

Swords, bread and games: the largest Roman living history event of 2009, but then different

■ Roeland PAARDEKOOPER (NL)

The city of Xanten is situated just 60 kilometres North of Düsseldorf (DE) and a bit to the east of Nijmegen (NL). This city used to be known as Ulpia Traiana and had existed as Roman Town since 110 AD. There is now a large archaeological park (73 hectares) with ongoing excavations, a museum and (partly) reconstructed buildings situated there.

It was started by the Land-schaftsverband Rheinland because the original remains of the only Roman town north of the Alps that has not been built over in post-Roman times were in danger of being lost by becoming an industrial area in the late 1960s. The goal was and remains to protect, explore and (partly) rebuild Colonia Ulpia Traiana and to present it to the wider public.

It is an extensive and popular archaeological open air museum, the largest in Germany. The most famous reconstructed buildings are the amphitheatre and the temple, parts of which are 30 metres tall. Most of the reconstructed houses are furnished.

The reconstructions are the results of years of excavations exactly at the place they are rebuilt, most of them standing on the original roman foundations. So it is the specific site, added by general knowledge about Roman times and results from the Mediterranean area.

The biannual large Roman Festival is a must-see and so we attended in June 2009 with a delegation from the Netherlands. Over the weekend, 20,000 visitors were expected. The programme listed 55 groups and stands in the open air area, such as the distin-



■ Members of the Ermine Street Guard at APX Xanten, 2009

guished Ermine Street Guard (UK), Bastilippo (ES), Pax Romana (NL) Cohors II Nerviorum (FR), Legio XI Claudia Pia Fidelis (BE). There were over 400 craftspeople, soldiers, kitchen maids et cetera in operation. If you have ever seen 5 or 10 Roman legionary soldiers, that is quite something, but seeing 200 or so is much more impressive – and that is what we got at Xanten that weekend. Thankfully, the organisers had not brought ‘more of the same’, but there was much added value presentation of crafts you hardly see anywhere else, like for example Roman construction techniques. There was too much to see in just a couple of hours and one needed to stick strictly to a programme in order to get the most out of it.

A remark can be made about the emphasis on science by the organisers: “you will not meet any actors, costumes or theatre, all participants add their part to experimental archaeology”. It is hard to maintain there was no such thing as living history and it is even harder to maintain this was not a living history event but a presentation of experimental archaeological results. The public needs to be entertained, but the 400 costumed people seemed to be handpicked on quality.

The programme on the Saturday mentioned a pompa (celebratory triumph) in the partly reconstructed amphitheatre, followed by a show with gladiators. For many people, this was the highlight of the day and there must have been over 10,000 visitors in the park at that moment. Shortly after the show in the amphitheatre commenced, it started raining and visitors moved down into the catacombs to find shelter. People elsewhere in the park tried to find shelter wherever there was a dry spot. Some lightning moved closer to the park and eventually struck inside the park, between a group of trees, seriously injuring over a dozen of people. People standing as close as 20 metres from the hit were blow off their feet.

Medics present applied first aid and shortly after, the first ambulances arrived. Standing in the catacombs, we thought there might have been a tourist with a heart attack. Only when we saw ever more ambulances and paramedics arriving did we realise the graveness of the situation. In the end 190 professionals were present and 3 emergency helicopters transported the 13 seriously injured victims to nearby hospitals. Two victims needed to be resuscitated. It was a miracle, nobody died. The park was carefully evacuated for the remainder of the day – this took some time in order to not arouse panic. All activities for the day after were cancelled, but the park was kept open on Sunday for those who wished to see and talked about what had happened.

The organisers carry no blame – this is something nobody can prepare for. The APX Park was equipped with a good communication infrastruc-

ture: loudspeakers and more important: an internal communication system for staff members who could function as messengers – all with the same message. Medic staff was present all day and direct links to nearby hospitals were therefore established instantly. Not only were the victims evacuated as soon as possible, panic was prevented – and the combination of these two factors showed the real quality of the organisation. We will be back in 2011!

Summary

Des épées, du pain et des jeux

L'histoire de la ville allemande de Xanten commence avec une cité romaine fondée en 110 après J.-C. Aujourd'hui, elle accueille un grand parc archéologique intégrant des zones de fouilles, un musée et des espaces de reconstitution. Le Festival Romain qui y est organisé deux fois par an est devenu incontournable pour la qualité de ses représentations. En 2009 pourtant le festival a connu un accident lorsque l'équipement d'éclairage du théâtre reconstitué est tombé sur le public. Heureusement, la bonne organisation de l'encadrement a permis de gérer cette situation rapidement et efficacement.

Schwerter, Brot und Spiele

Die Stadt Xanten (Nordrhein-Westfalen) wurde im Jahre 110 n. Chr. als römische Siedlung gegründet. Heute gibt es hier einen großen archäologischen Park mit eigenen Forschungsaktivitäten, einem Museum und rekonstruierten Gebäuden. Der Park organisiert alle zwei Jahre ein bekanntes und gut besuchtes Römerfestival. Die Organisatoren betonen dabei die hohe Qualität der Darstellungen. Beim Fest 2009 gab es ein Unglück: Während einer Vorstellung im teilweise rekonstruierten Amphitheater schlug hier ein Blitz ein. Aufgrund der guten Organisation und der guten Kommunikationsstrukturen wurde die gefährliche Situation schnell und effizient gehandhabt.