Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: Hans Horreus de Haas

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Author(s): Diederik Pomstra [1] ✉

[1] Faculteit der Archeologie Universiteit Leiden, Einsteinweg 2, 2333 CC Leiden, the Netherlands.

December 2010, Hans de Haas turned 75 and this seemed a fitting occasion for an in depth interview with this Nestor of Dutch living prehistory and experimental archeology. In SPT Bulletin nr. 23 David Wescott and Steve Watts already published an interview with Hans, but there is more to say about this extraordinary man.

In the Netherlands he is famous in a small circle of experimental archaeologists, stone-age enthusiasts and primitive skills aficionados. He has built more than15 full size (pre)historic

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houses and produced boats, pottery and tools from all likely and unlikely materials. All these things were done in typical Hans-style with one eye on archaeological finds and another wide open for all other possibilities the material on hand could offer. But perhaps more importantly, everything was always done with a lot of laughter and an eagerness to experience that is infectious to many. There is no one who can make a working party of volunteers toil in cold, rainy weather as Hans can.

This interview took place close to the fireside at Hans' house in Zwolle at the end of a day of experimenting with clay and pottery. As I do not have a tape recorder, the text below is not exactly as our conversation went, but as I remember it.

How did you come to do this kind of work, how did it all start?

Well, it begins with me being a very fortunate man. I've always had a strong body and never had much trouble with cold, heat or wetness. And I've had an extraordinary father, Roelof Horreüs de Haas. As a child Indians fascinated me. I loved the 'Tecumseh'-series by F. Steuben, but my dad also gave me the book 'The Cave Children in the Secret Valley' by A. Th. Sonnleitner to read. He was a biology teacher, but had a wide range of interests. When he was still teaching biology at high school he organised many outdoor activities in which I participated. He taught me much about plants, birds and wildlife. During the Second World War I assisted him in building a bird watching-hut with willows and reeds in much the same way as we would build prehistoric huts 30 years later.

He was the driving force behind the Stone Age living-project that took place in 1976. By that time I was working as a biology teacher myself, but I was not happy with this situation. I've always wanted to stay free and this job was tying me down. So I was very glad that this opportunity presented itself. The project was not meant to be an archaeological experiment; it started more as a game: can we do this? My father however tried to gather as much background information as possible and got in touch with Errett Callahan and several archaeologists from Denmark, Czechoslovakia, the UK and the Netherlands. We had a very successful project that got a lot of attention in the media. We were asked to cooperate in a series of short films for national television. We adapted these films later for educational T.V. and wrote booklets for teachers and pupils to accompany the films. Roelof also published an article in a popular magazine and gave lectures. Because of all this, what we had done became well known and that, basically, is how it began in earnest.

So Stone Age technology became more or less your job: what were your most important assignments?

In 1982 the Floriade was organized in Amsterdam (this is the National Exhibition on Horticulture that takes place every 10 years, DP) and we were asked to build a few Stone Age huts for the Exhibition. However, since an important Bronze Age site had recently been excavated in the vicinity, we chose to build a Bronze Age farmhouse instead. They even made a small peninsula for us to recreate it on. When it was completed I stayed there for about 6 months, giving demonstrations in daytime and guarding the place at night. Most of the other project-participants, except my father, were suffering from 'stone-age weariness' and had regular jobs, so I was there mostly on my own. I had a good time, occupying myself with agriculture, baking pottery, building et cetera. Errett came to visit, and he was very enthusiastic.

