

Presenting archaeological reconstructions to the public

"Archaeological reconstructions are an easy target for criticism by academics, but they are undoubtedly popular with the wider public for a number of reasons. Foremost of these is that they 'fill in the gaps' or complete the conceptual jigsaw of 'this is what it was like.'" (Blockley, M. Archaeological reconstructions and the community in the UK, in: Planel, P. & Stone, P. G. *The Constructed Past*; Routledge 1999)

When talking about archaeological reconstructions the discussion is usually focused on accuracy, authenticity and responsibility of the archaeologists to keep to pure facts. Can we speak about the responsibility of sharing the finds of archaeology with the public? Are the 'minimalist' reconstructions an accurate portrait? How far can we go in our attempts to reconstruct the past?

'Pure facts' necessarily give a false picture

■ Raimund KARL
University of Bangor (UK)

Most of our archaeological reconstructions are produced, not for academic, but for public consumption. They are supposed to show 'how it really was' (*von Ranke 1824*, vi) by 'filling the gaps'. Through them, we construct a visual image that is much more memorable, experiential and influential than text (*Kroeber-Riel 1993*, 53).

However, we usually focus firmly on what is 'proven' to have been there by positive evidence. Of course, we never truly stick to only 'the facts': for all we 'positively' know, some timber Iron Age houses in Central Europe may have been nothing but parallel rows of unconnected posts. Yet, not a single reconstruction of them comes without walls, doors and roofs, even though evidence for any of these elements is scarce at best. But where other elements are concerned, we tend to leave them out. Even where all other material culture has been lavishly decorated, like in Hallstatt and La Tène central Europe, we reconstruct houses as plain and simple as possible (cf. *Karl 1999*): positivist minimalism rules.

In the name of alleged accuracy, we present as 'truth' what we know to be false. We know that most of the evidence is lost, and thus that reconstructions need to show what we do not know. We know more must have been there, yet we only dare fill in those gaps that we know how to fill. This is entirely illogical.

Thus, what we need to visualise is the uncertain rather than the certain, as counter-intuitive as this may seem. There is no such thing as an accurate archaeological reconstruction. Only multiple reconstructions of the same thing, showing the full range of possibilities and thus visualising the unknown rather than the known, can claim any degree of accuracy. 'Pure facts', however 'accurate' they may be, necessarily give a false picture.

References

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- Kroeber-Riel, W. 1993*: Bildkommunikation. Imagerystrategien für die Werbung. München: Vahlen.
- von Ranke, L. 1824*: *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*. Leipzig: Reimer.

There is no clear line between 'science' and 'speculation'

■ Oto MAKÝŠ
Slovak University of Technology (SK)

To reconstruct buildings from archaeological finds it is necessary to be courageous, not just have sufficient knowledge. Whatever reconstruction is built, whatever hypothesis it is based on, it will always be possible to say that it should have been done in a different way. There are always plenty of critics and most of them don't have the courage to do something similar but hide behind 'defending of science'.

Experimental reconstruction looks like a heresy – like abandoning the territory of exact science. Only when we look closer we find that while we know what is exact science and what is unsubstantiated speculation, we cannot say where exactly the border between them lies. In many cases what is still accepted as science territory is often within the field of interpretations.

Building of minimalist – 'scientifically accurate' – reconstruction in the context of Central Europe mostly means presenting points of finds of post holes, lines of palisade impressions or showing three rows of an underground wall of a rotund. That is exact science. Result of such presentation? Boredom. The question stands: who do we do the experiments for? If for the public then we need full size reconstructions. These are also valuable for scientists who are not scared to enter the field of experimental testing of theories.

Experiment has to respect the archaeological situation. But here we already run into a problem because interpretation of finds and their mutual time position can be difficult. While solving many – if not majority – of the construction details of a building it is not possible to fall back on exact finds or clear analogies. It is necessary to formulate hypotheses which require in-depth knowledge and multidisciplinary co-operation – concerning buildings especially co-operation with architects/engineers. A well done job often survives its critics. It is possible that several generations later it will be clear where mistakes were made but it will have its own value – for example it can represent science in the time of its building.

