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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: The Value of an Archaeological Open-Air Museum is in its Use by Roeland Paardekooper

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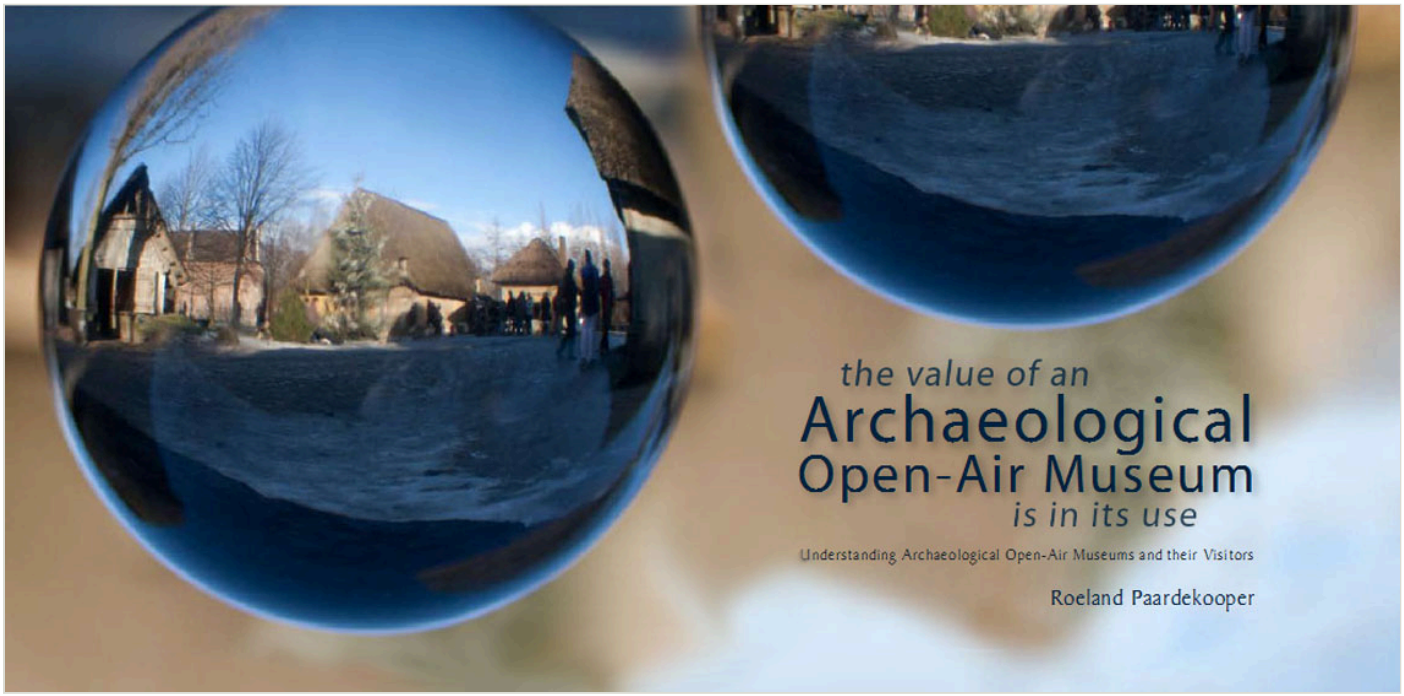

Question: What has 40,000 legs, likes to tell stories and pops up all over Europe?
Answer: An archaeological open-air museum.

OK, not the most brilliant riddle in the world, but the point is that with publication of Dr Paardekooper's monograph we now, finally, have a secure databank of facts and figures relating to archaeological open-air museums in Europe, including management structures,

key financial indicators, visitor profiles and visitor numbers (average of 20,000 visitors a year per site, hence those 40,000 busy little feet).

> The survey reveals that one of the drivers for visitor satisfaction across the board is the quality of the tour guides: these consistently receive the highest ratings, underlining the importance of personal interaction, something that is well-recognised in the wider tourist market.

Riddles aside, what actually is an 'archaeological open-air museum'? Well, as it happens Dr Paardekooper helpfully provides the following definition for us:

'An archaeological open-air museum is a non-profit permanent institution with outdoor true to scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources. It holds collections of intangible heritage resources and provides an interpretation of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors.'