In Floriade I met with Anneke Boonsta, who wanted to realize an Iron Age open-air museum in Eindhoven. She got a site and some budget from the city council, and we began work in 1983. As we had very little money we worked only with volunteers. This taught me a lot. It takes a certain skill to keep volunteers motivated, especially when it is hard work or the weather is bad. We used to make bets like:
'You cannot shift that timber today',
'Of course we can!'
' O yeah? Well, I'll make you a cake if you make it…'

As the main reason for building the reconstructions in Eindhoven was education, we were forced to compromise. For example, the children needed a place to sleep. This requirement necessitated a deviation from the original plan of the farmhouse. But it was great to be both builder and architect.
In Eindhoven I also worked with children, and we had challenging activities. For example, we butchered the leg of a pig with them using stone tools, and when we were done we weighed the amount of meat, skin, fat and bone that it yielded. Another was a match between the children who could make the biggest bowl with a limited amount of clay. This forced them to make thin walls. It was fun, but I preferred the actual work, making things and building houses.

Ever since Floriade I had been making items for museums. They liked to have a reconstruction of a part of a house in their exhibitions, filled with tools, baskets, pots and other utensils to give an idea of what a house could have been like in that time. I enjoyed working with their designers, trying to get them to go along with my ideas. I also made some money giving demonstrations at various occasions. That was great, being paid for having fun. That never felt like work at all. The main work remained building more reconstructions, sometimes with volunteers or young people from the Dutch

Youth Association for History.

Then, in 1991, there came a huge new challenge. Roelof and I had been in touch with Gerard IJzereef, the archaeologist who had been researching the Bronze Age site that formed the basis of the reconstructions at Floriade. Roelof, Gerard and others had been discussing ideas for a large archaeological theme park, and in 1991 it was to be realized. So that meant making many different reconstructions in quite a limited time frame. When Archeon, as the park had been christened, opened its doors to the public in 1994 I stayed on again, as in Floriade, to give demonstrations in various techniques, building and, new to me, working a pair of oxen. Archeon was a wonderful place, but as its financial situation deteriorated, part of the land was sold to avoid bankruptcy. This meant that many prehistoric reconstructions had to be moved to a new place. This was my last job in Archeon, and shortly after that I more or less retired.

What were or are your connections with archaeologists, what have you done for science?

Actually, that was not much. I have done some experiments in Sweden with stone axes and when we were building reconstructions, like in Enkhuizen and Archeon, we experimented with those. It was meant that archaeologists would follow these experiments up, but this did not always happen. The info from the early days of Archeon has been used in several reports, though.

My main activities have been building reconstructions for educational purposes, and the problem with extracting data from these is of course that there are unknown, but possibly huge differences in climate and use of a house which have great impact on every aspect of their characteristics. The only solid information probably is the amount of materials that is needed, wood and loam and so on and the time necessary to build such a structure. But it would be great to extract more information from reconstructed houses, though I feel it is better to unravel the whole and tackle it in parts. For example, if you want to know about the longevity of pillars of houses it is probably faster and better to set up a whole bunch of them, all prepared in a different way, than to build several reconstructions. The same goes for living experiments. I have been in two of them (in 1976 and 2005 DP) and though they are interesting experiences, they rarely yield something that is important to archaeology. I rather look to ‘primitive’ cultures for information. When I was in the Himalayas for four months while gathering plants as a botanist, I learnt a lot about building with the natural materials at hand. The higher up the mountain we came, there were always new technologies in building, well adjusted to the inhabitants’ needs. But when you have done all the isolated experiments, I think it would be valuable to bring it all together again. Building a reconstruction or doing a living-experiment based on the data from the many smaller experiments would then be a valuable thing to do.

But doing primitive technology takes patience. A lot of it is quite dull, hard work, like peeling bark from timber or thatching a roof. But if you stay alert, suddenly you have, as Errett called it, a 'finding'. And that has always kept me interested. Many archaeologists do not really want to get their hands dirty and toil like this. They do have questions that they would like to see answered by experiments, but when the going gets tough they usually give up. Some archaeologists have called me the godfather of experimental archaeology in the Netherlands, but that's far too much praise. All I ever did was use my common sense to find answers to practical problems. There's a large gap between archaeologists and primitive technologists, at least in the Netherlands. In other countries, like Germany or the UK it seems to be far better.

