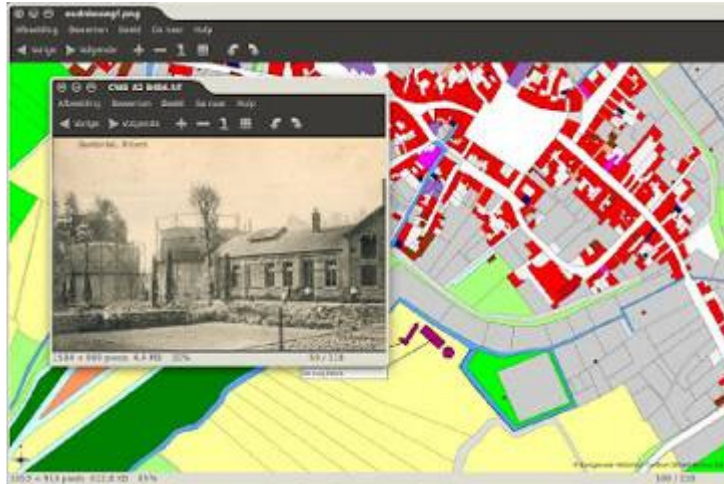# *The Sittard donkeys..*

How to build city history ánd have fun!

House and family = emotion

The Sittard 'Aezelprojek' [1] *starts from the premise that people find two things particularly interesting when it comes to history: their family and their immediate environment, starting by their home (and in further circles: neighbourhood, village, city, region, country) ...*

In the Aezelprojek therefore special attention is given to as well habitation history ánd genealogy. A house (or a barn, or a piece of land) is after all only an empty shell without the stories of the people who have had a relationship with it, or have lived in it, and the word 'house' is of little meaning without the contextual information of the people who have lived in it. Furthermore it is very desirable that this information is interactive, to make more people interested than only the historians, but also to encourage them to add more information to the already existing information. In this way personal identification is added to authentic information, which results in still more emotional binding tot the project.

This means however that an enormous amount of work has to be done, because all kind of data has to be digitized, georeferenced and vectorized. We do that slowly but constantly, like donkeys...

How did it start?

Between 1987 and 1993 about 30 historians and amateur historians were working on two publications on the history of Sittard, a city in the south of the Netherlands, in the province of Limburg. As a result, more interest was created on settlement history and from 1993 on a (still analog) project was started to excavate many archives. Around 2002 we started working a bit more digital, in 2001 a first CD saw the light and in 2003 we were one of the national pilot projects in the Netherlands around settlement history with regard to the former area of the chapter in Sittard. Because of the young death of some key figures, the project was not developed further. A few years later however the working group on 'written sources' of the historical society in Sittard developed capabilities to provide a good comprehensive research and presentation structure. [2] *Given the opportunities the project offers to make information from the records accessible to a large audience, the Euregional Historic Centre Sittard-Geleen (EHCS) herein has taken a prominent role. The EHCS acknowledged in particular the (Eu)regional scope of the project and made many archival sources available for the project in a modern way through digitization.* [3] *The project was in*

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[1] Aezel means donkey in the dialect spoken in Sittard, in the provincie of Limburg, in the South of the Netherlands
[2] Very important was the role of Martin Pfeifer, who, as a chemist, looked differently at historical infomation.
[3] Over 35 Tb of scans is available at this time.

communication with the EHCS redeveloped to a European format, because our region has a very European setting, close to for instance Maastricht, Hasselt, Liège Jülich and Aachen. Therefore all kinds of connections can be made all over Europe. The Aezelprojek is a collective *project, together with many volunteers and participants the decision was made to start it. Because of the large scale and the lack of money it would be necessary to make use of volunteers, so a forum was set up to be able to do this. Means, methods and organization needed to be structured to meet this goal: working with people who want to undertake history as a hobby in their free time. Today all kinds of people are working in the project. Special knowledge of archives, scripts, source material or the like, is not required, apart from some special tasks like making transcriptions from old documents or restoring old photo's in a digital way. Interest is the main requirement. The forum provides support and guidance, so already several volunteers became transcription-specialists! There are simple user databases and modules designed that allows data entry to take place on a large scale.*

