UNESCO

Organisation der Vereinten Nationen für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur

Harz - Braunschweiger Land - Ostfalen UNESCO Global Geopark

GEOPARK
Harz . Braunschweiger Land . Ostfalen

Naturpark Harz

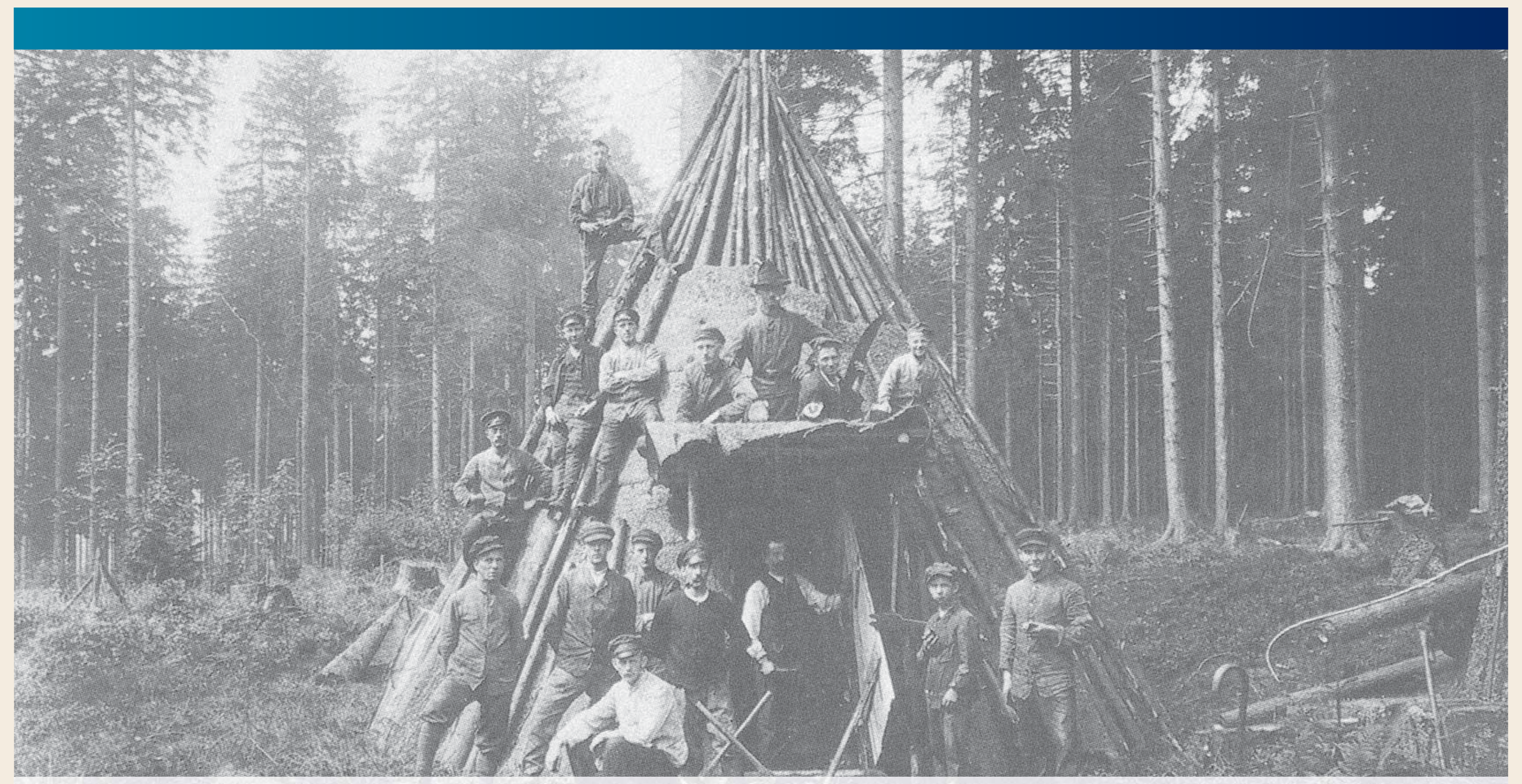
Landmark 10
Geopoint 12

Open Air Museum „Waldhof Silberhütte“

Charcoal Burning

Even today “Kohle” (charcoal) is a synonym in German for money. The charcoal burner’s trade was held in high regard. It is one of the oldest forest-related occupations. In the 16th and 17th centuries, when the mining industry was flourishing in this region, charcoal burning was also at its peak. Throughout the forests of the Harz, never far from open water, the charcoal piles smouldered.