What is to you the greatest value of primitive technology?

To my mind it's mostly a tool to educate people. Not just in archaeology, but mainly in important things like self-reliance, persistence, a sense of nature and living sustainably. I learnt much from the living experiments that I participated in: one needs so very little to live and have fun. And once you know this, you have great freedom. Many people have no patience, which can easily lead to shallowness. Primitive technology can help counter this, but then we need to introduce it to people when they are children. The lessons it has to teach are very valuable in every walk of life. Schools should consider primitive-technology projects. These even contain elements of common school subjects as handicrafts, history and gymnastics!

Who influenced whom in the early days of the primitive technology- 'movement'?

I think that Hansen influenced both Errett Callahan and Roelof, but after '76 Roelof in his turn influenced Hansen. The same kind of cross-pollination took place between Roelof, Coles and Reynolds (founder of Butser's Farm in the UK, DP). In the preparatory stage of the project of '76, Roelof was also in touch with Malina from Czechoslovakia.

Where do you think or hope primitive technology is going?

I would like to see basic technologies used as a buffer zone between nature and cities. Small farms based on historic examples and working with the technologies of those days could serve several purposes. Young people, interested in the challenge of this work could live there and make a living off the farms. These could be used for educational purposes too, and would also be a buffer between protected nature and the threats that modern life poses to it. On the same plane, it would be wonderful if more scientific research was done on useful and edible plants. We need this information if we want to make use of them, and we should, as the use of nature brings respect and love for nature with it.

In the Netherlands I think we should realize an open-air museum in the north based on finds from the Iron Age. It would be wonderful to have reconstructions of small but functioning farms on 'terpen' (artificial heights to live on constructed to avoid flooding at extreme high tides, DP). Our northern provinces do not have an open-air museum available to them yet.

You've also travelled quite a bit, what can you tell me about that?

As a biology-student I went to Brazil with Roelof to make an inventory of plants in the tropical forest, and we combined this with a low-budget trip from coast to coast. This was the full life to me: adventure combined with science. My own country is so small, crowded and manmade.
In 1984 I stopped working in Eindhoven for a month to be a guide for a group travelling to Spitsbergen. I had worked there before at a scientific station, but it was my first time as a guide. I didn't like it much: there were some people that were always complaining, and I can't stand that.
Shortly after the project of 1976 I took advantage of an important lesson that the project had taught me: that very little is enough to live on. Together with the children and a friend of ours we made a 6 month-tour of Europe, very low budget. We took a coffee-grinder to grind meal from grains we bought from farmers. It was a lot of fun. And then there were several trips to Senegal and Kenya for the benefit of development projects, the prolonged stay in the Himalayas that I already mentioned, botanical research in Iceland on dandelions and more. I love travelling, there's so much to learn and to experience.

Thanks Hans, anything you would like to add?

Make sure you make clear that I did what I did because I loved doing it, and because I wanted to keep my options open in life. The challenges of Stone Age technology have always been and still are a wonderful motivator.

Link(s)
http://www.archeon.nl
http://www.homeindhoven.nl

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Country the Netherlands

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Corresponding Author

Diederik Pomstra
Faculteit der Archeologie Universiteit Leiden
Einsteinweg 2
2333 CC Leiden
the Netherlands
E-mail Contact

