

Stone Age on Air

A successful „living science“ programme on German television

This article discusses the presentation of archaeology on TV using the ‘reality TV’ format based on “Steinzeit – Das Experiment”, a German television production.

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In May 2007, a programme was aired on German television that crossed boundaries in more than one respect. First of all, it was treated to the best airing time, being broadcasted on two evenings during a public holiday, while astonishingly dealing with neither sex, crime or politics but with ... archaeology. More astonishing was the number of viewers: 30.4 million were counted for at least 20 minutes of the main show or the accompanying children's programmes up to today.

Press interest both in Germany and abroad also proved considerable: In early 2008, Swedish and French versions were finished that dealt with one part of the German original: The crossing of the Swiss Alps by two members of the team. On Good Friday of 2008, the television channel ARD, which hosted the first airing of the programme, showed a new and more critical cut of the show at prime time. What was it that made the show such a success and what are the benefits – and snares – for public archaeology?

Lake dwellers in the 21st century

The show introduced a communal “experiment” carried out in an environment reconstructed with archaeological data. Modern people would move into a reconstructed ‘Neolithic’ village with preparation restricted to the most necessary skills. There they would provide a wider picture on how life in the Stone Age may have worked. It would show where the modern counterpart of the original Neolithic settlers would have encoun-

tered their boundaries – and why. It could, and would, introduce viewers to everyday Neolithic reality: the massive amount of work, the strain and exposure to nature and its other imponderables.

This “experiment” was to take place near the Pfahlbaumuseum Unteruhldingen at the southern German Bodensee, an archaeological open air museum about the local Neolithic and early Bronze Age lake dwelling cultures. There, specialists would act as advisors to the project. The programme itself was a statement not only in terms of a renewed public interest in the remote past – for decades a touchy and publicly unexplored subject in post-war Germany – but also for the development of German Public Archaeology.

A long way back to the past

Whilst being banned from most universities before even having been able to enter them in the first place, Public Archaeology in Germany was treated to an existence at the very margins of the subject. This was partly because of its inglorious past in the Third Reich, where its less disinterested, germanophile predecessor was successfully used to celebrate the made-up version of a heroic prehistory. On the other hand, post-war archaeology in Germany was basically preoccupied with getting everything “going again”. Developing new concepts for public involvement was not the first thing on the agenda from the 1950ies to 70ies. Thus, the very term of Public Archaeology was introduced in Germany rather late. In Scandinavia and Britain, however – for example with the pioneer work at archaeological open air centres Lejre in Denmark and Butser Ancient Farm in England, new concepts of museology and experimental archaeology were able to take root and flourish much earlier.



■ Fig. 1 Coaching about Neolithic cooking at Pfahlbaumuseum Unteruhldingen, Germany

Still, with time passing, there have always been committed individuals and organisations that have put their ideas and energies to the test. With a wide range of role models from its European neighbours to apply, Germany has managed to pretty well catch up during the last ten to fifteen years with a huge number of archaeological open air museums, new museum concepts, use of new media and outline exhibitions that aimed at providing a complex cultural and historical context. The massive amount of books published in recent years speaks for itself – books that supply profound information on archaeology for a lay audience.

Television – the “Oliver Twist” of German Public Archaeology

With all the competition for money and acknowledgement (a problem applied to any kind of cultural education in Germany these days), we may consider German Public Archaeology introduced to public cultural life and well embedded there. There is only one poor relation left to be met with more eloquence, and that is television. While making good use of the internet and being

increasingly creative in producing DVDs and software, the dialogue with television has always seemed to be rather awkward. It often ended up with programmes that veered more to the myth of adventure and eccentricity than giving credit to the academic relevance of archaeology.

Though there are very often short programmes offering space to archaeological research, they are productions of mostly regional relevance or interest and aired by local television channels.

Regardless of what or whom is particularly to blame for this “Oliver Twist” of Public Archaeology in Germany, there is after all proof that it is possible to set up a successful cooperation between science and media.

