

9 Reconstruction as ideology: the open air museum at Oerlinghausen, Germany

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INTRODUCTION

A popular dictionary of philosophy defines ideology as:

Misinterpretation of reality, that is theoretically deficient but useful and starts out from the belief that ideological systems of thought contain appraisals and normative statements presented as facts (as if they were universal truths). The pseudo-scientific ideological interpretation of reality is pursued so as to lend support to legitimate a particular world view or political objective, which will then in turn appear more legitimate.

(Austeda 1978: 114)

This is, without doubt, a bourgeois definition and Marxists would argue that it is an ideological definition as well. Despite these difficulties with the definition, this chapter attempts to tackle the problem of reconstruction as ideology.

As a German, when talking about ideological reconstructions one tends to think exclusively about the reconstructions of the Third Reich. I prefer to talk about 'models' because we are rarely concerned with any remains that can be reconstructed (see e.g. Schmidt 1995). Therefore, I will use the term 'model' myself and reconstruction if I cite somebody else. Ahrens (1988: 22) divides the history of archaeological models in Central Europe into four partially overlapping phases.

- 1 The era of pile dwellings (*Pfahlbauten*), 1888–1940.
- 2 The presentation of the cultural and technical superiority of the Nordic/German race (*germanische Kulturhöhe*), 1936–1940.
- 3 Scientific-educational reconstructions since 1936.
- 4 Commercial educational reconstructions since 1984.

According to Ahrens, only the open air museums of Nazi Germany were preponderantly ideological. In phases 3 and 4 he sees a striving for objectivity.

During the era of pile dwellings the people of the past were presented as happy, if simple, savages. But the fact that pile dwellings were, along with Wilhelm Tell, a symbol of integration and common identity for the multi-cultural and multilingual society of Switzerland should not be overlooked. This was not only true of prehistoric pile dwellings. In Imperial Germany, the medieval past was used to advance a feeling of national unity. Fake medieval castles and additions to big Gothic cathedrals took the place of archaeological reconstructions.

Griepentrog (1991) has comprehensively described the general state and development of German museums up to 1945. According to him, a tendency towards ideological representations in museology began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century. Ideologies emphasizing continuity and the idea of racial identity became increasingly popular. Material culture was no longer a testimony of the past but a symbol of timeless immutable laws and norms (*ibid.*: 167). These tendencies abounded not only in archaeology, but in all parts of the historical sciences (advanced to the state of a paradigm, for example, in German language studies by the influential work of the Grimm Brothers – Seidenspinner 1994).

THE NAZI MUSEUM

The open air museum in Oerlinghausen offers a good example of Nazi museums and the ideology presented therein (for a general summary of Nazi archaeology see Hassmann in press; Arnold 1990). As one of the *Freilichtmuseen der deutsche Vorzeit* (open air museums of the German past), the opening was celebrated with a big turnout of locals and Nazi VIPs, including Reichminister Rust (Figure 9.1 and Figure 9.2).

Hans Reinert, the scientific supervisor of the new museum, was the Professor of Prehistory at the Reichsuniversität Berlin and Head of the Reichsbund für Vorgeschichte at the Amt Rosenberg. Oerlinghausen is situated in the region of Germany where the *saltus tentoburgiensibus* is found, the supposed site of the battle where a confederacy of Germanic tribes under their leader Arminius defeated and annihilated the Roman legions under Varus in AD 9. This victory heralded the end of Roman expansion into transrhenan Germany (*Germania Libera*). Today the battlefield is thought to be located 100 km to the northwest, near Osnabrück (where a huge museum is planned to coincide with EXPO 2000).

The local population was already aware of nationalistic ideas. The famous *Hermannsdenkmal*, a huge statue constructed between 1838 and 1875, is only a few kilometres from the museum. Hermann (Arminius), as the liberator of 'Germany', lifts his sword, a gift from the Krupp factories, then and now an important arms producer, against the French arch enemy. The Externsteine, a picturesque sandstone formation, is nearby and has traditionally been interpreted as an important Germanic shrine although there have never been any



Figure 9.1 Grand opening of the 'Germanic farmstead' in Oerlinghausen in 1936. 'Reichserziehungsminister' B. Rust is visiting the houses, guided by Prof. Dr. H. Reinert, the head of the 'Reichsbund für deutsche Vorgeschichte' within the 'Amt Rosenberg'. Both are in SS-uniforms.

archaeological finds to prove this. It is interesting to observe that today the summer solstice is celebrated there by both leftist neo-pagans and neo-Nazi activists.

