

Reflections on an Unreflected Sphere

Archaeological Exhibitions and Nationalism

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There is an open nationalism, clearly stated through national symbols as well as through various rituals. However, there is also an underlying form of nationalism, operating on a structural level, so obvious that it becomes “invisible”. This is not only true for the actions of people in general, but to a great extent also for the understanding of different normative institutions, not least the museums. Nationalism is included as a hidden facet in the communicating activities. This article sheds light on the role of archaeology in this context, with particular emphasis on archaeological exhibitions. At a closer look, it becomes obvious that one elementary aspect of the archaeological communicating activities is missing – the conscious reflection.

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THE NEED TO HAVE A HISTORY

Deeply rooted conceptions of the elder’s right of precedence and the inferiority in lacking a history stand out in early Swedish attitudes. One obvious example would be the Geaticism (Sw. *Göticism*), dating as far back as the 15th century.

In 1434 the bishop of Växjö, Nicolaus Ragvaldi, contributing to a discussion about the order of precedence at a synod in Basel, identified his mother country as the original home country of the Goths. Ragvaldi’s interpretation of the tribal stories of Jordanes was later entered into Swedish law, into the royal code of Christoffer of Bavaria’s national law code of 1442: “The realm of Sweden has arisen out of a heathen world, out of a Swea land and a Gotha land; Swea the northern forest was called, and Gotha the southern one. Gotha is two in Sweden, Eastern Gotha and Western Gotha. There are no more Goths, except for outside of Sweden since they spread to other countries, as it is stated in the writing”

(Nordström 1934:62, our translation). Ragvaldi’s speech was translated in the 17th century from Latin to Swedish and was sold, for instance, at markets. In this way, the belief of the glorious past of the Swedes was spread throughout the country.

The Swedish era of great power (1611–1718) was highly Geatish in its appraisal, having the terrifying and at the same time protecting lion as one of its symbols. In different ways one tried to show that Sweden, the country of the Geats, was once the starting place for Western civilization. This view became the natural expression of a strong nationalistic self-esteem and at the same time it morally legitimized an expansive foreign politics. The height of this tradition was represented by Olof Rudbeck’s immense volume *Atlantica* (1679–1702) (fig. 1).

The political era of great power died with King Karl XII, but the dream of greatness did not disappear. Instead it was transformed into a dream of greatness within the country itself.



Fig. 1. In Atlantica Olof Rudbeck tries in different ways to show that Sweden was once the starting place for Western civilization. The picture shows the tree of Japhet. The strong trunk, originating in Sweden, represents the son of Japhet, Magog, and his descendants, the Swedes. The fallen apples show all the tribes that, according to tradition, emigrated from Sweden. (From Nordström, J. 1934. De yverbornes ö)

This issue was especially brought to the fore when Finland too was lost in 1809. The Gothic Society, founded in 1811, was at first a literary association and later became a more romanticizing nationalist ideology. Parallel to archaeology's earliest development as a science, the Geatish ideology lived on. Archaeology and nationalism went hand in hand. The Geatish heritage, the heritage of the conquerers of Rome, generated in our country a feeling of an outstanding position amongst nations, and created a belief in an innate power that would not recoil at new worldwide enterprises.

Having a history gives you security and an

optimism for the future. The centrality of this view becomes clear when reading Hans Hildebrand and Oscar Montelius: "The people, who prior to the mid-9th century appear before the Western Emperor's throne with a mission, must have had a history before this. We must have such, so that we do not stand among people like a foundling, with a prehistory that no one knows" (Hildebrand 1866, our translation); ... "we have in our possession, in every possible way, valuable sources. Should not all this spur us to renewed endeavours in the name of science, since we should never forget that even though this science in its origin is Swedish, its purpose must also be patriotic! A people that love and honor their forefathers' memories, have the right to hope for a great and happy future" (Montelius 1874:26, our translation) (fig. 2).

Early on, the Swedish prehistoric research characteristically also emphasized the importance of the physical monuments. In 1628 Johannes Bureus was commanded by the king to seek out old monuments and document them in writing, "in honour and appraisal of our country" (Schück 1932-44:1, 121). Sweden's first law of ancient monuments from 1666 aimed at serving "our ancestors' and our whole country's imperishable glory" (Schück 1932-44:1, 264). The Swedish identity was firmly anchored in the material remains, the monuments and the cultural landscape – thus not in a national epic or an equivalent.

