

## On-site Communication

### Old bones and New Audiences

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**Abstract:** Since the end of the 19th Century human bones have regularly been unearthed at Alken Meadows by Lake Mossø in Denmark. Then, as now, the numerous human remains have fascinated and puzzled the local inhabitants as well as the specialists. When archaeologists excavated the area in 2005 to 2014, the astonishment increased. The results provided the specialists with new and surprising information about the spectacular site dating from around the birth of Christ, where the skeletal remains of hundreds of warriors were deposited in a lake.

During the 2013 excavation, a user survey was conducted as a part of the author's master thesis. The purpose of this survey was twofold: 1: To investigate whether or not the visitors visiting the museums are the same as the visitors visiting the excavation? And 2: Whether the visitors have an understanding of the purpose of the excavation and the excavations part in the archaeological research process?

By using a simple survey form, focusing on both qualitative and quantitative data, it was possible to identify a different visitor group compared to the typical visitors in the museums.

What the result of this survey indicates is interesting, as another archetype of visitor seems to be attracted to this type of events, a group not usually seen in the museum. Secondly, it shows how to conduct a simple field survey, which allows us to further determine the type of visitors, we have in the excavations, and their interests and needs. In a time, where many museums find it difficult to attract visitors, on-site communication may offer possibilities to involve people and attract a different type of audience.

**Keywords:** On-site communication, Alken Enge, User survey, Public Archaeology.

### Introduction

In Denmark there has been focus on describing and defining the visitors of the Danish culture historical museums. A massive survey has been conducted over a longer period of time, on all museums, and has used a complex survey form, which have been given to representative number of visitors. This survey called *Den Nationale Brugerundersøgelse* (The National User Survey) is today able to give an insight into the wishes and wants of the visitors, and demographics (The Danish Agency for Culture 2013). Unfortunately this survey focuses only on the visitors visiting the museums, and not all the events that are held outside the museums. During the excavation of the Alken Enge site (Alken Meadows), near Skanderborg, in the eastern part of Jutland in Denmark, an impressive amount of people chose to visit the excavation, which led to a new survey; the survey of on-site visitors. This was conducted as a part of the authors master thesis (RASMUSSEN 2014), with the twofold purpose of investigating whether the visitors on-site and the visitors to the museums

are the same, and whether the visitors have an understanding of the purpose of an excavation and it's part in the archaeological research process.

The survey was conducted in 2013, on-site at the excavation, as a part of the guided tours made regularly. In 2013 these guided tours were given every second Thursday at 15 and 17 o' clock, and attracted that year, during an 8 week period approximately 4100 visitors.

### The Alken Enge Excavation

The excavation of Alken Enge in 2013 was a part of a campaign of excavations, made in 2009, 2012, 2013 and 2014. The excavations were a cooperation between Moesgård Museum, Museum Skanderborg and Aarhus University, and today, both Moesgård Museum and Museum Skanderborg have exhibitions showing some of the great finds and explaining the complex history of the site.