The building of the museum in 1936 took place in the context of a quarrel between Reichsbund für Archäologie and Amt Rosenberg, on the one hand, and the SS-Ahnenerbe (Ancestral Inheritance) under the leadership of Himmler, on the other. The local promoter of the museum was Harmann Diekmann, a very keen amateur archaeologist, who had an impressive career – moving from ordinary teacher to school director – during the Third Reich. When, together with the Mayor of Oerlinghausen, Diekmann asked for permission to build a full-scale open air museum, it was refused several times by Amt Rosenberg and personally by Hans Reinert.

However, the Ahnenerbe then took over the nearby Externsteine to carry out huge excavations to prove it was an important archaeological site. The Ahnenerbe even planned to re-erect a huge modern National Socialist/pagan shrine. In a purely political move to retain influence in this important region Reinert and Amt Rosenberg (1930) totally changed their opinion within a few days, and the construction of the museum began immediately.

The buildings in the Oerlinghausen museum presented a compelling illustration of the image of German racial superiority (*Herrenmenschentum*). There



Figure 9.2 The opening of the museum was part of the celebrations of the 900th anniversary of the town of Oerlinghausen. Here, amateur actors take part in an overtly nationalistic Germanic play performed during the celebrations

was the house of the leader (*Führer*), with a high quality interior (Figure 9.3). The furniture was crafted from massive beech or oak timber, bearskins adorned the walls and weapons hung within easy reach over the leader's bedstead. The furnishing was a crude mix, combining everything from second-century BC Celtic cauldron fittings to seventh-century furniture from the Alemannic cemetery of Oberflacht. In addition there were chests, of a form developed in the medieval period, decorated with swastikas.

The other buildings were extremely tidy and were also well built, but there were subtle differences. The guesthouse or the home of the retired farmer (the existence of which is based on strict analogy to recent folk tradition) was even built a little askew. When the first article to feature the reconstruction appeared in the popular archaeology magazine *Germanenerbe* in 1936, it was entitled 'A Germanic farmstead from the first century'. However, in the same magazine the first full-page photograph showed a 'Germanic warrior from the time of the battle of Varus'. Some pages later, in the article about Oerlinghausen, there is an illustration of the same 'warrior' sitting in the museum, talking to a Germanic maiden. In this way the 'Germanic farmstead from the first century' was changed into the 'Germanic-Cheruscan farmstead of the time of the battle of Varus'. This demonstrates the fully intentional manipulation of prehistory by Nazi

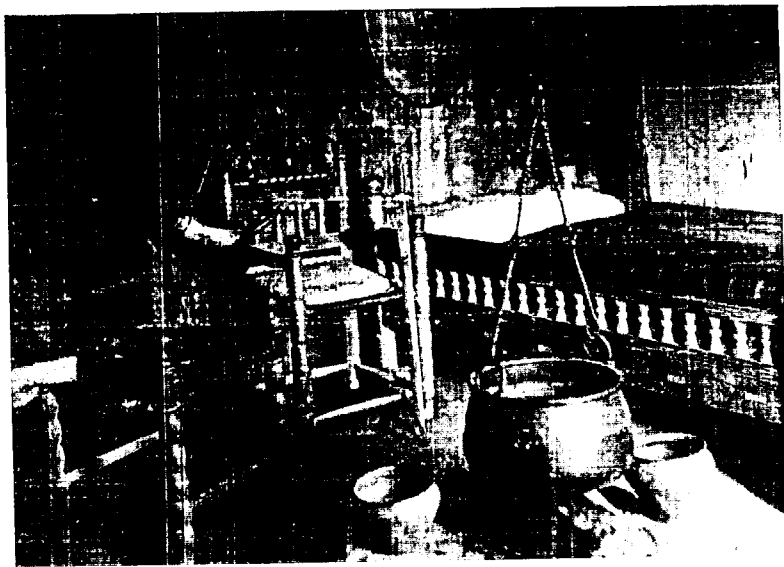


Figure 9.3 The interior of the 'house of the leader' at Oerlinghausen in 1936. The furniture consisted of replicas and imitations from the early Medieval cemetery at Oberlacht. The cauldron hook is a replica of an artefact from the Celtic oppidum 'Altenburg bei Niedenstein'