The belief in the material evidence remains strong in nationalist discussions through centuries, not only during but also after the Second World War. It is not a coincidence that the custodian of national monuments, Sigurd Curman, describes ancient monuments as "the irrefutable evidence of our ancient right of occupancy of this country" (Curman, in a 1940s film about the importance of ancient monuments in connection with the exhibition *10 000 Years in Sweden*). Birger Nerman follows the same line of reasoning when he, in 1946, states that the Museum of National Antiquities, in its new rooms, is ready to "let the areas of knowledge it represents take their

place within general education and thereby strengthen our people's sympathy for thousands of years of continuous cultivation with distinctive character" (Nerman 1946:219, our translation). It is against this background that the ideas of the value of a continuity of thousands of years in a society's development and deep cultural roots should be seen.

NOTIONS THAT MAINTAIN NATIONAL CONCEPTIONS

The entries to history have varied with the current *zeitgeist*. Independently of this, the archaeological material has played a self-assertive role for the nation, even during periods when nationalism in its traditional sense was not fashionable. If not by lineage, the direct linkage to the past can be found in the soil. When Oscar Montelius celebrated his 70th birthday in 1913, the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* thanked him for giving splendour to the glorious Swedish name by, for instance, "showing that the gold he had found in the

deepest forgotten pits was old Swedish gold" (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 1913-03-30, our translation). The gold confirms the nation and ennobles the Swedish culture. This conception is still at work today.

In the exhibition called *The Golden Room of the Swedish People* (Sw. *Svenska folkets guldrum*) at the Museum of National Antiquities, it is emphasized that the gold and silver treasures displayed have been found in *the Swedish soil*. They are said to bear witness to a world of wealth and prosperity in the past, of *our ancestors'* great technical knowledge and high artistry. In the introduction to the book *The Magic of Gold in Myth and Reality* (Sw. *Guldets magi i saga och verklighet*) the authors declare that their ambition has been to give the readers a view of what "our prehistoric artistic smiths were able to make and what the numerous treasures might mean to the interpretation of several millennia of Swedish prehistory – a period mainly without written sources" (Hagberg 1994:7, our translation).

The view and use of archaeology at the turn of the century does not differ greatly from today. The role of archaeology is still self-assertive. The emphasis on technical skills and economic wealth as genuine, national, ancient qualities expresses a nationalism so obvious that we no longer see it. But when we speak exclusively about a *Swedish* prehistory, we forward a myth. The choice of words and accentuations is easily distorted when present conditions are applied to the past. We speak of *our* prehistory, *our* ancestors and our Swedish soil, instead of speaking of prehistoric people and cultural areas with other extensions than the present ones. This unreflected conception of continuity gives words like *Swedish*, *our* and *us* a usage that has no coverage.

How topical is this kind of self-assertion in a time when the "Swedishness" in a most fundamental way is changing? The consequences of this story-telling are reflected in the inner as well as in the outer works of the museums, within the preserving as well as the mediating activities. Henceforth we will shed light on the latter.

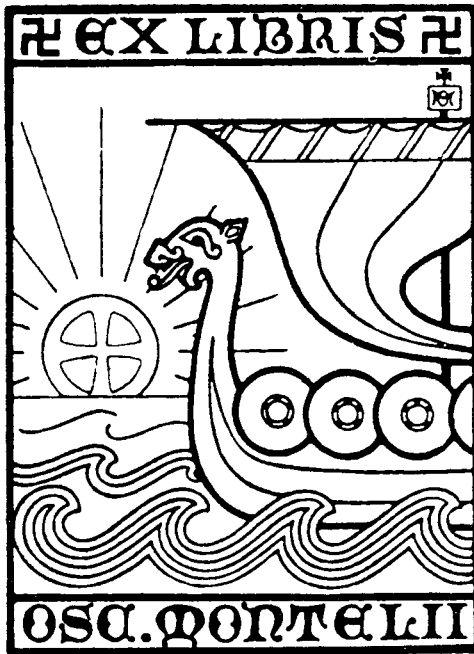


Fig. 2. The exlibris of Oscar Montelius alludes to his research. During his lifetime (1843–1921) the signs and patterns that stand as images for his scientific achievement, were still immaculate.

10 000 YEARS IN SWEDEN AND MODERNITY

The archaeological exhibition tradition of today starts in 1943 with the landmark exhibition *10 000 years in Sweden*. Interestingly enough, it arose out of a pressing situation during the Second World War, detectable in the exhibition, when the purpose of archaeology was to serve the nation.