British television has set, thanks to its long tradition of archaeological programmes presented by archaeologists dating back to 1950’s, high standards for its documentaries: well approved programmes that manage to be profound and entertaining at the same time... Among the most successful is the Channel 4 award-winning *Time Team*, aired for the first time in 1994, presented by actor Tony Robinson with a set of stable and guest experts. Some of these, like Francis Pryor, have previously headed their own programmes. Or it is possible to look at a number of BBC documentary series – *Meet the Ancestors*, *Time Flyers* or *Two Men in a Trench*, all written and presented by professional archaeologists. It was also British television that first came forward with the original idea of sending people off to live the daily life of another period: Channel 4’s “**1900 house**” (1999) and BBC



■ **Fig. 2** Two of the “little lake-dwellers”, Ronja and Till, are coached about logboat-riding by Harm Paulsen

Wales’ very well researched “**Coal house**” (2007) are only two examples of this now very popular scheme that was adopted in several European countries, as for example the programmes “**Adventure 1900**” (2004), “**Wind force 8 – the emigrant’s ship**” (2005) or “**The 1958 school for brides**” (2007) in Germany.

Thus, “**Stone Age – the Experiment**” was one of many programmes that has followed this general idea, though the one furthest removed in time and the only one where archaeology played a major role.

It is therefore not surprising that Dr. Gunter Schöbel, curator of the Pfahlbaumuseum Unteruhldingen, should mention the British BBC when being interviewed on what standards he would wish to be met in the German television production “**Steinzeit – Das Experiment**” (Stone Age – The experiment).

Schöbel, one of the archaeologists who acted as an advisor on the project, had his doubts at first – not knowing whether the archaeologists involved would be able to side with the contents and outcome of the programme after the editing process. He was very aware of the quick cutting, compressing nature of the medium and its focus on visual effects. This, combined with a huge, costly project such as this with a large number of expected viewers, academic reputations would be at stake.

A project takes shape

After a planning phase of two years in which to prepare the setting and carry out the accompanying research by the supporting specialists from the Pfahlbaumuseum, experimental archaeologists and a survival trainer, 13 people between the ages of 2 and 63 would move into a specially built Neolithic village near the museum of Unteruhldingen. The museum, one of the two oldest archaeological open air museums in Germany, prove a perfect background for the experiment. Not only were specialists in the field of Neolithic settlement and everyday life at the Bodensee close at hand. The museum also looks back on a long history of public involvement and development of living history concepts, not only in Germany but

also as part of a European networking system, among others through EXARC of which they are one of the founding members.

The research subjects had agreed to spend two months – August and September 2006 – in the village away from the museum, living on and supporting themselves with goods and materials of the Neolithic. They had to bring in the harvest of their little fields, prepare meals the “Stone Age way”, make their own pottery as well as go hunting and fishing using Neolithic weapons and techniques. Two men would also undertake the long and exhausting journey from the Bodensee across the Alps on foot, where their real Neolithic predecessors, like the famous “Ötzi”, would have gone for trade.

The archaeologists were kept busy, as were the journalists and the director who worked for the German television channel SWR. The archaeologists involved wanted to make the show a success, but also stick to the scholarly side of things – how were they to maintain academic standards and make the setting as “real” as possible? How were they to handle the possible problems of their “Neolithic settlers” who, in the short time available for coaching would not have been able to fully grow into the responsibility of what was ahead? The experiment’s participants were – and as it turned out in the most literal meaning of the word – thrown into the deep end. How would they treat failures and accidents which were, almost inevitably, to occur? Most unpredictable of all was how would the people react to changing circumstances, to the weather, the huge amount of work, the complete removal of structures they were used to?

Inventing the Neolithic?

Tales from the Green Valley – a new solution for an old problem

The layout of the project demanded, from the start, an intense communication between the film team and the archaeologists as well as other scientists, such as a group of research dentists from the University of Freiburg im Breisgau, who were

to measure the impact on the participant's teeth. This working "hand in hand" is tangible throughout the finished programme, although the archaeologists were not allowed to be present on the scene after filming had begun – against their explicit wish. This proved a difference in attitude comparing to a similar programme for the BBC.