So now we know what sort of animal it is, how many of them are out there? Dr Paardekooper estimates that there are roughly 300 archaeological open-air museums in Europe and while the concept can be traced back several hundred years, the vast majority of these were founded from the 1980s on. The analysis also shows certain regional preferences in terms of theme: for example, the Iron Age and anything 'Celtic' is very popular in Britain and in German-speaking areas of Europe, while the Viking 'brand' is synonymous with Scandinavia. These sites have until now existed in a certain degree of 'strategic isolation' in the sense that the absence of any comprehensive analytical review has made it very difficult to place them in context, to compare and contrast behaviour, success and failure, and to plan effectively for the future. Now for the first time these sites have a solid frame of reference against which to test themselves, and that, for me, is probably the most significant contribution of this monograph. There is much still to be done, much more data to be collected, but for me this book was nothing short of a revelation. It opens the door on a community that didn't even know it existed. It's as if each was taken at birth from its natural family and only now realises that there are others just like it in the world. It is an inestimable comfort just to know that you are not alone and that others share the same problems, challenges, dreams and small victories....

This study sets out a number of very clear goals. These are: to characterise the sites; to explore issues of management and finances, staff, collections, marketing and interpretation; to compare the objective of visitor experience with the reality as perceived by the visitors themselves, and to look at ways of improving the situation. Dr Paardekooper systematically explores each of these over eight carefully constructed chapters, including detailed case-studies of eight separate sites, i.e. The Crannóg Centre (Scotland), HOME (Netherlands), the Pfahlbaumuseum (Germany), Lofotr (Norway), Parco Montale (Italy), Araisi (Latvia), the Matrica Museum (Hungary), and Fotevikens Museum (Sweden). Comprehensive visitor

surveys are also described and analysed, before concluding with a series of specific recommendations for application across all sites. The entire monograph is extremely well illustrated with figures and charts. Seven separate appendices follow, including a very helpful bibliography of publications with direct application to archaeological open-air museums, and a standardised visitor questionnaire.

So what do we learn about these sites? Well, one thing that strikes the reader forcibly throughout this book is the precariousness of their existence. The survival of these sites is often dictated by the whims of visitor approval, the vagaries of grant-systems and the vision of a few key individuals. Quite a few have failed, including some large well-developed sites. However, equally telling, is the resilience of the sector as a whole – many, many more have survived than have failed and, as in all areas of business, it is those who have shown an ability to adapt who have performed best of all.

Dr Paardekooper describes an interesting exercise in which he invited the various sites in his study group to select from a number of key words that best described what they were about. The results show that 'education' is selected repeatedly and more frequently than 'tourism', despite the fact that it is actually tourism that feeds footfall through their gates. The emphasis on 'education' is welcome – this is precisely what stops these sites from becoming 'theme parks'. However, any sense of detachment from the wider tourist sector must equally be avoided as detrimental to business; indeed, throughout this study it is hard to avoid a sense that many of these sites simply do not see themselves as being in 'business' at all. We are probably all aware of sites which in the off-season close at week-ends – the very time when they are most likely to attract whatever visitor or domestic traffic exists. This type of anecdotal experience is backed up by Dr Paardekooper's research which finds that modern management systems tend not to be used at all, with little evidence of forward planning and with very few sites having any sort of formal business-plan in place. Instead, management tends to operate on a day-to-day basis, and is largely reactive rather than proactive in its approach. This is not in any way to detract from the huge investment of time, effort and resources that these sites apply, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that in many cases this investment could be better directed.

In terms of structure, Dr Paardekooper estimates that about 60% are bound in some way into local government structures. In some cases this gives a certain security, but in others it has proven restrictive in what can be attempted or in what extra facilities (such as on-site shopping or cafés) can be provided. Start-up costs tend to be relatively easily obtained, in the sense that there are grant structures available for establishment – the real problem is in meeting operating costs thereafter. This study shows that on average about 60% of all income is invested in staff-costs (which is not unreasonable), and just 5% on PR and marketing (which seems very low by comparison with competitors for visitor traffic).

An astonishing statistic to emerge from this study is that **only one-third of all sites generate more than 50% of their own income.** In other words, virtually none of these sites are independently viable - they are all hugely dependent on external contributions, mostly grant-aid or government support of one form or another. Then again so are most 'traditional' museums – in fact the position is even worse there, with only one-fifth of these capable of generating anything like 50% of their operating budget themselves. If one breaks out further for comparisons into the wider rural economic environment (in which most of these sites operate), one very quickly realises that very few enterprises are entirely self-sufficient – some areas of farming, for example, are even more dependent on subsidies for survival than the least viable of these museums. The question we need to ask, therefore, is whether we get *value for money* from such investment, and in the case of the open-air museums, Dr Paardekooper concludes that the return on investment for the state in these cases is consistently positive.