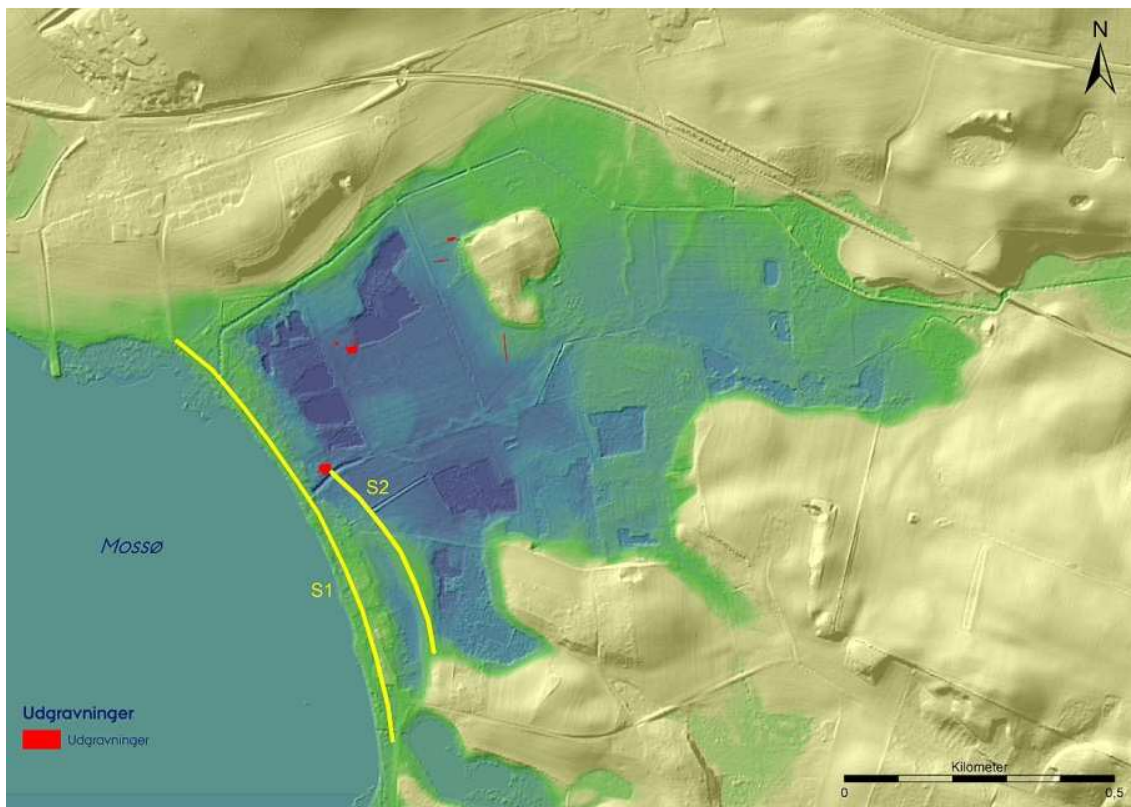


Fig. 1 – The Alken Meadows area. The red areas are excavated. S1 and S2 are the two beach ridges. (Copyright: Moesgård Museum)

The site of Alken Enge is just one of several archaeological sites in this small area of eastern Jutland with the iconic Illerup site just a few kilometers away (a mass weapons sacrifice in the wetlands of Illerup Å), where both the Illerup site and Alken Enge site are connected by Illerup Å (Illerup stream).

The Alken Enge area is an approximately 35 hectares large wetland area at the eastern part of Mossø (Lake Mossø) just west of Skanderborg, a small city in East Jutland. This wetland area has been separated from Mossø by at least two beach ridges (Figs.1, S1 and S2), and it is from these ridges, the sacrifices have been thrown or put into the bog. The finds consist mainly of human bones, disarticulated and concentrated near the beach ridges. There have been found some ceramics as well, and a few wooden items, including a wooden

club. Only a few metal weapons have been found, and most are considered to have been embedded in the remnant of the young men sacrificed.

The skeletal remains are considered as being the remnants of a defeated army, which have been left on the battlefield for a prolonged period of time. Later the remains have been picked up, and moved to the beach ridges of Alken Enge, where the bones have been sacrificed in the shallow waters of the wetlands. Both the wood and skeletal remains have been dated, and are all dated around year 25 AD.

No doubt the gruesome story, and the very well preserved skeletal remains, both have an attraction to the public, but this combined with a large interest from the national television media and papers, a visit by the Danish Queen Margrethe II, and the fact that the excavations took place during the school summer holiday period, have all been contributing to the great number of visitors.

### **The guided tours**

During the three campaigns of excavation in 2012, 2013 and 2014, the format of the guided tours changed slightly, and the amount of guided tours as well.

In the first campaign of 2012 with the excavation lasting for 8 weeks, there were circa 3500 visitors at the excavation. The guided tours were made every Thursday afternoon at 15 and 17 o' clock, in a form where the visitors just showed up at the appointed time. The first few guided tours laid out the format, which would be followed the next two years, and would be changed slightly in a few ways. In the 2013 campaign of eight weeks, the same setup was used, with the only exception being that there were only guided tours every second Thursday, still at 15 and 17 o'clock. In 2013 the excavation attracted circa 4100 visitors, and the on-site survey made, was conducted in this period. Finally in the 2014 campaign, still lasting eight weeks, a signup was required online at Museum Skanderborgs website. This was a necessity since the amount of visitors gave several logistic problems; parking and on-site accessibility. 1500 visitors signed up for the guided tours, and an additional circa 1300 showed up for either prearranged guided tours in the afternoon, or just dropped by, for a total of circa 2800 visitors that year.

The setup of the guided tours was deliberately chosen to be simple in form and format, with a focus on the excavation itself, work methods and how the excavation functions as an "archaeological laboratory" with the exception that the experiment can be made only once. By having at first three stops on the tour, and later four stops, the format was only changed slightly.



Fig. 2 – A guided tour, here the central part of the excavation. (Copyright: HERTZ. E.)

