

On storytelling and identity

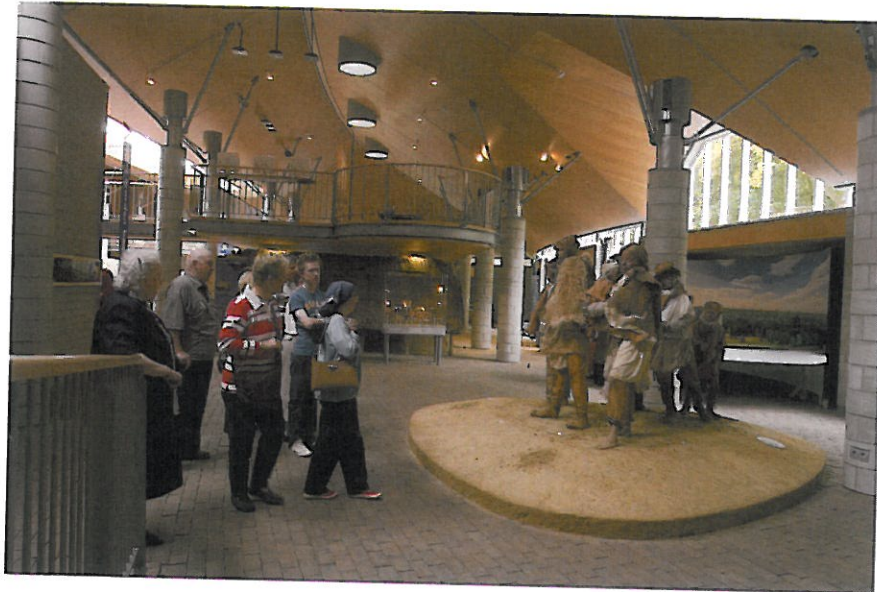
EMPATHIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Hunebed Centrum



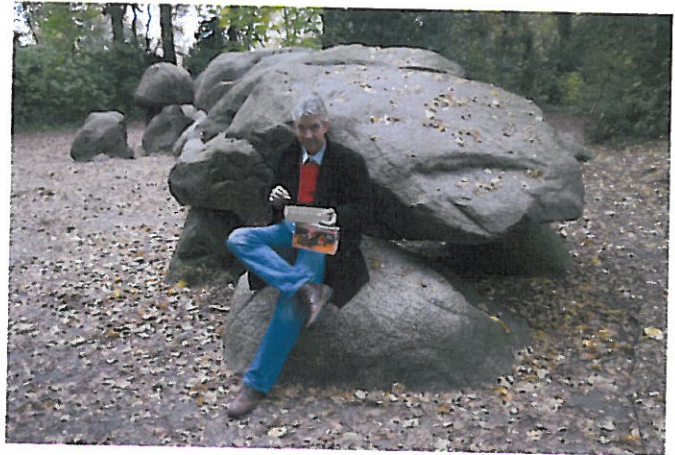
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Introduction

In June 2005 – right after the opening of the new Hunebedcentrum by HRH Princess Margriet of the Netherlands – a man came to the centre with a small box containing pottery fragments of the Funnel Beaker Culture. He said, that he had 'excavated' it out of D27, the largest dolmen of the Netherlands, when he was thirteen years old in 1983.

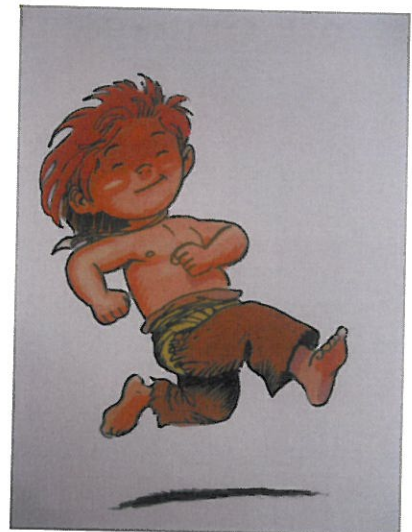


René Edens found fragments of Funnel Beaker pottery in 1983.

It was the beginning of an amazing story, that resulted in thorough research, the discovery of more fragments in the depots of the University of Groningen, books and a lot of attention in the media. The story fitted perfectly in the concept of the detective metaphor, that the Hunebedcentrum had embraced. It also fitted in the new concept of empathic archaeology of the centre. By means of stories – in the most extensive sense of the word – we try to individualize the dolmen builders for our visitors. Prehistoric biographies disclose new ways for different interest groups to identify with the past and, in doing so, learn from it. Since 2004 we created four illustrated books for little children (5-8 year olds) about the 6-year-old boy Oek, child of the dolmenbuilders. For 11-14 year olds we created four comic books about Arin, an young adult dolmen builder.