A key component of an archaeological open-air museum is the presentation of full-scale reconstructions of sites and monuments from past eras. In this respect, it is comforting to note the extent to which these reconstructions are based on good archaeological evidence: the study found that **84%** were supported by excavation evidence from at least one site, while **90%** had an archaeologist involved in the initial design phase. A respectable **68%** still have an archaeologist on their staff, though not always employed in that capacity. That said, where interaction with the academic world has begun to slip, Dr Paardekooper has identified a danger that some sites begin to develop and deliver their own unsubstantiated interpretations of the past. We have all seen this ourselves – sometimes it may be with a guide delivering highly personal interpretations of past societies, sometimes more worryingly it creeps in at the institutional level. No matter what your business, quality assurance needs to be to the fore and in this instance paying-customers have a legitimate expectation that the experience they are being offered is authentic and that the information communicated is accurate. Studies in the wider tourism sector have consistently shown that this is a key 'want' of what are called 'cultural tourists'. This is by far the fastest-growing area of tourism worldwide and it is these visitors who will ultimately decide the fate of many of these archaeological open-air museums. If the product is faulty, these customers will buy something else – it's as simple as that.

Staying on the subject of customers, Dr Paardekooper's research suggests that the average open-air museum receives just under **20,000** visitors annually while very few exceed **70,000** visitors. Some monsters – such as the Pfahlbaumuseum in Germany – can attract up to 300,000 visitors, but this is very much exceptional. This is a really important piece of information for the sites themselves, particularly in terms of evaluating their own performance. I know of several sites which attract in or around what we know now to be the 'norm' in terms of visitor footfall across Europe, who regard their sites as failures because they do not match the performance of the leading competitors in their own regions.

Expectations must be realistic and now, at last, we have a basis on which to found those expectations. Furthermore (and unlike many other areas of life), size really does not matter in this instance – at least in terms of visitor satisfaction; irrespective of the size of the site, most visitors report themselves as very happy with the experience and **70%** say it 'exceeded expectations'. This is one of the findings from a dedicated visitor survey undertaken by Dr Paardekooper at a range of sites across Europe. A huge amount of information has been obtained from this survey, which is one of the highlights of this study, and this provides a solid foundation for assumptions and projections into the future as well as creating a baseline for future comparisons and trend-analyses.

The survey reveals that one of the drivers for visitor satisfaction across the board is the quality of the tour guides: these consistently receive the highest ratings, underlining the importance of personal interaction, something that is well-recognised in the wider tourist market. The quality of the reconstructions also scores highly with visitors and overall Dr Paardekooper finds that interpretation and visitor service are well-developed at most sites. The various case studies demonstrate that living history and hands-on activities are a feature of the best sites and a major contributor to visitor satisfaction. What is surprising as well is the high number of activities on offer: common across many are things like cooking, pot-making, weaving, working with an axe, building houses, music and/or theatre, archery, and re-enactment. The research shows that **90%** of visitors stay between one and three hours onsite, which – combined with the very high levels of visitor satisfaction – is a very strong indicator of the quality of the product on offer and the visitor appetite for same.

Possibly related to that are the areas with the lowest levels of visitor satisfaction: these are the quality (or absence) of onsite cafés, and the quality of onsite shopping. If we want visitors to spend time onsite, the café is an obvious way of doing so while retail sales provide additional income and branding opportunities. It comes as something of a surprise to find that so many sites have only the simplest of refreshment options. In some cases, the corporate structure of the entities managing these sites appears not to facilitate such complementary developments. As regards retail sales, it is noteworthy that the top two best-sellers are typically to be purchased for **€2.50 or less**. Profitability from sales is of course a function of margin and volume, and unfortunately the study cannot tell us the extent to which sales of these lower-end products make a significant contribution to overall profits, but it is another example of the little nuggets of information that pepper this publication. For the record, postcards and children's souvenirs seem to dominate this end of retail-sales.

The survey reveals that footfall is strongly dominated by domestic visitors, mostly families, with statistical profiles registering on average **83% domestic** and **16% foreign**. These figures came as something of a surprise to me, being much more familiar with the situation in Ireland where a 60:40 breakdown would be more usual, reflecting the breakdown of the general tourist market in this part of Europe. It would be interesting to see how the visitor

profiles recorded by Dr Paardekooper compare with the general tourist market in the relevant areas concerned in his studies. Interestingly, his studies also show that repeat business for the archaeological open-air museums tends to be lower than for other tourist attractions, and one would have to wonder why that is and what can be done to address that.