Five years after building a hypothetical 'Celtic' tower and other buildings at the archaeological museum of Havránok (Liptovská Mara) which is maintained only sporadically and after a

momentary dilemma over the reconstruction of the crumbling 'Great Moravian' hill fort – archaeological open air museum in Ducove, I still believe that the building of 3D archaeological open air museums is the right way forward. It is only necessary to follow and gather experience.

Visitors should be able to form their own interpretations

■ Hannah SIMONS

West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village (UK)

Experimental reconstructions provide visitors with a chance to see, touch and smell a version of the past which leaves an impression lasting longer than the past presented in text books or artefact-based museum cases alone. The relative ease with which this version of the past embeds itself in the memory of visitors increases our responsibility to create well informed reconstructions and to ensure that balanced interpretation is provided, ideally in a variety of styles so that the information is widely accessible.

Any publicly accessed reconstruction that stands alone with no interpretation bears the risk of becoming an absolute definition of a particular period for its visitors. As experimental archaeologists working in the public forum it is not our duty to "complete the conceptual puzzle of 'this is what it was like'", instead we should encourage visitors to challenge the 'concept' itself. Working at a reconstructed site, especially if it has run for several years, provides the opportunity to not only present possible interpretation of the past but present the development of ideas, the gaps in the original evidence and any pitfalls in the experimental process. From personal experience I have found that this honest approach sends visitors away from the site with greater respect for experimental archaeological investigation and a well rounded understanding of our methodologies. Visitors should leave a reconstructed site understanding that there is no one true past, and better able to form their own interpretations. Passing on an understanding of our methodologies will serve to make the discipline more accessible and by involving the public in the process of interpretation, encourage a greater sense of ownership of heritage. By achieving these things we are investing in the protection of heritage and reconstructed sites for the future.

Creating experiences of a past reality

■ Cornelius HOLTORF

Archaeology and Heritage Studies, Linnaeus University, Kalmar (SE)

Archaeologists are story-tellers. They tell stories about past people, stories about present people, and stories about themselves. Reconstructions are a powerful medium to tell such stories because they are full-scale and can thus be experienced with several senses. Insofar as they make the past present, reconstructions create time travel experiences. In contemporary society, such experiences are appreciated by many. But time travelling in this way is not dependent on the true correspondence of a certain reconstruction with a given past reality. What matters more is whether the reconstruction creates the experience of a past reality. In other words, the key for a successful reconstruction is not its authenticity (conventionally defined as preserved material substance) but rather its credibility to a given audience.

One of the reasons why discussions among academic archaeologists about reconstructions are often controversial is that many academics are unsure both about what kind of story they are actually telling and to whom. If they address mainly their own colleagues or decide that they want to tell a story about archaeological methodology, it is no wonder that imaginary reconstructions do not appeal. It is of course perfectly legitimate to communicate with one's peers and archaeological methodology does indeed offer many great stories. But for telling stories about the past and providing memorable experiences in the present for a broad audience, impressive reconstructions that emanate a scent of the past are hard to beat.

For longer discussions of similar questions see:

Holtorf, Cornelius (2010): On the Possibility of Time Travel. Lund Archaeological Review 15-16, 2009/10, 34-41. Special focus on The Archaeology of Time Travel.

Holtorf, Cornelius (2010): Heritage values in contemporary popular culture. In: G. S. Smith, P. Messenger and H. Soderland (eds) Heritage Values in Contemporary Society, pp. 43-54. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Rekonstruktionsmodelle als Zusammenfassung des aktuellen Forschungsstandes

■ Wolfgang F. A. LOBISSER

Vienna Institute for Archaeological Science (AT)