This programme called "Tales from the Green Valley" was aired on BBC 2 in autumn 2005 and portrayed a group of historians and archaeologists re-enacting early 17th-century rural life on a farmstead close to the Welsh border with England. The five specialists wore period dress, worked with period tools and cooked with ingredients available in the 17th century. As they were very accomplished in the period history and everyday life – as were the team of supporters and advisors – the show managed a high quality level of information and insight – although, unlike our German Stone Age – re-enactors, they did not sleep on location but only went there during the day. Whereas one of the most evident purposes of the German show was to portray the everyday person's reaction to the experiment, the British programme aimed more at a supply of genuine subject-specific information, provided within a lively and highly intensive frame of reference – classifying the show as "The best period lifestyle reconstruction ever seen on British television", the British newspaper *Observer* reflected the overall enthusiastic public reaction to this new format. Indeed – it seems a rather clever and vivid solution for making abstract archaeological and historical sources widely accessible.

Archaic life and modern minds

But let's get back to our German programme: Before filming started, the editing team set up rules to ensure that nothing was forced on the protagonists in order to allow the show to preserve its experimental character. The camera would witness, not manipulate, what was to happen – accidents, rows and failures included. Apart from tampons and pincers for removing ticks, all modern belongings had to be left outside the village. While the group

was to be sheltered from current affairs and would not be informed about the latest news, they were allowed and encouraged to invent, as long as it happened with materials familiar to Neolithic Culture. Most importantly they were expected to handle minor difficulties and accidents on their own, only when it was absolutely necessary would one of the advisors help out.

Everything that was about to happen would be regarded as a hint about how things could have worked out in the Neolithic. Or, even more likely, about what challenges the Neolithic settlers had to meet – challenges that might exceed the participants' capabilities in spite of the many technical, organising and housekeeping skills they could claim for themselves. All the adults were chosen for their various abilities like making pottery, tailoring, nursing, archery, managing a large household, gardening and animal husbandry. These skills would help them adjust more quickly to the experiment's demands. From the beginning though, it was very clear that the programme would primarily show a bunch of modern people trying to apply their mindsets to a rebuilt Neolithic environment. Recreating the Neolithic is not possible – 5,000 years of cultural history have not only altered landscapes and tools.

As it turned out, the show would be a lot more about modern people's restraints and conditioning, which is an enlightening experiment in its own right, as long as one does not claim it to be an archaeological experiment in the precise methodological meaning of the word.

Democracy does not really work in the Stone Age

Two months in the Neolithic village quickly showed that democracy – every member of the group was allowed to express his or her opinion and grasp on whatever problem occurred –, especially when extended to the children of the group, does not exactly increase economy. In spite of the archaeologist's repeated and urgent advice to begin harvesting on the fields as soon as possible, the pressure was not felt by the participants, who, at this point, had not yet caught a glimpse of what it was



■ Fig. 3 The film set with the lake-dwellers

like to be hungry or, in the case of Neolithic reality face a winter with an insufficient stock of food that runs out quicker than expected.

To the participant's surprise, daily requirements like grinding, baking and cooking took much longer than expected. Heavy rain and chilly temperatures in August made their housing wet and uncomfortable: drenched clothing would not dry, an oven nearly exploded, hunger, tasteless and indigestible food and a collapsing roof brought the participant's spirits low. Still after a period of revolt and frustration, they slowly managed to adapt to the circumstances.

One of the highlights of their achievement was the walk across the Alps, undertaken by two men of the group who walked from the Bodensee to Bolzano in Italy within three weeks. Their return to the village lifted spirits, and by the end of September, the group had moved close together. In spite of the fact that their housekeeping would, according to the archaeologists, not have let them last over the winter, they had managed to survive. But what was left of the experiment, in their memories, as well as in terms of Experimental Archaeology?

For archaeology – as for the other disciplines involved in research – the project provided a couple of enlightening experiences: Extremes in the weather like an uncommonly hot and dry July and a very cold, rainy and stormy August – led to the collapse of the roof whose material had first completely dried out during July's drought and then slid down in the heavy August storms. The participants slept more and in

general had a hugely increased energy requirement due to the work and being exposed to the outside temperatures.