One of the most surprising pieces of information to emerge from the visitor survey is the importance of *radio* as a marketing tool. In fact, the survey showed that this was by far the most effective tool available, accounting for 31% of footfall, closely followed by word-of-mouth at 23%, and then the traditional paper flyers at 19%. The internet registered surprisingly low as a primary source of information, with just 8% of visitors identifying this as the motivator for their visit.

A clear seasonality also emerges in terms of footfall, but it is not just that more people come in the summer, but that the profile of visitors changes over the year as does their expectations and behaviour. The shoulder seasons (i.e. the period between the peak and low seasons) seems to be the main problem area for sites to tackle: visitor satisfaction falls significantly during this period, probably because they still expect a 'peak-season' offering and instead find a quieter, less interactive one. Interaction costs money and for many sites this is only possible in peak season. However, as the marketing often highlights this aspect of the experience to potential visitors, this can lead to disappointment when the experience fails to deliver on expectations. Marketing material needs to recognise this too, while on the other hand sites need to find some way of addressing the 'deficit' of interaction in the shoulder and low seasons. Some do this by operating different gate-fees for peak and low seasons, while one site – HOME in the Netherlands – takes a quite imaginative approach by applying distinct 'Watch' and 'Do' rates across the week, depending on the level of interaction available. Others shut down completely for the low season. In fact, it appears to be highly unusual for an archaeological open-air museum to stay open all year round – the average period for which sites are open over a year is between 200 and 250 days. While this can make economic sense, it fosters serious problems in terms of staff development and retention; again and again this study demonstrates that the real strength of these sites, what Dr Paardekooper calls their 'intangible heritage', lies in the people working there and the stories they tell.

The study concludes with a number of key recommendations, which can be applied across the board. Live interpretation is the key, plus opportunities for active participation by all (not just children) – this is what makes the archaeological open-air museums different from anything else. However, there is also a need to introduce some degree of real 'business-planning' into the management process, including annualising of the maintenance-investment to smooth-out some of the cycles of decline and refurbishment to which these sites are otherwise enslaved. Sites need to become much more self-sufficient in terms of income. They should look to network more, especially with the wider community of tourism providers, marketing and 'bundling' products jointly with these. They need to sell more: the

message here is to open a shop, customise your retail products, and open a café – no matter how limited it is. Sites need to keep their staff and try to offer some form of career path within the institution. If they don't already have an archaeologist on-board, they need to find one quick; an advisory or steering committee will also help provide other skills that may be missing (for example in marketing or finances). Volunteers can be a valuable resource but they need to be managed: assigning a staff-member to this function will quickly recover the associated salary-costs in free labour and inputs. EU funding is another under-used resource – the application and design process is time-consuming but the money is there. EXARC may be able to help with this process.

There are more recommendations, but these are the ones that jumped out at me. However, the sad fact is that none of these recommendations, nor indeed Dr Paardekoooper's book, is likely to be read by those who would benefit from doing so most. The book is simply too big, too detailed, too academic. It is not an easy read – not because it is not well written, but because it is so detailed. In its current form, it betrays its origin as an academic thesis and this will not lend itself to easy digestion by the managers of archaeological open-air museums, who are the very ones who need to read and understand this study. I would personally like to see this publication accompanied by a more accessible one – a 'highlights' edition, aimed directly at the sites themselves. I think the information that is now available, and the findings from the new research undertaken, needs to be disseminated as quickly as possible to as wide an audience as possible. A Powerpoint version, or a web-video, would do equally well. The opportunity could also be taken to expand some of the data, by reference to some of the wider contextual statistics that are freely available, for example regional tourism trends, projections and profiles, or the relevant economic multipliers to help us understand the real contribution and return-on-investment that these sites deliver. I would also like to see some median analyses added to the mix, to complement the averaging approach which is otherwise adopted throughout, and which might give a better idea of actual 'norms' within the sector in instances where outlying values distort the picture.

But that should be only the start: if, as Dr Paardekooper asserts, *'the value of an archaeological open-air museum is in its use'*, then surely the value of this publication will be in its application. So where to from here? What role can EXARC play in fostering a new approach to the management of these sites? Could we think of a special forum aimed at managers, a virtual space where they can share data and experience with each other, and perhaps develop ideas for joint ventures or projects? Should we go further and look at a process of 'accreditation' – creating a standard for archaeological open-air museums, just as exists for so many other sectors? We should not lose the momentum generated by this publication. There is too much riding on this.

Book information:

PAARDEKOOPER, R. P., 2012, *The Value of an Archaeological Open-Air Museum is in its use. Understanding Archaeological Open-Air Museums and their Visitors*, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 342 pp., ISBN: 9789088901034

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