During the 1930s, the national ideas of identity were influenced by new political ideas, and thereby were directed more towards the future than the past. The image developed of a special Swedish way, a kind of exceptional position that differed from other countries in Europe. Sweden was a model for civilization. Here the foundation was laid for a new national feeling – Sweden as a modernity. Sweden became a country that more and more identified itself with its own progressiveness.

In the exhibition *10 000 Years in Sweden* a new generation put forward its view of history. After modernism was introduced, there was a striving for cultural conformity. The citizens should learn to speak the same cultural lan-

guage. At least in its educational tone, the exhibition *10 000 Years in Sweden* clearly subscribed to this goal. Its form and pedagogy represented the new nationalism, while the content of the exhibition was still based on tradition. In this situation, one repeated old patterns and motivated identity with race, soil and nation. The exhibition communicated a collective view of Swedish prehistory. Its content was presented as a truth, and not problematized. The faith in progress was strong. No foundlings were to be found in the new society. In this way, the exhibition followed the traditional understanding of what love of one's country meant, and at the same time it communicated the new civic spirit.

The exhibition *10 000 Years in Sweden* was a temporary exhibition that became permanent. Its importance reached far beyond a common exhibition in that it was also a model for the exhibitionary arrangements at the county museums that were developing during the 1940s and 1950s. However, the progressiveness in fact was found in the form and in the technology, not in the content. "It is a modern exhibition technique ..., whose clear obvious



Fig. 3. Part of a stylized model of the mounds of Uppsala from the exhibition *10 000 Years in Sweden* in 1943. The moving model showing Old Uppsala, with its temple and sacrificial grove, and Uppsala of today, with its mounds and church, gathered the visitors; by means of a stick they could alternate between the two versions of the model. Photo: ATA.

objective has been to make things talk” (Lundström 1989:44, from *Svenska Dagbladet* 1943-04-17, our translation) (fig. 3). This was positive for the moment, but negative in the long run. Long after this exhibition there was still a belief that history tells its own story, but this is not the case. Instead, a non-historical vacuum emerged where the absence of interpretations and necessary relations to present-day society and issues was prominent.

In terms of a prepared exhibition with an educational purpose, *10 000 Years in Sweden* was exemplary in 1943, but further development made it futile since the national feeling sustaining it no longer was firmly established in time. The Nazis’ politicizing of archaeology had discredited it. The counter-reaction was so strong that the possibility to act within a public debate disappeared. In this situation, archaeologists chose two variants of one and the same alternative. One was isolation – science in itself was sufficient – and the other was to continue archaeological activities but to direct them towards areas that would not be considered offshoots of Third Reich archaeology. This could be done by refraining from interpretations and speculations and instead concentrating on descriptions of objects, something that was considered neutral. That was also how typology was perceived.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF POSITIVISM

The positivistic research in the 1960s and 1970s did not look upon human beings from a holistic point of view, science was dehumanised. Only work and the technical and material productivity were considered important. There was no room for cult, religion or feelings. Research had to be ethically neutral. This way of thinking is evident in, for example, Per-Uno Ågren’s comment on the permanent exhibition (1976–80) of the county museum of Västerbotten: “Museums of cultural history are museums of work... Every object represents work”. Work was highly valued as a productive force in society. (Kalina 1995:45).

On the permanent exhibition in Umeå, Ågren commented that even the periods which

the museum had tried to describe lacked attitudes. “We do not speak for or against any matter. We treat matters equally. The matters we have brought forward have been done so on the basis of what we thought to be the most representative... We have not depicted the conflict between the Saami and the settlers. The Saami and the settlers also had a symbiotic relationship” (Kalina 1995:44, our translation). In accordance with the policy of compromise that was characteristic of the decades following the Second World War, conflicts were subdued in the Swedish political debate. Neutrality was also reflected within the activities of the museum. However, it is treacherous to study a subject in the belief that one is scientifically neutral. Such a neutrality is by necessity supportive of the existing, prevailing thoughts. Not taking a stand means that you have already done so. Indirectly, this means that you want everything to stay the same (Gjessing 1974:19).

Positivism also claimed to be politically neutral, at the same time as its usage shows something else. Even if Ågren did not see the ethnic conflicts, he depicted the class conflicts. Once again, it is demonstrated that the *zeitgeist* to a great extent decides the framing of questions. Ethnic conflicts were not dealt with in the 1970s, but class conflicts were.

The collective and exaggerated rational solutions of modernism eventually evoked a reaction. The conformism was exposed to hard criticism. Instead, one started to strive for an increased individualism. This in turn demanded increased personal positioning and an ability to relate to an unforeseeable and pluralistic world. History once again became important as a central point of reference.