Charcoal pile of beech logs (ca. 1900)



Charcoal burner in front of a newly-constructed charcoal burner’s hut (ca. 1900)

Black Gold

Charcoal was required to produce the high temperatures needed for smelting ore. There were around 8,000 charcoal piles spread throughout the Harz region during the 18th century. In the charcoal burner‘s huts, known in the Harz as “Koete”, the burners slept on hard benches. The master burner, who directed the charcoal production process, lived in the forest with his assistants from the beginning of May until October or November. Often, boys began as helpers – called “Haijungen” – at ages as young as ten. They had to help the charcoal burners with their heavy labour. “Hai” was the name for the logging area. Many locations in the Harz still bear names including the suffix “- hai”, reminding us of the historical land-use practices. After a period of three to eight years a logging area would have been completely deforested and the wood processed into charcoal.

The Decline of Charcoal Burning

In the middle of the 19th century charcoal was superseded by coke, which was cheaper and was transported to the Harz region by train. When, at the end of the 19th century, the majority of ore deposits in the Harz were exhausted, charcoal burning declined even further. Pressure on the devastated forests was thereby reduced. The profession of charcoal burning did not disappear, however, although charcoal production declined noticeably in the 20th century. Up until 1972, the “Schulz – Festbrennstoffe” company in Ballenstedt produced 400 tonnes of charcoal annually in the forests of the eastern Harz Mountains. Charcoal burning was then carried out by the Ballenstedt State Forestry Company up until German reunification. The company established a central charcoal burning location near Sternhaus, between Gernrode and Maegdesprung. It initially produced charcoal in steel vessels and later used fireproof cement kilns. Average yearly production was around 1,200 tonnes. As well as for barbecue briquettes,“black gold” is today used in the iron and pharmaceutical industries, in filters, as an abrasive, and as a soldering base for goldsmithing. For years charcoal production has been carried out almost exclusively in industrial settings using both logged and scrap wood. Only in the Stemberghaus Charcoal Pile, near Hasselfelde, and in the Harztor rural municipality have traditional charcoal burning techniques been maintained.

