not necessarily contradict working with (pre)historic themes. He showed how experiences with the past can be enhanced and will be remembered more by actively engaging the visitor with games. His idea came from observations in (open-air) museums: when no one is present to talk to you, how can you have a dialogue? What I found inspiring is that you can reach a much wider audience when you try to adapt your story to your audience. Blaauw said children will not respond well to being denied the use of their cell phone in a museum. Instead, you should use the cell phone to reach the kids by providing them with more information on the subject you want them to learn about.

Hanne Marckmann was the last speaker of the afternoon session and she showed the use multimedia and games can have in reaching the public and enhancing their experience in the museum. She emphasized that museums are about stories rather than things. This idea related beautifully to the talk held by Wim van der Weiden in the morning.

Day two was almost entirely devoted to food. In the morning, after a general lecture by Jaap Hogendoorn on how to perform shows and theatre (including dos and don'ts), it was time for a tour around Archeon, where we could experience food (and drink) preparation through time. In each time period, ranging from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, people representing that period would show you how they worked and you could ask them questions. Being in this '(pre)historic' setting and seeing the way in which people might have prepared food in the past was a good experience and it made you realise the limitations and possibilities of cooking in the past.

In the afternoon, the lectures in the session I attended were focused on the way in which people prepare (pre)historic food in the present versus how they would have done it in (pre)history, including the differences between both. The first talk was by Rüdiger Kelm, the director of the Archaeological-Ecological Museum Albersdorf, who gave a similarly structured and presented talk to Gunter Schöbel on day one. Although interesting, the presentation was not engaging enough for me, since it lacked interaction with the audience. One of the employees of this museum however, had given a very interesting demonstration on plant use during the tour in the morning. This showed that the interaction with visitors works much better through real dialogue and demonstration than through presentation alone.

The second afternoon talk was by Alan Outram, who had researched the procurement and use of fat in prehistory and how these processes leave their traces. This talk was very interesting. Outram told us that our modern perception of only low-fat food being good can interfere with the interpretation of past societies' use of fat. His analysis of marks on bones showed that indeed in the past, people made avid use of animal fats, whether it be bone fat (marrow, grease) or body fat. The uses of fat in food can be broad and may include: high

caloric intake, essential vitamins such as A, D, E and K, essential fatty acids, and taste. It can also have practical purposes such as being a lubricant, water proofer, or fuel source. Outram's talk was very inspiring since he gave both his theoretical ideas, as well as the practical manifestations of these ideas he found on the bones. In this way, he makes it possible for many people to check whether fat usage played a role on their archaeological sites or not.

Bill Schindler finally, held a talk on how important it is that the public stays in touch with where the food they eat comes from, so that they realise the steps that have to be taken in order to obtain food and can therefore relate more to (pre)historic practices.

On day three, I only stayed for the morning sessions, since the afternoon was scheduled for meetings. First, Peter Jongste held a talk on his research on the site of Eigenblok in the Betuwe lijn project. He showed the features he found which are used for the Bronze Age building reconstructions in Archeon. Leo Wolterbeek, a reconstruction specialist, then showed how he had built these reconstructions after which we visited them in the park.

Next, David Richardson held a talk on his experience in working for the BBC in relation to re-enactment or 'living history'. This presentation was more of an overview of his life rather than adding something to the overall conference, but it was nice to see what large-scale re-enactment can evoke, especially for school children. The following talk was by Dorothee Olthof. She gave a presentation on how to engage adult visitors of an open-air museum. The talk was based on ideas presented during the European project *Didarchtik*, a project about adult education in archaeological open-air museums, and on her own experiences as a live interpreter. By looking at different learning styles and multiple types of intelligence, she showed the variety of how people (want to) learn and how that can be facilitated in open-air museums through quality live interpretation, crafts, creating rich images and dialogue. It was a very insightful idea and made clear that several approaches in a museum can ensure that different kinds of people stay interested in what it is you want to convey. The last talk I listened to was by Lieke Visser. She showed us what you can expect from a dialogue with children depending on their age. Visser gave concrete examples of difficult concepts in her talk, which made it both fun and memorable. Also, realising the difference a few years can make in the interaction with a child was an eye-opener. The combination of the presentations of Olthof and Visser gave a good overview of all age groups that might be expected to visit a museum and also made clear what approaches to use for these different groups.

Overall, this conference has been a very good experience. It has shown me that it is very important to think about people rather than objects when you want to convey a message in a museum, or a book for that matter. By engaging people in different ways and at different times, even when they have not visited the museum (yet), you can teach them, make them

interested, and make them understand more. It is also important to realise the people you are dealing with. Whether they are ‘paddlers’, ‘swimmers’, ‘divers’, adults, or children, they should all be approached in a different way. By using open-air museums such as Archeon, you can make people aware of the past in both a fun and educational way. Simultaneously, these museums can also provide learning opportunities for employees, both in reconstructing past activities, as well as through dialogue with the visitor.

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