ideologists: strong Germans fighting for their land and freedom just as the soldiers of the nationalist state were ready to do. This picture was used to provide historical legitimization for contemporary politics.

In Oerlinghausen and elsewhere a fake past was reconstructed that served as an eternal and immutable ideal for the present. The aim of the reconstruction was not to show historical reality, but to underline Germanic cultural superiority and the continuity of Germanic settlement and the German race. Later on, the attempted conquests in the East were also legitimized with archaeological 'facts'. Kossina had argued for a continuity of 'Germanic' settlement since the Mesolithic. Kilian (1988) argued for Germanic continuity from at least the late Neolithic.

At the end of the war the museum was closed by the local council. Diekmann was not allowed on the site. In February 1946 the museum was sold to a carpenter who pulled it down to re-use the timber. This simple, practical act was, in itself, a kind of de-Nazification.

THE SECOND AND THIRD MUSEUMS

In 1961, the revived local 'Society for Germanic Prehistory', who had run the first museum, rebuilt the whole complex. Once again Reinerth was the scientific director and once again Diekmann was the curator. The second museum at Oerlinghausen, now called a 'Germanic fair', was a 100 per cent copy of the original one. Some swastikas were removed, but the message was the same as in 1936. In 1974 the museum was accidentally set on fire by children playing nearby. Shortly afterwards Diekmann died – people said of a broken heart because of the destruction of 'his' museum.

The next stage in the history of the Oerlinghausen museum began very curiously. Hermann Gräfe, a businessman, took the initiative to rebuild the museum. He was a fan of open air museums, but had no fixed ideas about ideological implications (pers. comm., H. Gräfe). At first Gräfe, who at that time did not know any better, cooperated with Reinerth, but he quickly ended the collaboration. It was only when cooperation with Reinerth had come to an end that other archaeologists were consulted. However, by then the Germanic farmstead had already been rebuilt (Figure 9.4). Nevertheless, since this time the museum has been fully accepted by the scientific community. The new houses remain unfurnished, because there is no archaeological evidence for furniture and interior partitions (the houses are used for topical exhibitions about nutrition, pottery making and clothing). It is not, however, clear whether non-specialist visitors understand that this was a conscious choice of the reconstructor, or whether they thought that it had been a prehistoric reality. Other houses, based on Bronze Age, early medieval and neolithic plans and built under the supervision of the architect/prehistorian Helmut Luley, are very different from 'Germanic' houses. They are decidedly and intentionally bare, conscientiously based on archaeological features and facts (Figure 9.5)

At the same time, all these houses show a very characteristic style. Ahrens (1990: 2) described them as typical examples of the 'rustic style' of reconstruction. Models always tell us more about the period in which they were built, and the people who built them, than about the past. This is, however, not a negative feature in itself. For example, in 1986, when increasing attention was paid to ecological matters, at the height of the 'green movement', work began on reconstructing the natural environment of the different periods and growing typical cultivated plants, cereals, and so on.

As outlined above, the 'Germanic farmstead' of 1961 was an exact copy of the Nazi buildings, down to the tiniest details. This presentation of the Germanic farmstead, which proved to be very successful, is still present in the public mind. This is certainly due to the comprehensive, lifelike and popular presentation. Even today the locals call the museum the 'Germanic farmstead', although the name was changed to 'Oerlinghausen Open Air Museum' when it was reopened in 1980. Even on a map of the town of Oerlinghausen, published in 1994, there is a reference to the 'open air



Figure 9.4 Actual view of the neolithic house (c. 4400 BC) in the Oerlinghausen museum. The Bronze Age and the neolithic house are two of the most striking examples of what Claus Ahrens has termed 'the rustic phase of reconstruction'.