The two Hikers put Ötzi's reconstructed clothing on trial

One of the results was that Neolithic clothing could be extremely impractical when its owner was physically active, which, no doubt, Neolithic man was most of the time. Materials like leather, skin and fur are not breathable and only dry very slowly. Wetness is not transported from the skin and the bearer is literally bathed in his own sweat, that the gear was twice as heavy as modern clothing added to the discomfort. Additionally, they did not keep very warm, so that Ötzi probably was freezing cold more than once during his trip.

Other minor cognitions also belonged to the sphere of Neolithic everyday life, for example the experimental proof of how the holes in the "Horgener Ware", a certain kind of Neolithic pottery, made cooking easier. They allowed fluid to evaporate and keep the content at the same liquid level. Other examinations were carried out on the traces of wear out found on the tools.

Experiment or experimentation?

All in all, in terms of experimental archaeology, the results cannot be considered as strictly academic. The "experiment" carried out was rather to be understood in the

colloquial meaning of the word as something to be tried and its outcome – which is entirely open – to be observed in terms of an scientific experiment. The latter would have involved a thesis, a special purpose derived from interpreting archaeological data, some kind of expectation regarding the results and, for statistical purposes, repetition. So we can agree on the fact that the show had nothing to do with experimental archaeology as an academic discipline but in fact a social experiment. It provided, however, a few questions and results experimental archaeologists might want to look at and incorporate in their work.

Counting on the human link

The experiences and memories of the 13 participants are now used as a valuable tool for the museum work in Unteruhldingen. The children's programmes on the experiment, still photographs and even the participants in person – during special events – are included in the dialogue with the visitor.

Many of the visitor's questions about how "it was in real life" can now be answered with tangible examples of personal expertise – a new window to the realities of a remote past where speculation is often all archaeology can provide. Now there are names and faces to practical questions, for many museum visitors just the "human touch" they need to be able to find a point of contact to link abstract archaeological data to their own life.

Twenty museums in Germany have realised this potential and have cre-

ated complementary exhibitions, combining their artefacts with the image of Neolithic life created by the programme. A book was written as a co-production between Rolf Schlenker, the journalist who conceptualised the programme for television, and Almut Bick, archaeologist and expert on the Stone Age. Here, the experiment's account is cleverly supplemented with chapters about the archaeological background of everyday life in the Neolithic. On the project's website background information, a "making of" and several web blogs connect viewers with the participant's experiences and make them widely available.

A gap to bridge

An animated discussion, however, developed about the experimental character of the project at the 2007 annual meeting of EXAR, a European society of experimental archaeologists. The main question posed was where the experimental nature and use of the television project could be sought for archaeology. Where should – and could – archaeologists involved in cooperation with the television insist upon their being able to co-control the contents? And what, actually, made the show experimental, since the academic gain was minimal? Where had they to confront and adapt to the methods of another medium which is primarily visual in nature and in some ways is not ideally suited for communicating archaeological research? Especially one feature of archaeology is very hard to transport into all kinds of mediums for a lay audience:

Archaeology is a discipline investigating material culture. It is, by the nature of its sources, in many cases unable to offer exact information about the thoughts, feelings and the mindset of the cultures it is dealing with.

Therefore, there is often a lack of personal attachment, of stories and anecdotes, of "real" people and their fates – modes of contact more significant and more colourful than archaeology often can provide. It is exactly this "human touch" journalism regularly uses in every medium to make its subject accessible. It is also the bridge used in every living



■ Fig. 4 The lake dwellings are constructed on the film set

history concept to make a hands-on experience possible in one way or the other.

Journalism – and especially television – is strongly dependent on working with the “human link” in order to create interest and to secure people’s attention. Thus a gap opens between the archaeological ideal of a disinterested attitude that must not cross the line from cautious interpretation to speculation, and a medium which requires a tolerably clear image of the people behind the artefacts.

Different languages – different images of the past?

Trying to create an image of the past for archaeologist means filling in gaps – often with a stuffing that is a mixture of research data pieced together, filled with common sense and a more or less vivid imagination. To transfer such a picture into television means to give up certain possibilities in regulating people’s reactions. Television needs to fill in gaps in order to create a picture that, from an academic point of view, might sometimes mean presenting speculations as facts which, as such, stick in people’s memories.

