Introduction

In April of 1994 the archaeological themepark Archeon opened its gates in the municipality of Alphen aan den Rijn, The Netherlands.

As a former employee of the State Service for Archeological Research I became involved in the plans for building such a park in 1981. From march 1990 until july 1995 I was the archaeological director of this park. In 1995 I left the organisation for 2 years. At present I am one of the owners and general manager.

During the first year of opening (1994) about 250 people were employed. About 12 of them were fully educated archaeologists or historians. The year around staff consisted of 35 persons, the rest was hired at a seasonal basis from march to november. The main group of people (about 100) were employed as so-called “archeo-tolken”, i.e. interpreters of the past.

About 50 persons were employed in the catering division: a Roman inn and a medieval monastery. In 1997 the staff was reduced to 5 persons and additional 50 worked in the park and the catering in total.

Archeon demonstrates to its visitors the daily life of the past by means of reconstruction and with the help of craftsmen, builders and actors in authentic costumes. This means that the reconstruction of the past is as authentic as possible. For the prehistoric period evidence of the hunted animal species, weaving or spinning instruments, as well as the scanty remains of textiles, were used in the reconstruction of the clothes. The roman and medieval costumes have been based on written, sculpted, and painted specimens as well.

The “archeotolken” serve as interpreters to the public by speaking to them in modern language. We have chosen not to present authentic archaeological finds or museum show-cases, but only replica’s for people to hold and to touch. We do not have lenghty text signs but present the whole setting as originally as possible. Many problems had to be dealt with in order to recon-

(1) This article is a slightly modified version of a paper for the Third World Archaeological Congress.
struct houses, landscapes, tools and clothes of the various cultures that succeeded each other from the Paleolithic period up to the Middle Ages.

Background

The Netherlands is one of the most overpopulated countries in the world. Over 400 people per km$^2$ inhabit our country. It is because of this that there has always been a great pressure on building sites and that a lot of the old buildings were replaced by new buildings and industrial areas.

As a consequence there are hardly any archaeological monuments left and for the general public there is hardly anything to be seen of our former inhabitants. The exceptions are a few megalithic tombs and neolithic and bronze age barrows. Of the Roman period and the Early middle ages hardly anything can be admired, except in museums.

Excavations in the Netherlands have demonstrated over the last decennia that the country hides enormous quantities of settlements from many periods under the surface. It was also for this reason that it was decided to show the archaeology of the Netherlands in one large location. The reconstruction of this past has not been carried out on the remains of a local excavation, but examples were used in Alphen aan den Rijn from all over the country.

In 1978 the “Foundation for Experimental and Educational Archaeology” was founded. Its aims were to build a national open-air museum for archaeology by means of one-to-one reconstructions of mainly prehistoric settlements. When the location of this park became permanent in Alphen aan den Rijn (march 1990), the “Foundation of Archeon” became the leading developer, and the Roman and medieval periods were added.

From 1993 onwards, schoolchildren and other groups can actually live in a number of the reconstructions and a centre of experimental archeology was also added to the project.

The basis for all reconstructions is obtained by experimental archaeology. With this discipline archaeological ideas and hypothesis are tested during the reconstruction of buildings, burial structures, boats, charts and by imitating former processes, such as the melting of metals, weaving and the reconstruction of pottery from various archaeological periods.

The building of the park has not been done with 100% “authentical” materials. For example the fully operational Roman bath (reconstructed after the Thermae of Heerlen, province of Limburg) has a “hidden”, fully modern heating installation. For reasons of safety, modern hygien standard, etc. the wall consist of modern bricks, but everything that can be seen looks as authentic as possible (plaster, wall-paintings, roof tiles, doors and windows). In the prehistoric area as well as in most of the medieval buildings the proper materials were used for the construction.
It was decided to build the park in Alphen aan den Rijn mainly because of its location in the heart of the Randstad Holland; within 35 kilometers we find the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

Seven million people live within this area. In order to be financially successful 600,000 visitors were needed the first year.

Secondly, the area is visited by more than 2 million tourists each year. In the third place, it was possible to obtain 60 hectares (250 acres) of land.

