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The 2021 scenography of the MuséoParc Alésia

Manon Tibout

The purpose of this paper is to explain the decisions and choices made for a new scenography of the MuséoParc Alésia, inaugurated in July 2021. The points of departure in the following argumentation are the methods and usage of museum didactics. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the information and welcoming strategies for children and young adults have changed twice; it started with welcoming school children in the archaeological site for guided tours and workshops by the former Musée Alésia in the village of Alise-Sainte-Reine, which previously hosted and presented some of the archaeological collections, but was not able to accommodate a large number of visitors nor did it meet the standards for the reception of people with disabilities. Taking these contemporary challenges into account, a new museum was inaugurated at the foot of the Alise-Sainte-Reine plateau in 2012 to allow for the true valorisation of the battle site.

The region around the newly created MuséoParc is one of the few sites allowing to understand (intellectually and visually) a siege and battle of antiquity, the framework and (pre-)conditions of the historical context as well as the consequences with demographic and settlement changes, and an urban development. In the case of Alésia, the specific background is the “Gallic War” (58–51/50 BCE), a Roman military campaign of appeasement (of the already existing Roman territories) and conquest centred on present-day France, which ended in a Roman victory under the Roman proconsul C. Iulius Caesar. The Battle of Alesia was the decisive battle between the Roman general Caesar and the Gauls (Celts) under the leadership of Vercingetorix in the late summer of 52 BCE. Caesar won the battle, thereby consolidating Roman rule in Gaul for centuries to come.

The subjects and challenges for museum didactics are therefore extensive. They can lead from general themes such as warfare and heroism, or Roman and Gallic-Celtic identity and the modern utilisation of such identity constructions, to the specifics of regional

history, for example. The choices of media and interaction opportunities for our young visitors have a strong influence on the topics and focal points that are emphasised by our respective didactic focus. The following brief presentation will provide an insight in such aspects.

The 2012 scenography

The first scenography started with the “Combat Gallery” (Fig. 1), which produced a definite ‘wow effect’. It was abandoned in 2021 to give more room to the collections, which was undeniably needed, even though some visitors regret its removal.



Figure 1: The “Combat Gallery” in 2013. © D. Darrault

The common thread of the first scenography was Caesar’s *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* and the Roman point of view. The Battle of Alesia interpretation centre was meant to be part of a larger ensemble with a second building on the hill near the Gallo-Roman city’s remains. This second museum was supposed to follow the Gallic point of view. This is still an ongoing project, although one that will not come to fruition right away.

The visitors’ criticism of the first scenography was that they wanted to hear more about the Gauls and see real artefacts. There was also little connection to the remains of

the Gallo-Roman city and archaeological research, apart from the controversy over the location of the site, which was very lively at the time.

Within a rather short period of time, the rather lengthy film (18 minutes) presented in the middle of the scenography (Fig. 2) and the computer-generated imagery were no longer up-to-date as well as some other digital and physical devices. The scenography's texts were quite intricate and designed to convey as much information as possible. Therefore, visiting the museum was quite a challenge for children and families. Audio-guides were then created for this audience. They were abandoned again with the installation of the new scenography in 2021 as they were no longer necessary.



Figure 2: Extract from the film "Le rêve d'un roi nu" made in 2012. © AGAT Film

The 2021 scenography

In 2020, for the reasons mentioned above, it was decided to update the museum after only ten years. Clémence Farrell was chosen as the scenographer as her inspirations were in line with ideas about a contemporary, cutting-edge scenography. Her former realisations include work at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Philharmonie de Paris or the Versailles castle. With her scenographic concepts, she seeks to appeal to a (her) childlike soul by creating 'magical' devices. She is looking for a constant dialogue between the collections and the visitor's immersion.

Clémence Farrell had to rearrange the huge space of the museum (1,200 m²) complicated by its particular circular shape (Fig. 3). A new thread has been created for the visitor's experience: the objects guide the visitors through the Gallic period, the battle of Alesia, the Roman period and their historiography. Accessible texts and equipment make it possible for everyone to visit the five spaces.

There are also several 'reading' levels offered by this presentation: some visitors can just play games and look at some artefacts, others can read the labels and watch the films, and some 'overachievers' will enjoy reading everything and listening to every de-

vice and testimony. The museum provides a lot of information according to strict scientific standards, even in the games, which have a great entertainment value as well.