In archäologischen Freilichtmuseen wird die unvollständige Quellenlage von archäologischen Fundstellen durch zusätzliche Informationen ergänzt, so dass Architekturmodelle von Gebäuden und anderen Objekten der Vergangenheit im Maßstab 1:1 angefertigt werden können. Zusätzliche Informationen entlehnt man dabei von anderen archäologischen Fundstellen, aus den Ergebnissen von archäologischen Experimenten, sowie aus der Volkskunde und der Ethnologie. Es liegt in der Natur der Sache, dass bei der praktischen Umsetzung in vielen Detailbereichen interpretiert und interpoliert werden muss, um zu einem sinnvollen Ergebnis zu gelangen. Die Gebäude sollten so weit wie möglich nach archäologischen Befunden errichtet werden, Originaltechniken dort eingesetzt werden, wo es aufgrund von wissenschaftlichen Fragestellungen sinnvoll ist. Baumaterialien, Holzverbindungen und Oberflächengestaltung müssen archäologisch argumentierbar sein. So gesehen können Hausrekonstruktionen in archäologischen Freilichtmuseen als Zusammenfassung des aktuellen Forschungsstandes in Form von Architekturmodellen im Maßstab 1:1 verstanden werden.

Ich glaube nicht, dass sogenannte „Minimalrekonstruktionen“ ein realistisches Bild der Vergangenheit geben können. Hier sollten wir mehr Mut haben, auch entwickeltere Strukturen zu zeigen, doch gehören diese entsprechend kommentiert und kommuniziert. Konstruktive fachlich fundierte Kritik ist dabei durchaus erwünscht und führt oftmals zu neuen Erkenntnissen bzw. neuen Fragestellungen.

Das Führungspersonal im Museum sollte gut ausgebildet sein und den Besucher auf den interpretativen Modellcharakter der Bauten hinweisen, damit der wissenschaftliche Prozess vom archäologischen Befund zur Interpretation und vom archäologischen Experiment zum Architekturmodell nachvollziehbar bleibt. Tatsächlich bestechen gut geführte archäologische

Freilichtmuseen durch ihren hohen Informationsgehalt, durch die Aufbereitung der archäologischen Befunde und durch die Kombination von Erlebnis, Unterhaltung und Weiterbildung für die ganze Familie. So gesehen sind archäologische Freilichtmuseen ideal, um archäologische Inhalte an ein breites Publikum zu kommunizieren.

Durch die Materialität der prähistorischen Objekte liegt aber auch ihre Kommerzialisierung auf der Hand. So sind manche Freilichtprojekte nicht allein aus Interesse an der Vergangenheit motiviert, sondern aus dem einfachen Grund, dass sich Vorgesichte einfach gut verkauft, Touristen anlockt und Arbeitsplätze schafft. Die Aussicht, durch die Neuerrichtung von historisch ausgerichteten Baukomplexen im Tourismusgeschäft zu punkten, verleitet viele, auf diesen Zug aufzuspringen. Planungs- und Errichtungsarbeiten werden dabei oft genug von Nicht-Fachleuten durchgeführt und die Ergebnisse sehen entsprechend aus. Die Archäologie sollte sich über das große Interesse der Öffentlichkeit freuen, doch gilt es Mittel und Wege zu finden, um sicherzustellen, dass rekonstruierte Anlagen so weit als möglich dem Geschichtsbild der modernen Wissenschaft und dem letzten Stand der Forschung entsprechen. Die Darstellung von historischen Inhalten sollte nur in engster Zusammenarbeit mit Archäologen vorgenommen werden und keinesfalls auf Kosten von Qualität kommerzialisiert werden. Die Betreuung von archäologischen Freilichtmuseen durch einschlägige Fachinstitutionen der Archäologie über die Errichtungsphase hinaus ist anzuraten.

Sharing the knowledge?

■ Charis ZACHARIOU

Field archaeologist (GR)

I have been working for the last decade on archaeological excavations of prehistoric and Bronze Age sites, where the actual architectural remains are very scarce and badly preserved due to the nature of their construction materials. Therefore, it is almost impossible for a visitor to get a clear picture of prehistoric life. I can recall locals and tourists visiting, staring at the site of the excavation unable to relate the picture before them, to the archaeological information offered during the guided tour.

Scientists in charge, at the same time, are usually reluctant to expose archaeological conclusions and related finds before the publication of a site, a fact that can decrease the understanding of the “ignorant” public, bearing also in mind the length of excavation time in most of the cases. I consider this as one more barrier to understanding the untold past.