Participation-society...
In the Aezelprojek volunteers took the initiative in the town of Sittard; the Euregional Historic Centre (and in the mean time also several other archives) saw possibilities and embraced, facilitated and expanded it. This is done by over 100 volunteers, and in the EHC alone about 55. Among them of course pensionado's, housewives and unemployed people, but also a number of autistics and other people who need extra attention. In this field we are working together with health care institutions and unemployment agencies. Every three months we have a meeting in which we speak about the progress that is made. There is drinks and our famous 'vlaai' (cake, flan), and normally between 50 and 60 of the 100 people attend, so it has become a sort of community. This is more important than one would think, because community means durability.

Broadening the scope
At this time also museums, libraries and historical societies, not only in Sittard but also in more than twenty other cities and villages in and outside the province of Limburg, work together to broaden the scope and possibilities of the project. So, today it is not only a Sittard, but much wider used system. Using simple (but correct) formats historical data, photos, movies, oral history and museum objects are stored in a large database that is monthly filled by tens of thousands of additional facts and links between them.

Open source
All data are entered into various open source systems. This is because (in hindsight fortunately) five years ago, a few hefty subsidies to develop an integral history of the region were not allocated to the Euregional Historical Centre. Around that time (2008/2009) the Aezelprojek was founded and by using open source we can still achieve our goals despite the fact that there is relatively little money. In fact, the integrality now is even greater, because we have now chosen as a starting point the fact that the original source is directly linked to the presentation. What you see is what you get, so to speak...

Platforms and Open Standards
The Aezel project works with all software that is available for the three best-known operating systems Mac OSX (Apple), Windows and Linux. A work desktop for project participants can be fully equipped by the Linux variant. The windows systems themselves have such high demand that the additional Aezel project software actually is of secondary importance.

Cadastral project
It all starts with a scanned and vectorized cadastral map, which is fed in open source geo-information system. Starting point is the cadastral map of 1842. These cadastral maps were made available by the Dutch national project 'wat was waar' (whatwaswhere) in the year 2003. These maps still had to be geo-referenced and vectorized, which is done mainly by volunteers. From this

year until today all further cadastral information is entered in databases. It is also possible (but much less easy to do this in a massive way) to add pre-cadastral data from the years before 1842. It is less easy because of the fact that the Sittard-Geleen and Limburg region has a hugely fragmented history, so there is not óne standard. Each cadastral plot that exists in 1842 becomes a unique ID, which is and remains the 'linking pin' to all other information added to the project. Here also each (scanned) document gets its own unique ID, which can be linked to all kind of other data.

Extra cadastral enriching
Information from the cadastral layers can be supplemented with details from other sources, for example by advertisements in the then newspapers and magazines. Houses that were sold also often were published in these magazines. Also the notary archives are available in the city-archives. Another important source of data on property transfer is the 'memories of succession' in which is listed how the estate of a deceased person is divided. As for the years before the French revolution, all kinds of archives can be useful, like the municipal archives or the archives of the poorhouse, in which also very much cadastral information is hidden.

Genealogical information
As already mentioned, family-history is 'hot'. Linking it to cadastral data is even more interesting. So therefore almost all information about individuals and families from church registers (from the 16th century on) and Civil Registry (from ca 1794 on) has been digitized, and volunteers are busy linking it to the cadastral information. Only as far as the law permits it to be shared it is linked to the cadastral information however.

Thematic layers
It is also possible to make a thematic layer. Basic information already present can be enriched by other, special data. For instance a 'secret-garden-layer' or a 'poverty-layer' can be added in such a way, but also a shop that celebrates its 100th birthday can become a thematic layer...

Restoration
Not all of the archival material is in perfect shape of course. So various material does have need of restoration. Many objects are so specific that only professionals can do this work. Of course, there is too little money, but we do what we can.