Germanic farmstead'. The more recent archaeological feature-based phase of the reconstruction is obviously not as popular as the previous ones. To put it bluntly: the Nazi presentation of their racist *Herrenmenschenideologie* was felt to be perfect and accepted completely by the local community. The ingenious propaganda methods of the Nazis were applied to the teaching of prehistory as well. Prehistory became an important means of legitimizing fascist political and social aims (Hassmann in press). The memory of the perfect pictures from the Nazi era cannot easily be erased. Older visitors will still subsume the whole of prehistory under the heading of 'Caves, Neanderthals and old Germans', whether it be the neolithic or medieval period. After the war, the politically motivated misuse of archaeology that manifested itself predominantly in open air museums led to a retrenchment into 'ideologically free and objective research' (Narr 1990: 304).

The results, in the classical guise of catalogues, county inventories and corpora, could not easily be popularized. So no new images were created, no democratic pluralist interpretation of the past was offered. The prolonged after-effects of Nazi archaeology should be a source of embarrassment to contemporary archaeologists. Our inability to create our own adequate image and gripping picture helps to preserve Nazi archaeology and the pictures it created. Visitors and amateurs crave pictures and comprehensible



Figure 9.5 The domestic part of the Bronze age house (c. 1500 BC) in the Oerlinghausen museum today

interpretations and are not satisfied with purely scientific or aesthetic statements. If the archaeologist cannot deliver satisfying pictures that inspire the imagination, the public takes them from wherever else they can get them, whether they be old Nazi presentations, modern esoteric eccentrics, new age prophets or clever salesmen like von Däniken (for a general consideration of public attitudes to and interest in archaeology see Schmidt 1995).

However, it must be stressed that today's models, despite their careful and detailed scientific background and painstaking attention to detail, are certainly not ideology-free. During the Third Reich (Ahrens phase 2) the national folk tradition was emphasized, especially concerning moral values. Today, in German archaeology, only technical progress is stressed, as everything else is considered suspect: ideology might lurk in some dark corner, and the objective scientist would be forced to consider the socio-political relevance of his/her work – not a popular option (Schmidt and Wolfram 1993, and see Härke and Wolfram 1993). Most German archaeologists believe themselves to be completely objective and unprejudiced in every respect. They argue that their research is immune to all political, economic and ideological (in *sensu lato*) influence (see, for example, Biel 1993).

Therefore archaeological 'reconstructions' are confined to the presentation of the unavoidable and desirable march of technical progress. Examined more

closely, this ostensibly objective presentation of the results of pure academic research conveys a message very similar to the fascist one: this is what the party tells you, therefore you have to believe it – this what the scientists tell you, therefore you have to believe it.

Indeed, there has been very little change in attitude: we still talk about 'our forebears' – still the implicit idea of continuity. To call the past 'a foreign country' would occur to very few German archaeologists. The questions of continuity and/or discontinuity are rarely, if ever, discussed. Archaeologists see themselves as belonging to the humanities, but when they have to justify their existence they fall back on scientific methods (Schmidt and Wolfram 1993). Most German archaeologists are unwilling to express any kind of theoretical views, or even consider these relevant to their own work.

Of course scientific integrity seems to be vouchsafed if 'hard facts' are exclusively relied on in the creation of reconstructions. However, this begs the question of whether modern reconstructions are scientific (and see Schmidt 1995). For example, the neolithic 'rustic house' in the Oerlinghausen Open Air Museum could also be built to resemble a Polynesian house, colourfully decorated all over, with filigree woodworking. It is just a question of interpretation. Dull models are not necessarily more 'scientific', for this seemingly scientific approach must also be seen to be ideological as well:

So it becomes obvious who benefits from the reduction of archaeology to typology. By presenting scientists as being able to objectively classify and administer reality, a world where material objects gradually evolve, the existing political system is stabilised. The past no longer belongs to everybody. The past has been taken over, not only by the fascist ideologists, but by the technocrats of the 80s as well.