My involvement in reconstruction enabled me to see things in a different perspective. Objects and architectural remains found on a site, all of a sudden appear like reality, “telling a story”. I have noticed the different impact reconstruction attempts can have on the visitors: people coming for a quick glance at the actual dig, with little interest in learning more, immediately changed their attitude and developed a deeper interest on our work. I could also point out the difference between a simple guided tour of prehistoric dwellings with utensils and tools inside to the possibility for visitors of experiencing the building procedures or their involvement in days with certain activities, like starting a fire, firing pots, or working with obsidians.

I take for granted our responsibility to share our hard-achieved knowledge with the public and I consider reconstruction a practical way to do so, while acknowledging the difficulty of their au-

thenticity. A key issue for me would be the involvement of people and the opportunity offered to them to experience as many activities as possible.

Meeting the needs of sensory experience

■ Bodil PETERSSON

Lund University, Dept. of Archaeology and Ancient History (SE)

When full-scale reconstructions of the past are made, they are often thrilling to our fantasy and an excellent way to get in touch with the past. The criticism should not focus on inaccuracies according to archaeological facts or questions of authenticity. Instead reconstructions are important for our sensory experience. They evoke new, sense-based thoughts on other forms of life that are very different from our own, and that is an excellent quality with reconstructions. When we get rid of the museum glass case usually surrounding past times, we automatically get other and new thoughts in our minds, perceived through the senses. The past presented in reconstructions is usually freed from conflict and war and presents a peaceful existence, but this peaceful past is sometimes forgotten in other presentations, for example books and exhibitions where conflicts, war and power manifestations are often focussed on. Reconstructed environments are meeting the needs of sensory and emotional experiences of everyday life in the past: to get a feeling of how it would be to live everyday life in other conditions. Most important is that we trust the visitors and wish to give them – and ourselves – the possibility to experience views of the past through our senses and judge for ourselves what we see and feel. From this point we can renew the discussion on why we need the past today.

Summary

Préserver les reconstitutions archéologiques au public

Les reconstitutions archéologiques ont un grand impact dans la diffusion des connaissances historiques car étant grandeur nature, elles stimulent tous les sens du visiteur. La clef d'une bonne reconstitution est sa capacité à “parler” à tout type de public. Les concepteurs doivent savoir quelle histoire ils veulent raconter, et à qui.

La plupart des reconstitutions sont conçues d'abord pour un usage public et il est indispensable de montrer la part d'interprétation dans leur réalisation. Il n'existe pas de reconstitution parfaitement historique, et il faut laisser se faire aux visiteurs leur propre avis et jugement. Ils devraient quitter toute reconstitution en ayant compris qu'il ne s'agit pas exactement d'une image précise du passé. Une approche minimaliste sans accompagnement pédagogique exposerait au risque de donner une fausse image de la démarche.

Zur Darstellung archäologischer Rekonstruktionen für die Öffentlichkeit

Archäologische Rekonstruktionen sind ein bedeutendes Medium, um Geschichte(n) der Vergangenheit zu vermitteln. Denn sie sind in Originalgröße errichtet und sprechen mehrere Sinne an. Die Basis für eine erfolgreiche Rekonstruktion ist ihre Glaubwürdigkeit vor dem Publikum. Die Macher von solchen Rekonstruktionen müssen sich klar darüber sein, welche Geschichte sie erzählen und für wen. Die meisten Rekonstruktionen sind für eine größere Öffentlichkeit erstellt worden und ihretwegen ist es notwendig, das „Unbekannte“ nachvollziehbar darzustellen. Es gibt keine vollständig korrekten archäologischen Rekonstruktionen; wir müssen uns auf die Fähigkeit der Besucher verlassen, dass auch sie die Konstruktionen kritisch hinterfragen können. Die Besucher sollten eine Freilichteinrichtung mit dem Wissen verlassen, dass es keine „wahre Vergangenheit“ gibt. Ein minimalistischer Ansatz in der Kommunikation der Einrichtung gegenüber den Besuchern muss dagegen ein falsches Bild ergeben.