These initiatives formed the base of a rather amazing development. On the one hand we could make the era of the dolmen builders (3450 – 2950 B.C.) exciting and amazing through Oek and Arin. On the other hand we could clarify the work of an archaeologist. All of a sudden prehistory became hot in the Netherlands. What happened was that all kinds of scientific disciplines were interested in what came to light. But even more overwhelming was the initiatives that came from individuals and businesses in the regional environment of the Hunebedcentrum. In particular Oek became an identity provider to the province of Drenthe.

This unusual story is the base of the project presented here that started in 2005 and that will end in 2010.



Oek, child of dolmenbuilders.

Aims of the project

In brief the project has the following aims:

1. presenting the prehistoric heritage of the province of Drenthe as an exciting and amazing experience for visitors of the Hunebedcentrum;
2. making products that reach new interest groups/target groups;
3. communicate on the internet and other media about the results of research on artefacts of the largest megalithic grave of the Netherlands;
4. translation of sound archaeological knowledge about the dolmen builders to the public by means of empathic archaeology;
5. empathic archaeology opens the way to understanding other contemporary cultures that are part of Dutch society and to prehistoric man i.c. the dolmen builders. Empathy is the base for reaching 'other' people through barriers of time and space;
6. the Hunebedcentrum is part of society and therefore seeks cooperation with partners of other disciplines to raise awareness of dolmen builders heritage and to provide identity to the region;
7. the Hunebedcentrum seeks to reanimate storytelling in the teachers curricula of the Dutch educational system and started therefore a cooperation with two teachers institutes in the Northern regions of the Netherlands.



The reconstructed Funnel Beaker farm was part of a documentary, a movie and school posters.



D27, the largest dolmen of the Netherlands. Authentic heritage in the vicinity of the new Hunebedcentrum.

The content of empathic archaeology

1. The secret of the largest hunebed

In 1685 the first known excavation of a hunebed (dolmen) in the Netherlands took place. The artefacts found then have disappeared. The only remains is a brief report. Three hundred years later (1983) a 13-year-old boy from the village of Borger secures some twenty pottery fragments and three tiny pieces of bone. In 2005 the Hunebedcentrum in Borger got hold of these artefacts and started research. The research process with (among others) an excavation of a Swedish dolmen was accompanied by a film group. The idea was to make a documentary of the process of researching based on the detective metaphor. Moreover, in a book (published in a series known as the Hunebedseries) the process of research was written down. The Hunebedcentrum invited the media to follow the conclusions on the research and the director of the Hunebedcentrum wrote about the research in nine weblogs.

So far a documentary of six minutes has been made, a book has been published and media attention has been drawn. The amazing results so far are that there are two important events to follow.

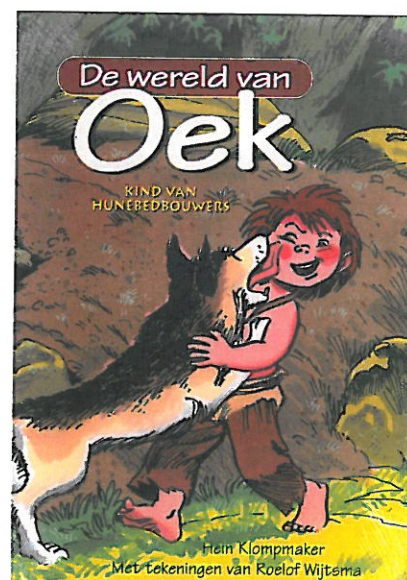
1. The combination of the artefacts found by the 13-year-old schoolboy with the artefacts found in the depot of the University of Groningen, that were considered lost in the past. 2. The Groundtracer research that will take place in November 2009 in the cellar of dolmen D27 and its immediate surroundings. This last process will be followed by a film group. After research the documentary and the artefacts will be exhibited permanently in the Hunebedcentrum.

2. Youth awareness and Oek

In the period 2004-2009 the Hunebedcentrum initiated the publication of four picture books written by Hein Klompmaker (managing director of the Hunebedcentrum) for very young children. The books are illustrated by a talented young illustrator, Roelof Wijtsma. The series, named 'The world of Oek', was an unexpected success. In total some 8.000 copies were sold and parents and grandparents read stories about Oek as bedtime stories for their children and grandchildren. The Hunebedcentrum enters, so to speak, the children's bedrooms with identifying stories about a 6-year-old child of dolmen builders.