The tours always started with a welcome at the small parking lot with a general introduction of the tour personnel, and then separation into three and in 2014 four smaller groups. These groups were then led to the different stations. The first station was in the excavation itself, where an archaeologist explained what was going on, and how the archaeologists worked in the field. The second station was the meadows, where the general geology of the area and the research history of the area were presented, including the earlier excavation by the archaeologist Harald Andersen, in the period 1957-1960. The third station focused on the biological anthropology, here the skeletal finds in the excavation were explained, using skeletal material found in local peat digging areas from the 1950-ies. In 2014 an additional station was included, explaining how the conservationist works in the field, using wood debris from the excavation as material. There was 20 minutes for each stop, including questions from the visitors, and the guided tour took in total about an hour and a half. Common for all the stations were a focus on how the science is applied in the field, how theories are formed, and how these are confirmed or disproved.

### The On-site survey

The purpose of the on-site survey was to investigate whether the visitors on-site were the same, as those visiting the museums. A comparative analysis between the survey conducted by The Danish Agency for Culture, and the on-site survey proved interesting.

Inspired by J.H. Falk and L.D. Dierkings approach to user surveys (FALK & DIERKING 1992), where the physical space can be incorporated as a factor in the way the visitors use they room they visit. A simple survey was made using 14 questions, with answers both quantative and qualitative, resulting in a sample size of 209 individuals. The survey could be answered in either paper form on-site, or via the internet using Google Drive, where the questionnaire was set up originally. The result was imported into Microsoft Excel 2007, where graphs can be made and presented.

The different type of questions would offer not only a general picture of the average visitor on-site, but also give a response to what worked well, and not so well during the guided tours. These responses were both numerical and in citation form by the visitors themselves.

In the survey by The Danish Agency for Culture the average visitor at the museums can be summed up to be a female aged 50-64 and being well educated with a medium length or long higher education. (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) (The Danish Agency for Culture 2013).

**Fig. 3 - Female-Male distribution - Museums**

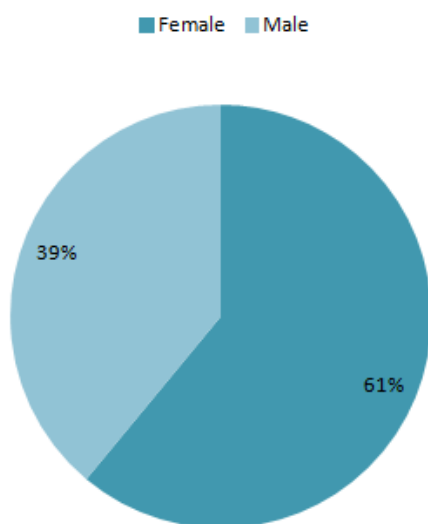


Fig. 3 – Female-Male distribution – Museums  
(Danish Agency for Culture 2013)

**Fig. 4 - Age distribution Museums**

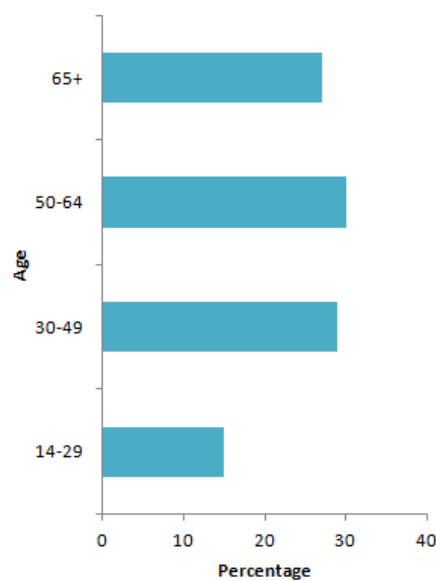


Fig. 4 – Age distribution – Museums  
(Danish Agency for Culture 2013)

Comparing just these two variables with those of the on-site survey gives an interesting picture. On-site the average visitor is a male with a more narrow age bracket (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Unfortunately the author did not include the educational background as a variable, which, in hindsight, is quite unfortunate.

**Fig. 5 - Female-Male distribution - On-site**

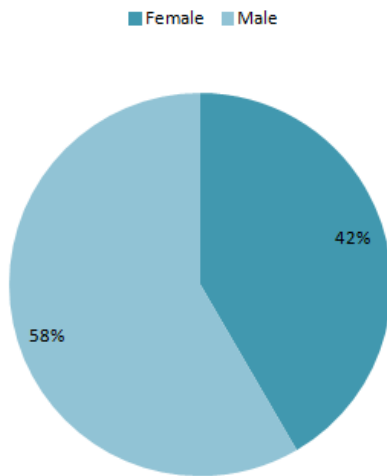


Fig. 5 – Female-Male distribution – On-site. (RASMUSSEN 2014)