Within museums this was accepted gratefully, and massive efforts were made to *restore history*. “At twelve o’clock on March 21, 1993, Swedish History starts”, it was declared. The objective of this exhibition was to give the lost identity back to the citizens, but this was done without reflecting on what Swedish identity consisted of today. It was taken for granted. The exhibition *The Swedish History*

became the swan-song of positivism and thereby also the swan-song of modernism.

INVISIBLE INDOCTRINATION

Many exhibitions, even today, have a pronounced character of unreflected optimism for development. In accordance with the understanding of material culture within the idea of development, technical experiments were encouraged, whereas the questioning of qualities of the abstract content was absent. The intellectual depth and reflections are missing.

In the northern provinces of Jämtland and Härjedalen, the farmers and the people whom we call the reindeer-breeding Saami have lived side by side for thousands of years. But at Jamtli, the county museum of Jämtland, they are separated from each other. The Saami are characterized as the people of the silver-glimmering plains. In their paradise-like landscape there is a celestial tranquility. Nature, animals and people live together in harmony, an exquisite life-style, free from conflicts (fig. 4). It was the farmers of Jämtland who “built the country”. Their history is a positive story of progress and increasing knowledge. But is this reality? Have the Saami and the farmers

lived so independently of each other?

A complex game can be discerned. The farmers of Jämtland exclude the Saami, and the latter respond by screening off and exoticising themselves. The exclusion becomes an act of self-defence. The majority controls the thinking of the minority to such an extent that the minority looks upon itself with the eyes of the majority. Jamtli communicates an imperialist way of looking at things. This affects the Saami as well as the hunter-gatherers of the Stone Age. Both are depicted in highly aestheticised environments, static in appearance since turning them into décors. The exhibition forces the visitor to think in terms of “us” and “them”. By claiming that the landscape is a “special country”, the self-esteem is strengthened at the same time as it acts to exclude the rest of society. The exhibition’s “us” are portrayed in such a way that it protects against unfamiliar elements in time as well as in space. The patriotic strains are obvious.

When the values and opinions of society governing these exhibitions are not clearly stated, but are hidden as premises and truisms in what is called a scientific description, it is possible to speak about indoctrination (Keller



Fig. 4. At the permanent exhibition at Jamtli in 1995, the Saami were depicted as the people of the silver-glimmering plains. People, animals and nature live together in harmony, free from conflicts. But does this reflect reality? Photo: Jämtlands läns museum, Östersund.

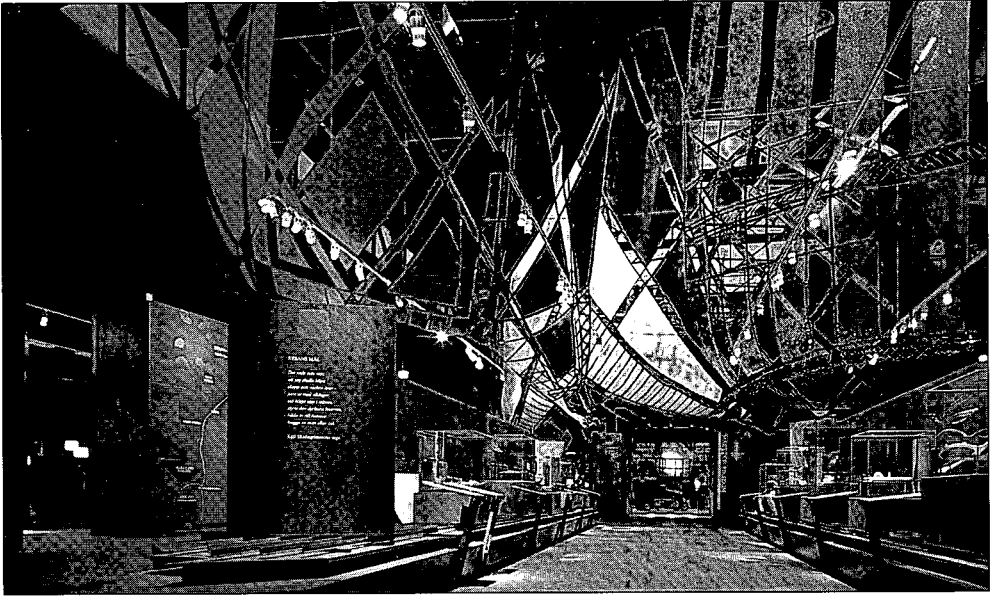


Fig. 5. At the exhibition *Vikings* at Eriksbergshallen in Gothenburg in 1995, one did not succeed, despite good intentions with different themes, in contradicting the myth of the Viking, but rather reinforced it. This was accomplished by an exhibition design that acted against the intentions, with the result that the grandeur that was supposed to be toned down, was instead strengthened. Photo: Eriksberg, Göteborg.