This is the main problem whenever archaeology meets the demands of securing public interest. Concerning television, it seems an even more complicated task to compromise. In museums, print and new media, e.g. software, DVDs and the Internet, there often is more space to modify and explain images of the past – always presuming that these are carefully chosen, produced and adapted to the demands of the medium. In a TV show there are (even) less possibilities for archaeologists to control the content of what is shown in the end – and how viewers take it on.

One of the reasons is that the language of film works quite differently from that of the written word or on his audience. A story told by means of visual effects creates its own reality in the mind of the viewer and has therefore to be carefully chosen. This is a job only a specialist

educated in this area can do. The producers and editors on the other hand, are usually not aware of the challenges that can arise when creating an image of the past by using the information archaeology offers. So the task of telling the same story in different languages often runs aground – due to a different understanding of the story itself.

As a fact, there are a number of archaeologists who can fairly deal with words and are able to communicate their subject through articles, books et cetera – though nearly always with the support of an editor. However, the author has not yet encountered an archaeologist who is able to advise a television producer on the best way to present his subject. On the other hand, archaeologists in (German) television are rarely asked for advice regarding what to bear in mind when editing a film, in order not to get it all wrong. Neither are they often involved in co-writing scripts or co-working on the layout of a programme dealing with their subject. This, in the author’s understanding, seems to represent the main reason why the dialogue with television in Germany is far less developed than, for example, with the printing press.

Cuts in impartiality – a price to pay for entering television?

It might therefore not be a coincidence that the British BBC is still the European “title holder” for well researched documentaries on archaeology. British archaeologists often seem to display a less documentary or accounting attitude towards their subject. Considering its presentation in museums, press and media – it is often as occupied with the interpretation of the “wider picture” as with the artefacts, and maybe therefore less concerned with avoiding a TV presentation that is not 100 % academically disinterested.

Maybe here we find a little more willingness for particular statements about “how it has been”, even if these are not the only possible truths and often derive from the views of the individual researchers.



■ Fig. 5 The lake-dwellers visit the reconstructed film set in Unteruhldingen one year later

Also, some theories that actually aim to provide a more detailed image of people’s behaviour and move away from an exclusive study of artefacts were developed, such as that of Lewis Binford, the leader of ‘New Archaeology’ in United States or of David Clarke in Britain .

Thus, the fear of contact with the new media – the urge of protecting an academic attitude that television would hardly want to meet – might not have played such a big role in Britain. This does not mean, however, that both BBC and Channel 4, having hosted most successful programmes like *Time Team* and *A History of Britain*, have not also produced their own share of flops, like e.g. “*Surviving the Iron Age*” or “*Extreme archaeology*”.

It can’t be decided here on whether making cuts in academic impartiality is the price archaeology has to pay for being represented in TV. It seems impossible and inadequate to judge this phenomenon only by stating the problems and not discussing the many endeavours to deal with them, amongst which “*Steinzeit – the experiment*” is only one. It is a fact, however, that avoiding this complicated dialogue altogether cannot be the solution, since it would mean giving up the publicity that, especially in Germany, cannot be easily dismissed be it only for the sake of money and support of archaeological research. Here we come to another reason that a presence in the media is vital: the financial situation many museums and research institutions find themselves in these days.

Do not look at their names but look at their deeds

If it helps to secure public interest in archaeology, if it encourages people to visit a museum which they would not have done before, if it brings archaeology back to people's minds, then – in the opinion of the author, who works as a journalist – insisting on the academic ideal should not be the first thing on the agenda. Making oneself familiar with the methods and requirements of the different media, on the other hand, and exploring ways to be taken seriously by journalists, editors and producers in order to be able to have one's say seems vital.

In the case of "Steinzeit – das Experiment", for example, it seems not to matter so much whether the programme's "experiment" met the requirements of an archaeological experiment, but how it can be used so that viewers get a fairly accurate idea of Stone Age settlement, everyday life and social requirements. We must not forget that a variety of viewers, before coming across the programme, might not even have any idea of what the Neolithic Period was about, let alone where it is situated in world history. Regarding this reality is it not of a minor importance what the editors choose to call the programme?