In the fourth place, and this was very important: there was a very strong local interest in especially the Roman and Medieval history of Alphen (prehistoric remains are very scarce in the area).

Although almost 500,000 visitors came the first year – and this was in fact a great success – the prognosis was higher, so the necessary steps were taken to perform at a lower cost level. The second year again, the number of visitors (350,000) was lower than expected (500,000). So, additional exercises have been carried out to reach a profitable level of existence. It became clear during the first two years that considerable larger sums were needed to put this new product, built in a new area in the touristic market.

The Archaeological Theme-Parc

On march 31 of this 1994 Archeon opened its gates.

Sixty hectares of land have been transformed into a journey through time starting in the Mesolithic area of hunters and gatherers, through the Roman period and it ends in 1350 AD with a monastery of the Fransiscan Minor Friars at Dordrecht (Fig. 1). Besides that, the park contained a parking area for 1500 cars and 70 busses, an entrance building of 40,000 cubic metres, an educational yard with overnight facilities and a centre experimental archaeology.

The total costs were 70 million Dutch guilders, or 40 million US dollars.

It was financed mainly by a large Dutch bank, by grants of the municipality, the province of South Holland, the ministry of Public Affairs and by sponsoring donations. The participation of the government was possible because of employment possibilities, tourism opportunities, and finally because of the believe in the unique new concept and theme of this project.

After 3 years of opening and nearly 1,000,000 visitors the park went bankrupt afterall. The investment was too high to repay the loan of the bank. It was thus decided by that bank to sell the park to a new owner, and to reduce it to 6 hectares, in order to build houses on the rest of the terrain. The entrance building, the car-park, and the whole area of the prehistory were taken out of the project, and a continuation of Archeon was left to market parties. I succeeded in bying the park with two partners in april of 1997, and during the fourth season the park obtained 70,000 visitors, but now on a break-even situation.
On April 10 of 1998 Archeon will open again for the fifth season, but now on a 6 hectare basis. We expect to make a small profit with 100,000 visitors.

The three periods

1. Prehistory

The prehistory in Archeon focusses on several settlement sites, with varying landscape aspects, megalithic monuments and water. Starting in the Mesolithic site of Bergumermeer visitors can see a temporary hunting camp on the border of a lake (Newell 1973).

Hunter-gatherers build dug-out canoes, the clothes are made of deer skins and the houses – based on Dutch excavation plans – resemble those of some modern time settlements of Africa (Fig. 2). The first farmers in the Netherlands came from the south-eastern areas of Europe around 5400 BC (Bakels 1978). The so-called Bandceramic settlers made very large family houses up to 35 m in length and they imported live-stock, domestic grains, pottery, ceramics, and stone axes and adzes into the Low Countries. Their
settlements were found in the south of the country and only on the very fertile “löss” soils. In fact, for the actual reconstruction truck-loads of “löss” have been brought to the park to “create” a Bandceramic environment. It will, however, take several decades to recreate the proper sub-atlantic forest. In the new lay-out, one large farm of 35 m is reconstructed.

Other Neolithic sites in Archeon concentrate on the Funnel Beaker (Bakker 1979) and Vlaardingen culture (Regteren Altena et al. 1962-63).

One megalithic burial mound is reconstructed as well. From the period of the Bronze Age one farmhouse from Andijk is reconstructed (Fig. 3).

Two Iron Age houses from Ezinge complete the prehistoric part of the park.

2. Roman Period

The Roman period concentrates on an imaginary town called “Trajectum ad Rhenum” with the house of the local potter, a taverna, a bathhouse (Fig. 4), a temple, a forum, and an amphitheatre. As all of the reconstructions in Archeon are based on an excavation, the example for the bathhouse comes from Heerlen, where in the Thermenmuseum the foundations of this building can still be seen. In Archeon visitors of the thermae can actually take a Roman bath. The Roman inn from Nijmegen is being used as a Roman restaurant, where “Roman” food and drink can be obtained, prepared with reference to the Roman writer Apicius.
Fig. 3 – The reconstruction of a Bronze Age farm from Andijk.