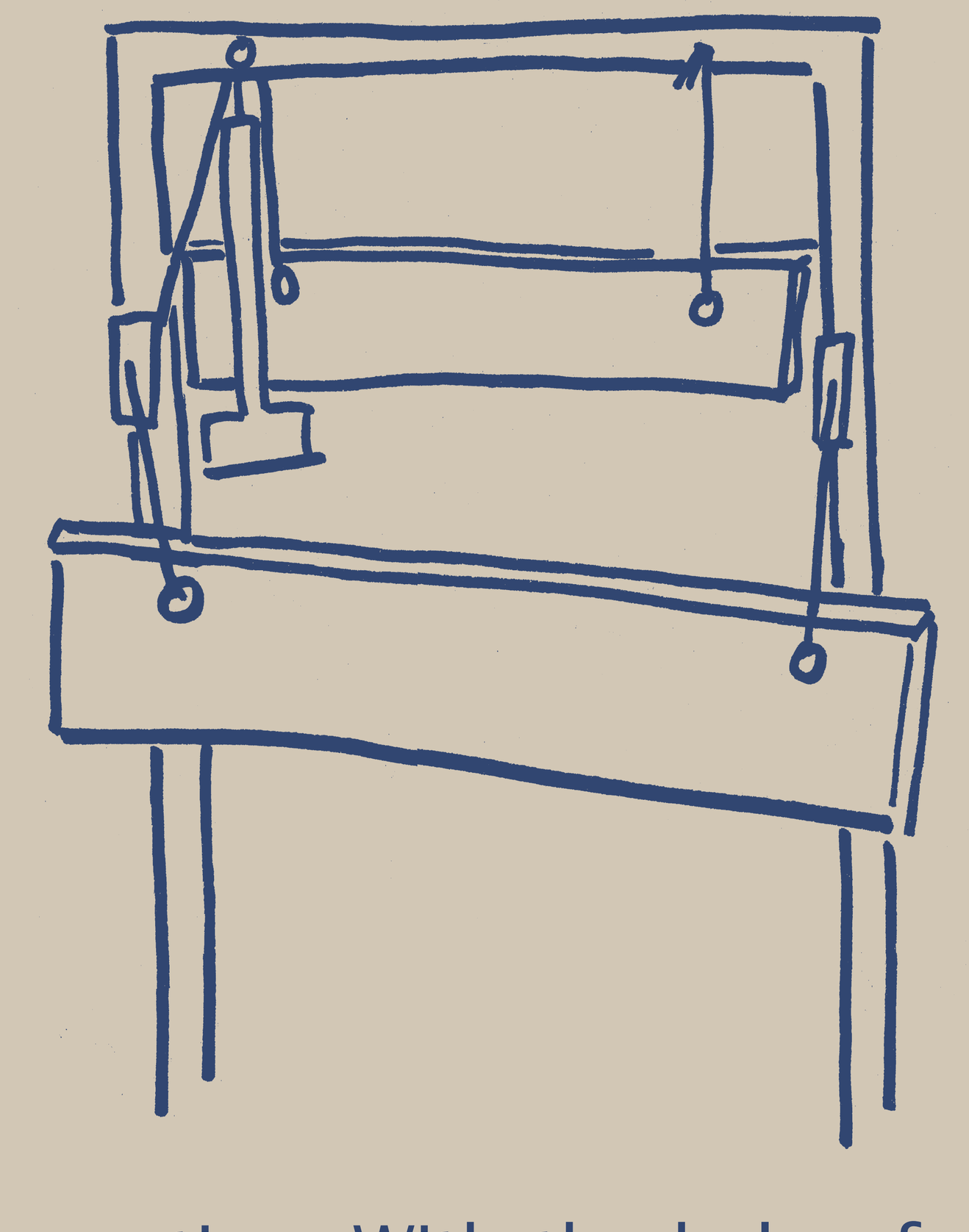
Charcoal Piles

Charcoal piles are used for the production of charcoal. Between 20 and 30 m3 of wood is piled in layers and covered with an airtight layer of earth, moss and grass. Construction of a pile generally takes four to five days to complete. It then has a diameter of between eight and ten metres. A shaft is left in the centre, called the „Quandelschacht“ (central, or heart, shaft), which is filled with brush, dry wood and old charcoal, and ignited. Carbonisation of the wood pile takes between five and eight days, after which it needs to cool for three to five days. Only then can the burnt covering layer be removed and the charcoal extracted.

Beechwood charcoal pile near Neustadt/Harz

Modern charcoal production process at the Sternhaus charcoal pile near Gernrode

The Charcoal Burner’s Sounding Board



To produce sounds that could be heard from far and wide, charcoal burners and loggers would use a clapper of hornbeam to strike a “Hillebille”. This comprised a board of beech or maple hanging from two leather straps on a frame and was an essential signalling device. As charcoal piles had to be continuously overseen, charcoal burners couldn’t simply leave to pass on news or other information. With the help of these devices it was possible for charcoal burners to communicate with each other over great distances. If help was needed, it could quickly be called.

Text: Dr. Klaus George, Michelle Müller & Manuela Ritter • Figures: Albert Burckhardt, 1895, privat property Göllnitz, Exhibition in the Museum Schloss Herzberg am Harz, Exhibition area forest and mining history (Charcoal burner ca. 1900); Oberharzer Bergwerksmuseum (Charcoal pile); otherwise Dr. Klaus George • Translation: Darren Mann
Conceptual design: design office - Agentur für Kommunikation GmbH • Printing: Hering Gravuren und Werbetechnik

Deutsche Version umseitig