If it is good entertainment and also provides an educational background, as we may agree "Steinzeit – das Experiment" does, can we as academics live with the fact that the title may invoke an echo of Big Brother and Jungle Camp? It is bound to hook people and make them watch – a lot of them. We must, after all, bear in mind that this entertainment is for the wider public and not for the academic world. Archaeologists can do their best to make it infotainment as far as they are involved, but put on a trial of strength with the laws of 21st century mass consumption they are bound to lose. If you cannot beat them, join them – and try to use it for your own purposes.

Networking and media – a concept for the future

In conclusion, finding ways of effectively connecting knowledge to entertainment is a task to learn for all archaeologists concerned with the

public. Journalism/media is only one area of importance, but one which can reach a large amount of people at one time.

With "Steinzeit – das Experiment", boundaries have been crossed between archaeology and television, only hesitatingly in Germany explored in the past, between science and media, between viewers and protagonists. The experiment was not only about the participants in the programme, but – on the level of Public Archaeology – also about whether and how the involved people would manage to bring science and media together to everyone's satisfaction. Its extraordinary success was a gain for the producers as well as archaeology. The wide use of it in museums all over Germany reflects a professional awareness of its public potential for exhibitions and education.

Nevertheless, a willingness towards dialogue and networking with television and new media remains the key issue for future cooperation. Creating a lively image of the past that attracts a large audience without slipping down to sensation mongering is one of the responsibilities of Public Archaeology. Giving credit to an age of multimedia and its tools another. Bringing archaeology and television together means to invent ways of continually adapting knowledge. It means to venture into unknown territory and to watch how your neighbours do it. Is this not after all exactly what archaeology has been exploring all along?

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More information on the programme can be found at www.swr.de/steinzeit/html/DAS_EXPERIMENT.html

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Steinzeit im Fernsehen: Ein Experiment auf Sendung, in: Archäologie in Deutschland 3/2007

Summary

L'Age de Pierre à l'antenne

En mai 2007, la télévision allemande a diffusé un programme archéologique

reposant sur une expérience « sociale » mettant en scène des personnes modernes placées dans un environnement préhistorique reconstitué. Après une phase préalable de deux ans, nécessaire au travail de préparation et au montage d'une équipe de recherche composée de spécialistes du Pfahlbaumuseum, d'archéologues expérimentaux et de professionnels de la survie, 13 personnes furent installées dans un village néolithique construit pour l'occasion pour y passer deux mois à survivre et à vivre grâce aux savoir-faire néolithiques. Le déroulement du projet a nécessité dès ses débuts une communication intensive entre l'équipe de tournage et les archéologues, bien que ces derniers n'aient pas été autorisés à se rendre sur place une fois le tournage lancé – à l'encontre de leurs propres vœux. Le projet a engendré des débats animés autour de son caractère expérimental et de sa contribution à la recherche archéologique.

Steinzeit auf Sendung

Im Mai 2007 wurde im deutschen Fernsehen eine archäologische Sendung gezeigt, die ein „soziologisches“ Experiment vorstellte, bei dem moderne Menschen in eine rekonstruierte urgeschichtliche Umwelt verbracht wurden. Nach einer Planungsphase von zwei Jahren, in welcher der Drehort vorbereitet und die begleitenden Forschungen von den Fachleuten des Pfahlbaumuseums Unteruhldingen, von Experimentalarchäologen und einem Überlebenstrainer durchgeführt wurden, wurden 13 Personen in ein zu diesem Zweck errichtetes neolithisches Dorf verbracht, um dort zwei Monate lang mit Materialien und Arbeitsgeräten der Steinzeit zu leben. Das Konzept des Projektes erforderte von Anfang an eine intensive Absprache zwischen dem Filmteam und den Archäologen, denen es aber – entgegen ihrem ausdrücklichen Wunsch – nicht gestattet war, am Drehort nach Beginn der Filmarbeiten anwesend zu sein. Das Projekt verusachte lebhaft Diskussionen über seinen experimentellen Charakter und seinen Beitrag zur Archäologie.

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