Gallery Image

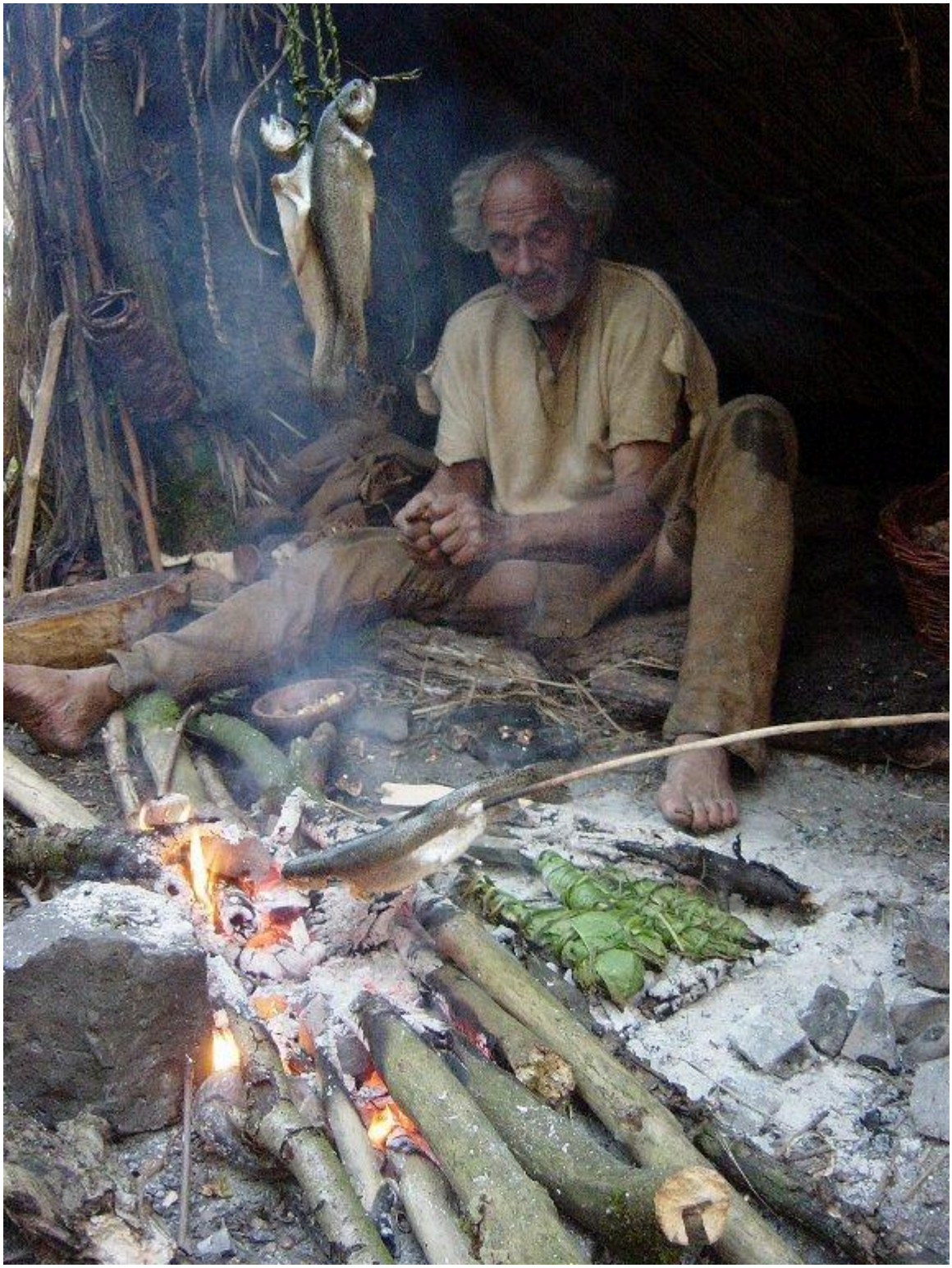

FIG 1. COOKING STONE AGE BOUNTY.

FIG 2. DRIVING FISH TO THE WEIR.

FIG 3. HANS AND THE AUTHOR SHELLING ACORNS.