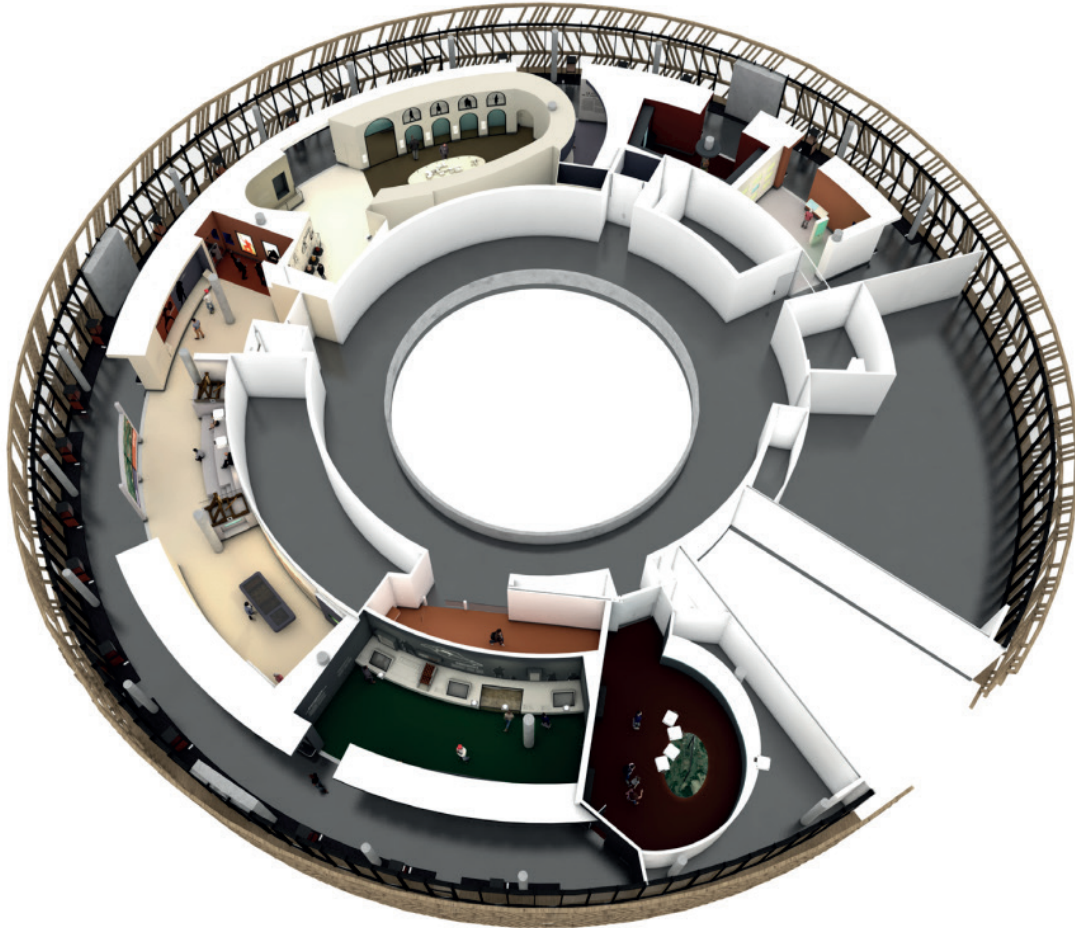


Figure 3: Digital model of the scenography. © Clémence Farrell

One of the emblematic digital devices of the new scenography is a transparent screen with moving objects, on which an archaeologist, played by an actress, is projected (Fig. 4). It zooms in on details and conveys scientific content in a lively, fun and accessible way for everyone. This works particularly well with epigraphic artefacts, where a few words or phrases are highlighted.

Results of recent archaeological excavations are also present in the scenography, such as those of the sanctuary of Apollo-Moritasgus (completed in 2018).

Offers for immersion also play a major role in Clémence Farrell's work. In the MuséoParc Alésia, shadows are projected on the walls, depicting craftsmen or people using everyday objects. There are opportunities for visitors to immerse themselves in another time with rooms and people seeming to emerge from a distant world. This helps visitors to understand archaeological artefacts. For instance, amphora sherds are presented next to the shadow of a Roman merchant holding such a vessel, allowing the

museum educators to show its shape (Fig. 5). It is something that is regularly brought up by children during their visit, as they sometimes recognise the object on their own. For instance, when talking about forging, some children will notice the shadow depicting a blacksmith and say “It’s like the man on the wall!”.