**Fig. 6 - Age distribution on-site**

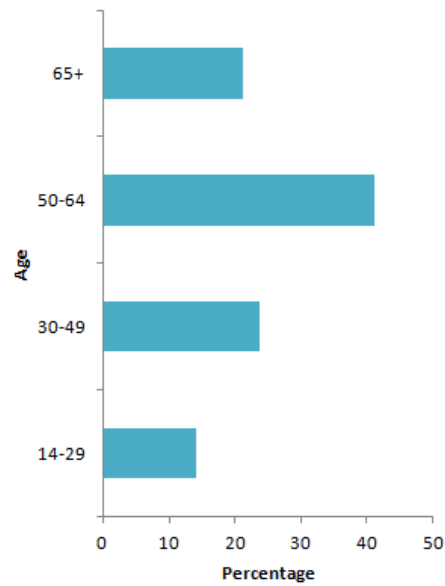


Fig. 6 – Age distribution on-site (RASMUSSEN 2014)

As the purpose of the survey was to examine whether the visitors to the museums and the guided on-site tours were the same, additional questions would give a broader knowledge on the on-site visitors. These variables are to a degree biased by the fact that the survey relates to on-site communication but, never the less, the results further divide the museum visitors and the on-site visitors into two separate groups. When answered how often the on-site visitor visits the museums, the majority never or only once or twice a year visits a museum (Fig. 7). Likewise when asked what the visitor prefer between museums and visiting an excavation, the answer is clear, the on-site visitors prefer visiting excavations. That fact in itself shows that there are indeed two different visitor groups.

**Fig. 7 - How often do you visit museums each year?**

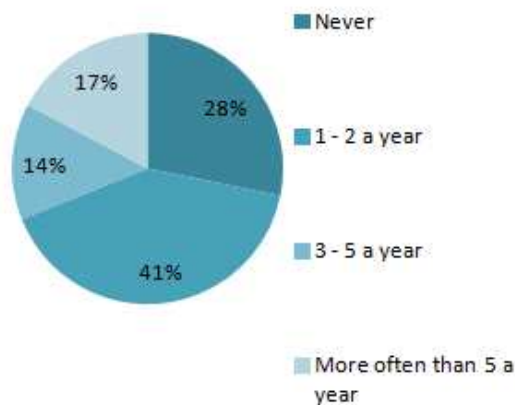


Fig. 7 – Museum visits (RASMUSSEN 2014)

One can speculate what attraction the on-site communication can offer, and the museums cannot. This is why; the citations from the on-site survey are a valuable additional tool. With the citations, the visitors are offered an anonymous and informal way, to make both complaints and praise for the work on the guided tours.

In the survey several trends could be defined. Most of the visitors are pleased with the form and setup, but a few minor complaints are registered as well.

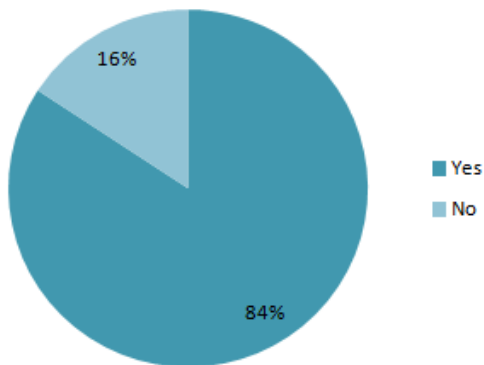
When asked “What did you expect to find and experience?” in the on-site survey, especially one citation sums it up: “*An excavation trench and finds. Accomplished and passionate archaeologists. Great explanations and hopefully good stories. To get an insight into the past – And being there*” (translated by author) (RASMUSSEN 2014). The key being that fact based stories, told on-site offer unique experience of being there, not only physically, but also through your mind’s eye. An experience the museums cannot give.

The two questions; “What did you enjoy?” and “What did not engage you?” both offered a visitors view on the setup. On the positive side, passion and enthusiasm of the personnel and the possibility to ask questions to the professionals in small crowds are recurring answers of what the visitors enjoyed. The less engaging aspects refer especially to the use of technical terms, when explaining how an excavation works, and the strict adherence to facts, when the visitors perhaps wants are somewhat lighter explanation. A few complained about the accessibility of the excavation, but when working in a wetland area, excavating a bog, one cannot accommodate all.