Fig. 4 – The Roman Bath of Heerlen.
3. THE MIDDLE AGES

The medieval period in *Archeon* concentrates on a small town called “Gravendam”. It shows a typical Dutch village from the late medieval period (1350 AD) in the Low Countries. Houses from Amsterdam, Utrecht, Edam, Delft, Rotterdam, as well as one from Antwerp have been reconstructed. Inside all the houses handcrafts of the fourteenth century are demonstrated, and they are fully furnished. Sometimes Vikings come by with a market full of products (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – Medieval market.
Educational Area

In April of 1993 the educational centre started its activities (Fig. 6). School children have been actively educated in this part of the park, and we have experienced that this area will be very successful. Permanent evaluation with question-forms to the schools and the teachers is carried out. It is Archeon’s philosophy that the acceptance of preserving the past starts at a young age, and that especially children should learn about archaeology by experiencing the past by actually living it through. It is only because of lack of education in this field at secondary schools, that at a later age adults have less relationship with archaeology.

Archaeology and Reconstruction

The reconstructions of the buildings were carried out by a team of archaeologists and building historians. Every reconstruction in the park is based on a specific plan of an excavation. In the plan of the bath-house from Heerlen the specific proportions of Roman measurements have been discovered, which enabled us to use the proportions and dimensions for the third dimension, as mentioned by the Roman author Vitruvius (Fig. 7).

The construction of the park started in 1991 and the former polder with meadows and small ditches was transformed into its shape of this moment. During 6 months more than 400,000 cubic meters of sand and other soils were brought in to enable the landscape reconstruction in the three periods.

The reconstruction at Archeon was carried out with “prehistoric” builders, who made many construction element with authentic instruments. When data on time management were acquired, also heavier modern equipment was used.

The first results

What did we learn after the first four years of opening.
1. Our visitors are very different. They vary from people with a scientific or university education to people with a very low education. In general, people (85-90% of the visitors) like the park very much and tell us that they will come back: the same year (30%), the next year (35%) or within a few years (35%). Word of mouth propaganda is a very important success factor.
2. Many people do not know the difference between archaeology and geology, i.e. many think that archaeologists excavate dinosaurs as well. Education in this area will take much more communication, signs and leaflets than we have at the moment.
Fig. 6 – Children in the educational area.

Fig. 7 – Visitors at a Roman party.
3. In the first years we had more foreign visitors (about 10%) than expected, so signs and leaflets in other languages are needed as well in the years to come.

4. Because our presentation of the past is presented by means of reconstructions and living history, visitors do not tend to experience our park as “a result of archaeological survey” but more like a theme-park or as a fun park. We may hope that they have learned something when they reach home, but we are not certain of this.

5. The park is a private enterprise and there are no public supporters in the exploitation. After three years it became clear that the initial investment was too high and that the marketing and PR of an archaeological themepark of this size, is not possible on a yearly bases of around 500,000 visitors.

   It is felt (but not based on research) that only ten percent of the population forms the long term basis of our visitors. With a population of 15 million in the Netherlands, about 1.5 million will attend the park on a regular basis in the future. When they do so on an average basis of five years, the park needed an additional 100,000 to 200,000 foreign visitors each year. Besides that, new and spectacular reconstructions or additions will have to be made each year, in order to keep the same level of attraction. For doing this, enormous sums of money were needed. These sums were not obtained.
The new Archeon – from april 1997 onwards – “only” needs about 100.000 visitors per year for a successful exploitation. We expect this amount as reasonable and possible.

Conclusion

I conclude this contribution to the Summer School in Archaeology by mentioning that we did not preserve any ancient monument in the Netherlands - as there were no sites in the area of the park itself - but we reconstructed them from other areas in the country. In this way people can get a better insight in the past without demolishing our few and precious real ancient monuments. Also insight is provided in the “richness” of the “soil-archive” of the Netherlands.

Of course, this paper also serves a means to provoke visitors, so we hope many of you will be able to visit the park in the future.

Archeon grows its own crops, we will keep different flocks of animals and last but not least our “archeo-interpreters” will welcome you with living history every day, demonstrating the life of our ancestors between 7000 years BC and 1350 AD.

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References


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