Figure 4: Transparent screen. © M. Tibout



Figure 5: ‘Shadows’ representing a Roman merchant selling an amphora to a customer.
© M. Tibout

As the course of the battle is too complex and lengthy to be explained in museum panels, both the 2012 and the 2021 scenography chose to deal with that topic in a film. The 2021 film was intended to be more durable and was therefore not filmed with real actors or in computer-generated imagery like the previous one. Illustrator Stéphane Levallois created timeless renditions of the Roman and Gallic fighters (Fig. 6). The film conveys a good feeling for the violence of a battle without being cruel, it renders emotions but also scientific information from the historical and archaeological sources. All texts in the film are written simultaneously in French, English and German.



Figure 6: Extract from the film “Le siège d’Alésia”. © M. Tibout

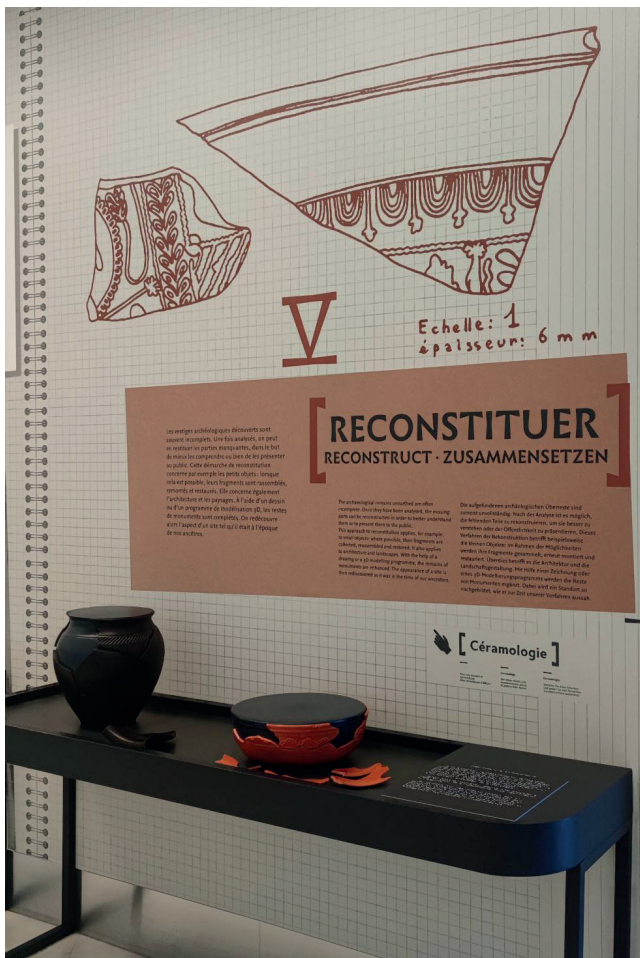


Figure 7: Teaching aid about pottery in the ArchéoLab. © M. Tibout

Another space in the museum is the “ArchéoLab”, which offers several hands-on activities to understand archaeological techniques. One activity allows visitors to reassemble magnetic replicas of pottery sherds (Fig. 7), another to identify seeds, another to understand the concept of stratigraphy ... This type of playful content is completed by archaeologists’ testimonies explaining their work and how they view the site. Once again, the purpose of this new scenography is to offer an appropriate content for various types of visitors. In the same spirit, 3D reconstructions of buildings of the Gallo-Roman city of Alesia are available, in particular for people who do not visit the archaeological site of Alesia.

In 2022, another space was created in the entrance of the museum in partnership with the Institute national de recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap) and entirely dedicated to the understanding of archaeology and its techniques (Fig. 8). A changing exhibition is presented there every year, and a model allows the museum educators to explain stratigraphy, post holes ...



Figure 8: Exhibition and learning room, created in partnership with the Inrap. © M. Tibout

In conclusion, the scenography was updated to be more durable and to respond to visitors’ desire to see more objects and learn more about archaeology in general and different civilisations involved in the battle of Alesia. It is a great tool for museum educators who work with adults or school groups, as well as a great visitor experience for individuals.