1978:93). Museum exhibitions have this problem more often than is generally conceived.

The Viking is a perpetual prehistoric symbol for Swedishness. In the autumn of 1995 the exhibition *Vikings* was shown at Eriksbergshallen in Gothenburg. According to the press-release, the exhibitors had the ambition to portray one of Europe's great popular myths. But the concept of myth was vague at the exhibition. Myth and nationalism were mixed in a peculiar way with archaeological "facts". Nothing was done to contradict the myth of the brave Viking, but rather, the exhibition agreed with this myth (fig. 5). The message was vague and elusive. Since the exhibition did not take a stand, it was up to the visitor to confirm his/her own conceptions. In this way, neither new knowledge nor a different picture of the Viking came forth.

Had the exhibition instead displayed the usage of the Viking as a modern symbol, we would have been forced to confront our own perceptions of the Viking, how these were created and changed over time. *Vikings* could

have been an important exhibition had it shed some light on these changes over time. It would then have given us a reason to reflect upon some of the problems that face us in our multi-ethnic society.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONDITIONS OF CULTURE AND HUMANS

As for anybody, it is not easy for archaeologists or museum staff to let go of myths. One seems to agree on what people in society in general appreciate, no matter what the consequences. The museums have taken their task too literally; they maintain traditions but do not work them through or question them. The exhibitions at museums have become much more popularistic, bordering on pure entertainment. The archaeology of today contributes to illustrative material rather than to scientific questions and answers of relevance to present-day issues (fig. 6).

If the museums want to seriously challenge the *zeitgeist* that exists, they must con-

tinuously delve into the thickness of meaning which constitutes it. The way people as different social beings have lived and perceived their existence should be illustrated to a much greater extent at museum exhibitions. This has, however, to a lesser extent been of interest to archaeologists. Ultimately, this is about letting people come back, not in the form of “us” or “them” but in the form of “we”.

At the county museum of Västernorrland the aim has been to show a cultural situation rather than vindicate a regional identity. Meeting-places and cross-roads that have meant development have been searched for. The tangible material has received an abstract and transferred meaning, showing the multiplicity of reality. The museum has concentrated on the fact that there is something fundamentally

human that connects prehistory to the present, “us” to “them”.

The Norwegian archaeologist Brit Solli has, however, questioned whether there is some form of identity ties between the people of today and the people of the past. She raises the question “whether people then were not completely different from us, despite the fact that they lived by the same fiords and mountains” (Solli, *Aftenposten* 1995-11-05). If history no longer is about “our” ancestors but is about people of unknown cultures, it will no longer be of interest to use prehistory as an argument in a highly nationalist spirit. In our opinion, it should be obvious that there does not exist a regional or a national identity bond, but something fundamentally human which is a common denominator for them and us. The idea of ancient roots has not only a mythical but also a mystical force, which especially fascinates Nazi and racist groups. The archaeological conception of continuity as well as the notion of the inferiority in not having a history supports these groups’ strivings for a pure race and a “Swedish” Sweden.

This tendency can be stopped by archaeologists and museum staff only by changing their own way of looking at prehistory. In a time of a shrinking world, migrating people and fading borders, the need for cultural roots is of great importance. But these cannot consist of race, blood and soil, but instead of an understanding of the conditions of life. As well as life is history an ever ongoing process. It is of no use to imagine prehistory as something complete, clear-cut or definitive. Borders have always been moved, people have always met. Prehistory was no less dynamic than today.

When the categorizations of research become goals in themselves, human beings disappear. Without the presence of a subject the dynamics, that is the motive for development, is lost. This is a relationship that enables a “cleansing” of prehistory. This is the very dilemma for archaeology as well as for society.

English revised by Laura Wrang.



Fig. 6. Advertisement for the Nights of Odin, youth activities at Eriksbergshallen in Gothenburg, in connection with the exhibition Vikings in 1995. The popularistic strivings restrict the content of the museum exhibitions. Expectations and ambitions aim at entertainment. That is why they become more of an illustrative material than scientific questions and discussions of present-day issues. Photo: Jan-Eve Olsson.

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