(Sommer 1989: np)

To pretend not to follow an ideology is ideological as well, the more dangerous for not being openly expressed.

Normally the results of academic research are not presented in such a way as to give the 'man in the street' the opportunity to understand and criticize them. In spite of this there is considerable interest in how archaeologists arrive at their conclusions and models, on what facts the images are based. Visitors should be constantly confronted with this question. I have changed my way of giving guided tours since I started working at Oerlinghausen: I now spend most of the time explaining how archaeology and open air museums work. Visitors are surprised to hear about the problems connected with the models, because they are not used to criticizing the results of research or talking to a scientist who is critical of his own profession and frequently quite animated discussions follow. Most visitors agree that it is more satisfying to learn about methods and problems than to be simply fed the so-called 'facts' about how 'our forebears' used to live. A few others are disappointed to see their illusions shattered. But we cannot please everyone, nor should

we aim to. The message deriving from open air museums should be that not only the results but research itself can be thrilling.

It is not important which facts are presented, but how these facts are presented and explained. An 'objective' fact that remains unexplained is as shabby and intellectually dishonest as a Nazi lie. 'The way is the goal', as a common German saying puts it. History is made today, and that is why I prefer to call our houses 'models' and not 'reconstructions'. We do not produce prehistoric reality. As Walter Benjamin puts it, 'History is the subject of a construction located not in a homogeneous and empty time, but in the present happening now' (quoted in Tiedemann-Barel 1991: 701).

Kristiansen (1993: 3) succinctly sets the agenda: 'We can no longer hide behind source criticism and the study of formation processes to neutralise the past, but need to set the political agenda of our work; otherwise others will do it for us.' So 'reconstruction as ideology' is perhaps not the correct title for this chapter. Reconstruction is ideology, there is no doubt about it. We have a choice of ideology, but it should be a conscious choice, one that we can justify (Schmidt and Wolfram 1993; Sommer 1989). We construct history, based on our contemporary beliefs and opinions. Scientists are formed by their way of life, political views and opinions, and so on. No one can liberate themselves from these influences. How to represent models/reconstructions and the ideology they contain in a way that allows criticism, discussion and different opinions remains a moot question.

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10 Slavonic archaeology: Groß Raden, an open air museum in a unified Germany

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SLAVONIC ARCHAEOLOGY: A HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Opinions about 'the Slavs' in what is now Germany have always been ambiguous. The philosopher Gottfried Herder in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of Mankind* characterized them as peaceable and industrious. But as they lacked warlike instincts and a constant military organization, they failed to form a nation of their own (Herder 1995: 433–5). Today, only the Sorbic minority in the Lausitz (Saxony) speak a form of Slavonic language, but place names ending with -ow, -itz, -in, for example, Güstrow, Chemnitz and Schwerin, still show the extent of Slavonic settlement.

Slavonic antiquities held a romantic fascination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in Mecklenburg which was ruled until 1918 by a dynasty claiming descent from the Slavonic Obotritic kings. This is best illustrated by the search for the fabulous lost Slavonic cities of Rethra and Wolin and in the 'Prillwitzer Idole', a collection of sixty-six Slavonic idols with Runic inscriptions that were first published in 1768. Easily identified today as fakes, they created a heated scholarly discussion that lasted for seventy years after their publication (Maubach 1994).

For Hegel (1961: 478), the Slavs were a people who had never been able to act independently as an historical force. Several authorities (e.g. Labuda 1969) have seen the Slavs as historically unimportant; others, emphasizing 'nationhood' as the defining point of historical significance, have stressed that, since 1795, the Russian Empire has been the only 'Slavonic' nation left in existence. Therefore, it has been argued, Slavonic people, with the exception of the Russians, were destined to be slaves (e.g. Wipperman 1983: 69), and thereby it had become part of the historical mission of the Germans to be the taskmasters and teachers of their Eastern neighbours (ibid.: 74).

Such views influenced interpretation of archaeological finds, especially as ethnic ascriptions to archaeological finds had been discussed from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards (Gummel 1938: 276). Ethnic ascription even found its way into some fiction, where the ethnic origin of a newly