

MORE THAN OBJECT HANDLING

The Roles of Archaeologists within Museum Organizations

Gunnar Andersson

The Swedish History Museum
Department of Cultural History and Collections
Box 5428, 114 84 Stockholm, Sweden
gunnar.andersson@shm.se

The subject of the discussion is museums, and more specifically museum archaeology and the roles that archaeologists have – or should have – within present as well as future museum organizations. It is a much-needed discussion since one of the consequences of the changes that have occurred in Swedish contract archaeology during the last decade is that quite a few museums have dropped their archaeological functions. As stated in the introductory text by Högberg and Fahlander, there is an ongoing trend that many regional museums are cutting off their archaeological departments. But I guess it is fair to admit that the discussion to some degrees also can be related to the – sometimes – heated and lively debate about the roles of Swedish museums that has been going on during the last year in the press and social media; a debate which sometimes touches upon the question of whether there is any need for specialists, i.e. qualified academic researchers and curators, within the personnel group or not in the ‘new’ reorganized institution.

In the following I will try to elaborate and reflect on a few issues that to varying degrees have bearing upon some of the changes that have occurred – or might be about to occur – within Swedish contract archae-

ology as well as within museums that either have archaeologists employed or have archaeological collections. It will be in no way near a complete overview and there are also great differences between museums. Some have vast archaeological collections, others have not. Some have archaeologists active in contract archaeology, but no collections, while others have collections, but no archaeologist working with contract archaeology. So as the situation appears today it is possible to have both, one or none of the above-mentioned branches in the organization. However, being fortunate in having spent many years working in both camps, I do believe I am qualified to comment on some the trends that I (we?) can foresee and express my own personnel view on. One of them is the above-mentioned undergoing change within many regional museums.

So even if all museums are not alike, one thing they have in common is that they undergo changes over time – and they need to do so; the opposite alternative is unthinkable, unnatural and unacceptable. However, it is my firm belief that in order to secure and maintain a high (or at least acceptable) standard and credibility, museums that do have archaeological collections also need to have archaeologists employed on a permanent basis.

It goes without saying that museum archaeologists do different work today than what they did 10, 20 or 30 years ago. Most of us probably don't do less, but more work than ever, often combined with struggling to fight cutting costs due to reduced grants for either ordinary museum work such as acquisition, i.e. registration and making materials available to the public online, having expert functions in exhibition productions or doing research. Tasks that requires the competence of a team of archaeologically skilled curators with different fields of expertise (the single curator/archaeologist capable of spanning the complete spectrum of archaeological material in a large museum collection that covers several millennia is yet to be born). Furthermore; through contacts with universities and different actors/companies, they need to be reasonably updated on what goes on, both within the academies and out in the different archaeological fields.

In many ways, however, we do different work today than earlier generations did: communication with visitors and public for instance. To a large degree this is done via direct e-mail correspondence between 'the expert' and the public. Communication of exhibitions is often done by skilled public educators – and they mostly do a fantastic job – but in many cases, it does also require archaeological competence. Another example of situations when this is needed is communication via the internet and social media. Many (most?) museums today communicate via blogs (administered by their own staff) and social media such as Face-

book, Instagram, Twitter and Flickr, etc. When uploading materials from their collections (which has been a tremendous success and opportunity for museums to open up their collections) or other research results – museums meet and interact with more, and in many cases ‘new’ kinds of, visitors than ever. If these conversations are solely managed by staff working with PR or media who is skilled in their professions, but have limited or no archaeological knowledge, the information as well as the following conversation might be in need of serious revision.

For museums that have existing archaeological material from excavations, or have expressed a wish to receive this, it is of vital importance to have expert competence at hand. If meaningful channels of contact between excavators and museums exist, or can be established, this has the potential to facilitate object handling during fieldwork. The acquisition process can start earlier and the amounts of double work that often occur as a result of non-existent communication between the two may be reduced, if not to a minimum then at least considerably. Different economy systems between museums and archaeological companies should not be used as a hindrance to communication; if there is a will, there are ways to bypass such bureaucratic obstacles.

Updated archaeologists at museums also have possibilities to deepen and enhance the information connected to the objects and thereby increase the quality of the acquisition process, for instance, by adding contextual information which sometimes may not be included in files or lists submitted, but can be found in the reports, which are not always available on-line. Given the right incentive, acquisition work can sometimes be more than just object handling and described as a kind of post-excavation (and post-report) research process, for instance, by thematically structured approaches.

Another task in which archaeological competence should be required is when museums – if they follow the recommendations of ICOM (International Council of Museums) – specify their principles in policy documents concerning acquisition and de-acquisition of archaeological materials and objects. In both cases updated knowledge of current research and views has the potential to make these documents useful, for museum staff as well as for excavators.

Updated policies do not necessarily need to be primarily object-orientated, at least not in a simplistic way. A more fruitful approach to acquisitions could (or perhaps should?) – apart from emanating from what the museum wants its collection to mirror and represent – be context-orientated. The same goes for de-acquisitions. As an example: bulk material, i.e. materials and objects that a museum may have an abundance of in their collection, should of course be evaluated in rela-

tion to the specific find context. It would be considered bad practice to let e.g. 'over-representation in the collections' be the only decisive criterion in the process.

Recently de-acquisition of archaeological materials, and the principles for it, has made its way into the general museum debate referred to earlier. In the debate the practice is often mentioned in negative terms and used as an example of the dismantling of good acceptable archaeological practice that is assumed to be currently going on in museums as well as among excavators, due to economic or political factors.

For several reasons I do not believe the answer is so simple. If a museum decides to get rid of its collections for economic or other politically motivated reasons, then the case is clear and in line with the arguments above. But if not, then it's something else. Among archaeologists there are those who are in favour and those who are not, and true – we can only speculate about what future development in archaeological theory and/or analysing techniques may result in – but in the end, I dare say that most archaeologists with insight into both museums and excavations – and excavation techniques – agree that in many cases de-acquisition is a necessity. Naturally there are materials that for ethical reasons (hopefully) will never be considered, among them human remains. But again; context is the keyword and most archaeologists probably also agree that e.g. heavily corroded and fragmented objects that are beyond conservatorial salvation and identification, or objects without properly secured and documented context have less values than others.

When de-acquisition of objects such as the ones described above, for various reasons is needed, if conducted by archaeologist and in accordance with prevailing practices and policies, it should be regarded as an act of responsibility towards to those whom museums and excavators serve, now and in the future: the public, students, researchers, developers, decision makers at county administrative boards, their holders, etc.

It might also be wise to remember and acknowledge that de-acquisition is not a new phenomenon; it has a long history within museums. But the principles of it may never have been formalized in a policy. Furthermore, it has also been practised for long time within archaeological fieldwork and excavations – but in those contexts we generally name the process 'scientifically motivated priorities'. After all, it is in the field you decide, either as a group of researchers or as in contract archaeology in dialogue with the purchaser (i.e. the county administrative board), upon find strategies and what features or parts of the site are to be intensively or extensively excavated.

So to sum up: museums that have archaeological material in their collections are in need of archaeological expertise among the staff. To

maintain – or (re?) establish fluent communication channels between those of us who are working in museums and those of us active in contract archaeology, is but one necessity for creating a better – and much needed – flow through the archaeological chain. If matters are evolving in an opposite direction towards where this is not considered necessary, then we really are on a slippery slope, and may soon find ourselves sliding downwards to full-scale deinstallation of good practice and fragmentation of knowledge.