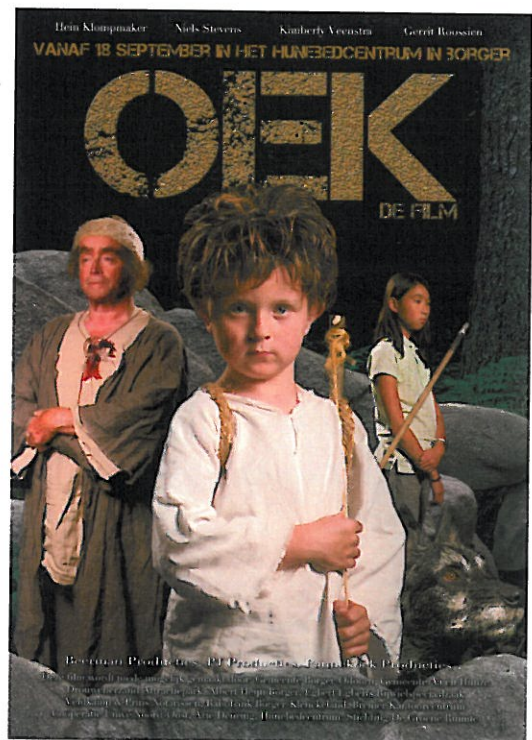
The spin off of the initiative was breathtaking for a museum:

1. a cd was made, named 'Kijk, daar is Oek' (Look, there is Oek), with 14 songs composed by nine singer-songwriters. Tracks of the cd were broadcasted on the regional radio station;
2. a maxi-cd with five songs was made in German;
3. a special made wander route in the local region of the Hunebedcentrum, named 'Oek-wandelroute' (Oek wander route), was made, accompanied by an illustrated brochure;

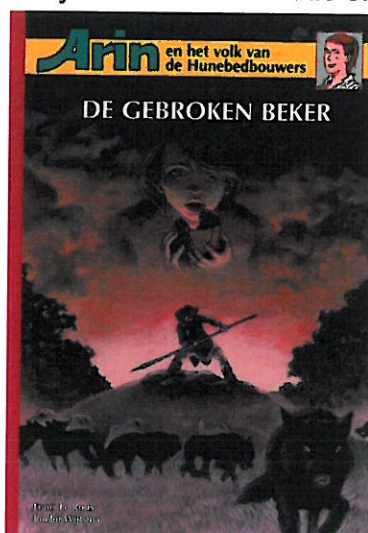


4. the regional tv station (RTV Drenthe) produced a tv series with 27 episodes for children. The complete series was repeated after a year. Every 8-minute episode contained a sketch, a story, a song and a grandfather explaining about daily life in the era of the dolmen builders;
5. all kinds of merchandise: T-shirts, wooden shoes, postcards, posters, refrigerator magnets, mini statues et cetera were produced by several companies and sold in the Hunebedcentrum and in regional souvenir shops;
6. a musical production was initiated. In the first phase of this production a contest was organized for children who wanted to sing, dance and act in the musical. The selected children were given master classes. New songs and a new scenario were developed. Twenty performances of the musical are already booked by six grand theatres in the Northern regions of the Netherlands. The premiere is scheduled on October 20th in Theater De Tamboer in Hoogeveen;
7. a low budget movie, named Oek, was made based on a book for 11-14-year-olds by Hein Klompmaker. The scenario contains a contemporary storyline of a Chinese family that is threatened to be send back to their home country and a prehistoric storyline of Oek meeting a tradesman and getting curious about meeting 'the others'. The book and the movie had their premiere on September 18th 2009. The book was titled 'Marloek, Oek and Others'.

3. Arin and the people of the dolmen builders
 In cooperation with a publisher and two artists (an illustrator and a scenario writer) the Hunebedcentrum produced three comic/history books about the dolmen builders. As with Oek the aim was to make prehistory an exciting experience and in doing so the readers would learn about the sources (archaeology) and the daily life in the Neolithic era.



Movie poster Oek.



The books have a realistic aim in reconstructing the era of the dolmen builders. Although humour is not absent jokes about prehistory are not made in the comic. In our view it would hinder identification with the main characters.

Again four main aspects are part of the production:

1. authenticity: in every book some artefacts from the dolmen builders are used for the story;
2. dramatisation: important for every story is that some drama is fitted in;
3. identification: readers should feel some

- empathy with the main characters;
4. personalisation: the story is build around characters of flesh and blood, with recognizable feelings and emotions. Archaeology and the era of the dolmen builders is not an abstract story, but exists of people and the things people do.

4. Reanimating storytelling in history lessons at school

To reanimate storytelling in history lessons at school the Hunebedcentrum has found cooperation with teachers institutes. These institutes have introduces curricula on storytelling for their students. The idea is that these new teachers will use these tools in schools when they have finished their studies. The Hunebedcentrum is to provide visual means to tell the story with and to watch over scientific correctness of the stories.