In Denmark it is usually free to participate on guided tours at excavations since the museums are prohibited from conducting tours of excavations and the archaeology at the builders or contractors expense. All the guided tours at Alken Enge were free of charge. This is an issue since the guided tours at Alken Enge used circa 16 man-hours every tour day. Fortunately, this expense was calculated into the budget for the three campaigns, but at other excavations this is another issue. So it was interesting to ask the visitors, whether a visitor fee would be acceptable, and if acceptable, at which price? (Fig. 8 and 9) The survey shows that a

visitor fee is indeed acceptable, and the majority finds that a price of about 20-30 Danish Kroner would be acceptable (between 2.5 and 4 €). This proves that the visitors are willing to pay a visitor fee, and this leads up to a better model for financing guided tours on-site.

**Fig. 8 - Is a visitor fee acceptable?**



**Fig. 9 - Acceptable price on visitor fee**

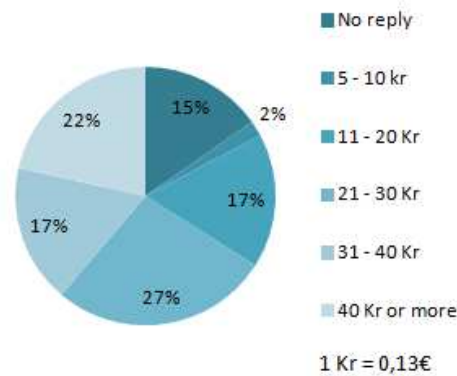


Fig. 8 – Visitor fees? (RASMUSSEN 2014)

Fig. 9 – Acceptable price? (RASMUSSEN 2014)

A last purpose of the survey was to investigate, whether the visitors had an understanding of the purpose of the excavation and the excavations part in the archaeological research process. In that regard the answer is unclear. It seems to depend much on the visitor's background and interest in archaeology in general.

To sum up the on-site survey the average visitor can be described as male, aged 51-70 years old, who has gained knowledge about the tour via web pages and local newspapers. The reason for visiting the excavation is curiosity and general interest, and it is likely that he has driven more than 30 kilometres. It is probably the first time he visits an excavation, but not the last, and he only rarely visits regular museums, since he prefers to see excavation or field work. He finds it acceptable to pay for a guided tour at a price bracket between 2.5 and 4 €.

### **A few experiences richer**

A year after the last campaign in Alken Enge, some lessons have been learned: Regarding the survey, the format using Google Drive both as a design tool for the survey, and later as a digital distribution platform worked well. The survey data is very approachable and Google Drive even has an ongoing visual representation of the data acquired. The data can be exported to other programs, and the use of Microsoft Office 2007 Excel, for further analysis worked well. By using both paper versions and digital versions of the survey, it was easy to reach a lot of people, and of the 209 replies in the survey, 78 were digital (37.4%). As the Alken Enge campaign had its own Facebook page, this was included to distribute the survey as well and worked better than expected. In hindsight there were a few failures in the survey: By not asking the visitors



about their educational background, it became more difficult to make a comparative analysis between the museum visitors and the on-site visitors. This must be included in the next survey. A few questions concerning Falk & Dierkings archetypes (FALK & DIERKING 1992) failed as well, as the visitors did not understand how to reply. In another on-site survey this will be omitted or changed.

Regarding the guided tour format, it was obvious to keep it simple, due to logistics, the site and the budget and continue this during the 2013 and 2014 campaign. By keeping it simple and analogue, and by moving from station to station, each with its own theme, the visitors only rarely became bored and restless, and the phenomenon of “museum fatigue” was not seen on-site. The informal format also gave the visitors an opportunity to speak with the archaeologist in more loose terms, making room for the “stupid” questions as well, the ones only children ask in the museums.

## Conclusion

Returning to the twofold purpose of the on-site survey, there does indeed appear to be a difference between the on-site visitors and the museum visitors. Even though the age and female-male only differentiate in the female-male distribution, the lack of interest in regular museums does indicate that there are clear differences. One can so far only speculate, what the exact attractions are to the on-site communication model, but the uniqueness of the site and the close contact to the archaeologist are reasons that several of the visitors highlight. What the on-site communication definitely do offer, is the sounds, the smells and other sensory inputs, that the museums lack.

As a way to further experiment with this, the author has, during a bog excavation in 2015, given the visitors an opportunity to feel and smell (and even taste) the different layers that a bog consist of. Combining this with 2000 years old wet logged wooden debris including leaves and nuts clearly eaten by mice, where the visitors can physically touch the past, if only for a moment, has given many an unique experience.

There is no doubt that the excavation and on-site communication can offer the visitors new and more physical experiences than the museums, easing those, who rarely or never visits museums, into the world of archaeology and finds. Thus by attracting the public in the field, hopefully the public will search out the museums, to learn more.

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