A special element that requires attention however is the photo collection. In the Sittard-Geleen archives for instance we keep about 250.000 images, from the year 1864 on. In photo collections detailed information can be found relating to buildings , but also relating to people. Many thousands of photo's are already scanned and restored or restored and scanned. Some of them are geo-referenced, but most of them not yet. The relevant images should be geo-referenced so that they can be linked to the parcels as a digitized image. This will require another amount of work, which we will do by making use of new (online?) volunteers.

One of the volunteers has been an professional photographer and artist but is now retired. She takes care of the digital restoration of vulnerable photo-material, especially the glass negatives. The original negatives have mostly been scanned by a professional firm. The further restoration is done by her. She works with Photoshop and every step of the digital restoration is documented. Because she is an artist, she is able to determine when an negative is in optimal condition, regarding the information that it contains. Restoration at pixel-level sometimes is required. After restoration, the photo's are put on the internet.

Three-dimensional building
To make information not only useful for researchers and interested adults, but also for youth, visualization is very important. So some volunteers have begun to create three-dimensional buildings. At first (from 2003 on) in AutoCAD and nowadays also in Sketch Up. Some parts of Sittard now have been created in 3D. From 2012 on we are trying to develop a further step to create

interest among youth, by developing a serious game about the history of the city. By the end of the year 2015 we will hopefully be able to show the old Maurits coalmine in Geleen in 3D. Not only the buildings, but also the mineshafts and the functions performed in them...

Clicking...
When all the basis information that is needed is entered in the databases, clicking on plots provides information about the property and the owners, clicking on names provides pedigree information. If you click once more you can see the scanned birth certificates, cadastral information, but also pictures or whatever other information is added. The interesting thing is that all data is and stays directly related to the original archival (or museum!) objects, because of the unique ID of each scan related to the data. So in fact, you also build a sort of e-depot of the archival material used in the project. Regarding to (for instance) the photographic material, you will be able to see the original scan of the glass-negative, but also the restored one. Finally, authenticity is crucial!

Relevance to the modern administration
Being busy with history is one thing, but making it interesting and even useful for nowadays civil administration is another thing! This however is done. The historical (Big!) data present in the project is at this time so massive, that without expensive researchers much of the necessary information about for instance monuments, (possible) archaeological sites or environmental information (old pollution-sites for instance) can be supplied with one push at a button. These facts ensure that we annually save some tens of thousands of euro's each year in the city of Sittard-Geleen alone. But most important remains the fact that by just visualizing (cadastral) information, you get new insights. In this way we discovered for instance the contours of a long disappeared bastion and could clearly see with the help of 19th century reconstructed map, where exactly a road, that had disappeared in the 14th century already, had entered the town...

And now: Business?
It is not our intention to 'make money' out of this project. However, it is also not our intention, to carry water to the sea...
In the last five years, over 150.000 euro has been invested by the Euregional Historic Centre in Sittard-Geleen, mainly in computers and other equipment for the many volunteers and the volunteers themselves. They become travel allowance, Christmas breakfast and a yearly excursion. At least 100.000 hours of work have been done by the volunteers in these five/six years. We do not want to get this money back. What we do want is to have all the basic-information to be freely accessible to the public. What certainly is needed for that, is a way to get the data to the internet. This will cost huge server-capacity and therefore money of course, money we did not find yet. We a still trying to find possibilities to do that without the enormous costs of data-traffic keeping us at our current low-profile.
And yes, additional *information may possibly cost money for users? For instance companies like real-estate brokers might sell a house quicker and at a higher price if they sell a house with a story? Already a developer is interested in the idea of combining a old fashioned 'real live' shoppingcentre with a 3D-webbased version. Online you shop in a lookalike with extra information about the site. The emotional binding is made and the service is given online but also in the 'live' shop (that can be smaller and cheaper the it was before…).*
And will it even become economically more interesting if nowadays mass-data can be attached to our historical mass-data? We will see... and in the mean time, we'll keep filling this databases, slowly but constantly, like donkeys...

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