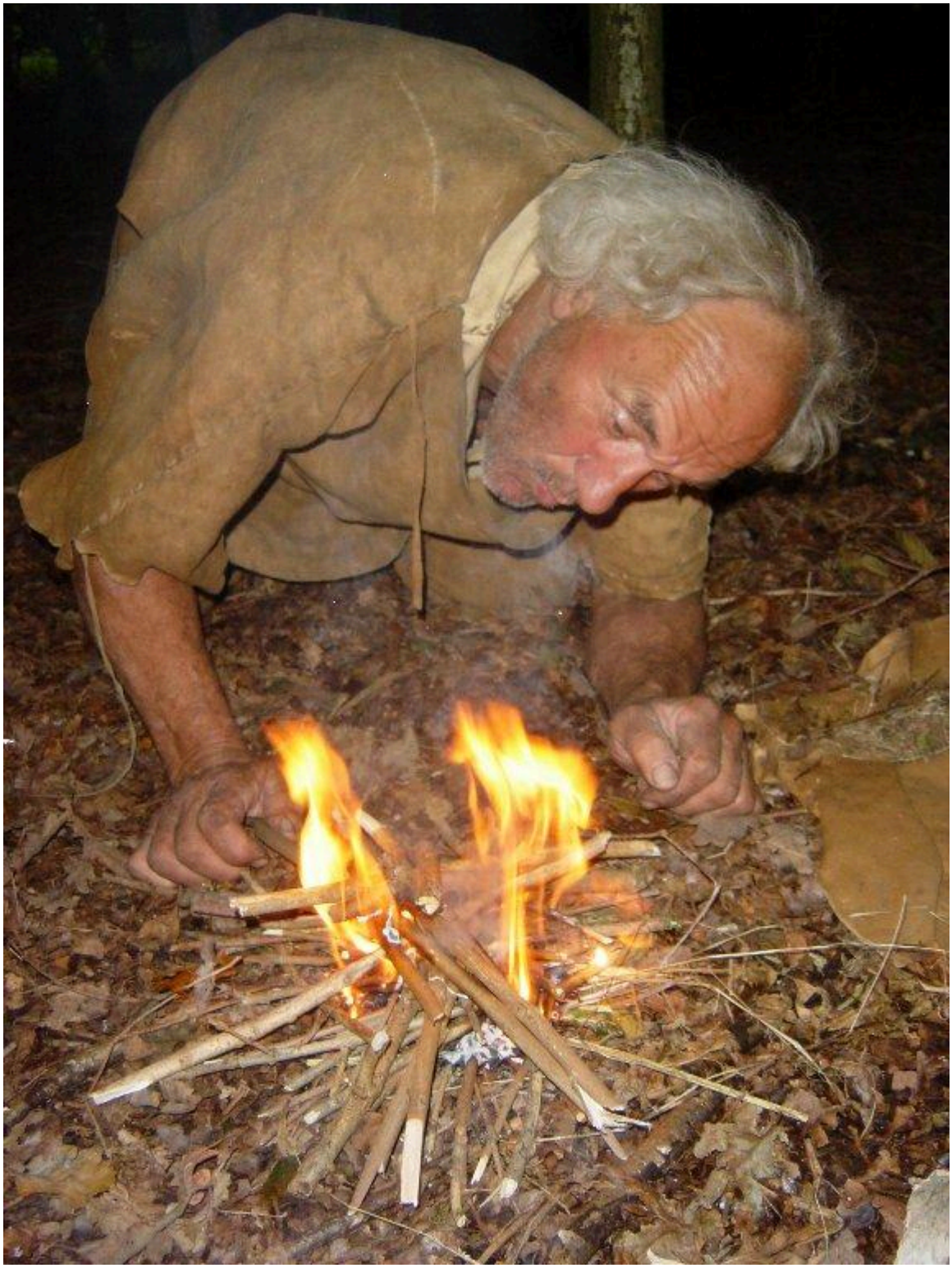

FIG 4. HANS LIGHTING A FIRE IN A TEMPORARY CAMP DURING A NUT-GATHERING EXPEDITION.

FIG 5. READY FOR THE OFF.

