

An exhibition of pre-historic Lake Dwellings : demolishing a myth

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Demolishing a myth

A fascinating cultural project will help to attract many visitors, young and old, to the isle of Saffa and the «Landiwiese» in Zurich: a replica of ancient lakeside dwellings will be ready for opening to the public, showing the way of life and the craft skills of our ancestors around 4,000 B.C.

This "stroll in the past" has been devised and organized by the Swiss Society for Under-Water Archaeology (the "GSU"). By its workshops, experimental facilities and other ways and means of letting the visitor have a truly memorable experience, it is hoped that he or she will leave with the feeling of having experienced some of the life of a lake dweller. It is hoped also that on the one hand the task of reconstruction, and on the other the resources of modern technology in the field of computer science, will combine to assist inter alia in correcting the mythical but rather inaccurate image of lacustrine village life that has persisted for so long, no doubt because it is so romantic and pleasing.

Life as it was five thousand years ago

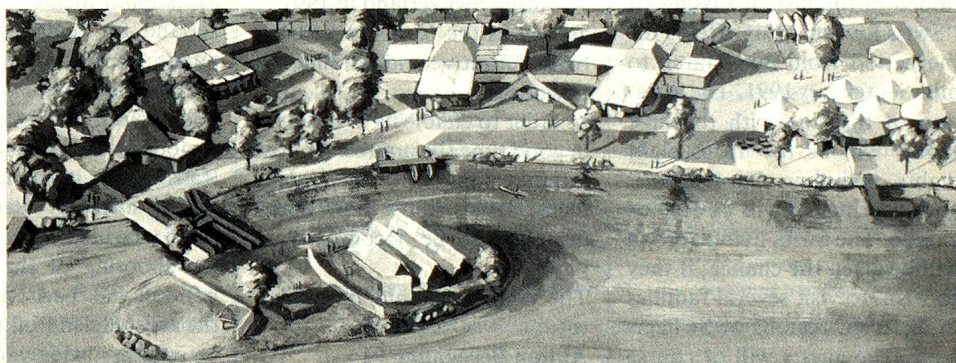
The main centre of interest in this ambitious exhibition will be a faithful reconstruction of a lakeside village on Saffa Island, which can be reached from the mainland by foot-bridges. There will be ten houses, five metres high and covering areas of from 15 to 40 square metres, designed in Bronze Age style, on the basis of a careful evaluation of the extensive excavations undertaken in 1981 and 1982 near the site of the Zurich Opera House. A modern landing-stage for regular shipping traffic is planned, as well as a copy of a pre-historic harbour accommodating eight "dug-outs" (canoes made from hollowed tree-trunks).

The exhibition on the "Landiwiese" comprises three main sections: a presentation Centre, three exhibition halls, and a workshop. There will be several smaller annexes on one of which a Bronze Age playground will for be located, for youngsters and older visitors who feel young enough!

Modern exhibition technique

As mentioned above, visitors will be enabled, in the Congress and Audiovision Centre, to complement and expand the impressions received in the pile village. There will be talks by experts imparting – with the aid of "Multivision" equipment and documentary films – information on

such themes as "Farmers, Hunters and Gatherers", "Village Life" and "Cults and Beliefs". Equipment for computer simulation will be bound to attract much attention. It will endeavour to describe the development of human society in the settlement, if possible with audience participation being shown "live". Happily however, recourse will also be made to good old time-tested means of communication such as "retrieved objects", replicas, diagrams and graphs. The "playground for grown-ups" will of course be sited mainly in the open air, and include sections devoted to textiles, pottery and Stone Age workshops and artefacts:



The lakeside village, heart of the exhibition. (Photo: E. Widmer)

anyone who would like to fell a tree with a pre-historic axe, or cast a tool from molten bronze will have a chance of doing so.

As is only right and proper, hunger and thirst can be satisfied in a "restaurant" appropriately called "The Haunch of Venison", where you will be able to enjoy a well-hung game dish roasted over an open fire, or fish from the lake freshly caught and grilled. The meal can be washed down in genuine "mead" (a beverage of fermented honey, served in earthenware tankards.)

No danger from wild animals

Some 140 years ago, the level of the water in some Swiss lakes fell in an exceptional manner with the result that the remains of wooden piles, together with other pre-historic objects and artefacts, became

visible. It was assumed that lakeside villages had originally been constructed right in the waters of the lake, to have protection against unexpected flooding, wild animals or enemy attacks. This theory was to prevail for a century or more, and its credibility was enhanced by the spread of knowledge about primitive tribes, whose huts were deliberately erected on piles in the water. But new excavations and "digs" combined with progress in the development of the still comparatively "young" science of archaeology led to a gradual demolition of these rather romantic ideas about pile dwellings.

After the end of World War II, researchers came to regard it as certain that so-called pile dwellings had been built neither on dry ground nor to rise above the level of the water. On the contrary, it seems that they were mostly erected in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (i.e., between 3,000 B.C. and 1,000 B.C.) following on lengthy periods of very dry and hot climate, in which the level of the water in our lakes had been far lower than in more recent centuries. About 90% of the pile dwellings are thought to have been simply built on the dry beaches, and it

will have been their remains that were later on engulfed by the steadily rising level of the water of the lakes. The piles now visible either under or above the level of the water are thus nothing more than the ruins of house-walls, roof-supports or foundations rammed into the ground. It was only the cattle that needed to be protected against wild animals: and they were at nightfall driven into the "corral" surrounded by the palisade.

A visit to the Zurich pile dwelling exhibition will offer, in an effortless manner, a journey through History and a fascinating opportunity to get to know another epoch in the story of Mankind – as well as perhaps giving the visitor some food for thought about our own present day world and in any case filling a gap in his or her education!

Heidi Willumat