The means to do so are:

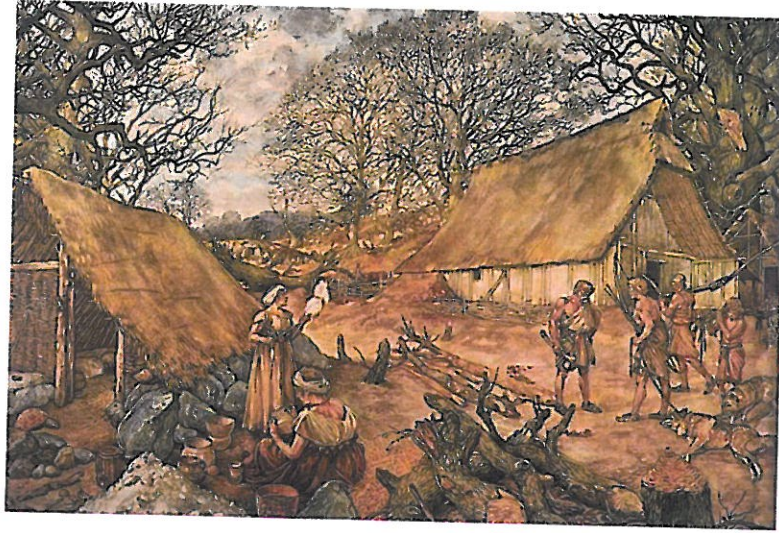
- an interactive internet site with pictures and stories (www.verhaalcentraal.nl);
- storytelling workshops in the museum;
- production of four school posters about the work of archaeologists:
 - o archaeologist as adventurer;
 - o archaeologist as detective;
 - o archaeologist as protector of heritage;
 - o archaeologist as digger for treasure;
- production of six school posters about prehistoric daily life:
 - o farming;
 - o in the house;
 - o building of a dolmen;
 - o et cetera;



The new school posters are partly in production by famous illustrators, such as Kelvin Wilson and Jouke Nijman (in cooperation with the Hunebedcentrum), partly already finished. In 2010 an exhibition about the new prints will be produced in the Hunebedcentrum.

Using a comic the Hunebedcentrum initiated four school posters about the work of the archaeologist. Frans Leroux created the archaeologist as a detective in 2009.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue of the school posters.



In 1959 J.H. Isings, Dutch illustrator, painted an educational school poster about the dolmen builders.



In 2009 Jouke Nijman, Dutch illustrator, painted an new educational school poster which will also be used in the museum based on new knowledge but on the same composition by Isings in 1959.

Have we reached the public?

We have.

1. The Hunebedcentrum has nearly a 100.000 visitors annually
2006 96.000
2007 97.000
2008 99.900
2. The tv series about Oek had about a 50.000 viewers per episode.
3. The website got over 80.000 unique visitors annually. Every visit lasted about 3 to 4 minutes.
4. 300 children participated in the casting contest for Oek, the musical. Twenty performers are scheduled for the performances in six theatres from October 2009 – April 2010.
5. More than 60 people (adults and children) participated in the cast and organization of Oek, the movie. The movie will be shown on a regular basis in the Hunebedcentrum.
6. Several hundreds of press releases appeared in the media every year: on tv, radio, internet and written press.

The marketing concept for Empathic Archaeology aims to reach new interest groups for the oldest tangible heritage of the Netherlands. Not only we try to reach a public that would visit the museum but, more important perhaps, we try to reach interest groups in their homes, in the landscape, at their holidays, at theatres and cinemas and through tv. The concept works: much more people are confronted with the dolmen and the dolmenbuilders than the amount of people that visited the Hunebedcentrum. In particular 'Oek' penetrated the homes of the people of Drenthe so often, that dolmen in general and Oek in particular became the identity provider for the region. Moreover the amount of visitors to the Hunebedcentrum as such has stabilized on a very high level.



A family of dolmenbuilders in the Hunebedcentrum. The same faces were used for the school posters about the prehistory.

Summary

Empathic Archaeology has had an important impact on the awareness of the tangible heritage of the Netherlands, i.c. the hunebedden. In the final year of the manifold project the existing products will innovate the permanent exhibition of the Hunebedcentrum and its activities. Five years after the reopening of the new Hunebedcentrum we are able to renew our exhibition with new exhibition materials that have already proven they appeal to the public. The Bankgiro Loterij Museumprijs of 2008 (Museum prize with a price money of € 100.000) provides the financial means to renew the exhibition. It will enable us to keep the amount of visitors on a sustainable high level. The concept was an important investment for the future, for the renewal of the centre and for the sustainable interest of the public.