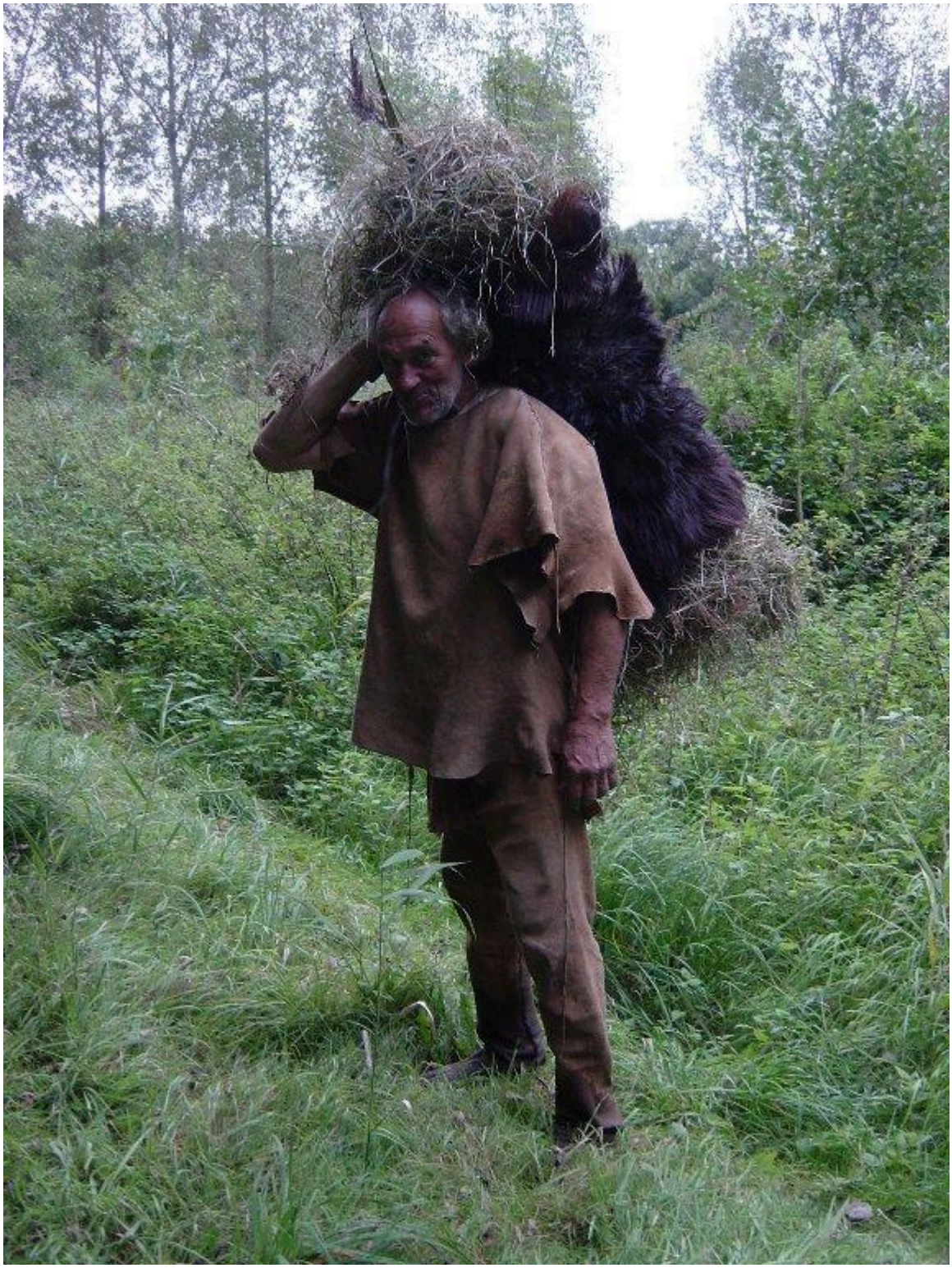

FIG 6. READY FOR THE OFF...