

MUSEUMS AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN SWEDEN

Some Points on a Widening Gap Based on Personal Experience

Fredrik Svanberg

The Swedish National Maritime Museums
Box 27131, 102 52 Stockholm, Sweden
fredrik.svanberg@maritima.se

THE IDEA OF 'MUSEUM ARCHAEOLOGY' IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

The very use of the strange concept 'museum archaeology' seems to me to signal a current set of problems in the relations between archaeology and museums in Sweden. The concept seems to indicate that when archaeologists work in museums they are doing a special kind of archaeology, or archaeology under special circumstances, rather than doing museum work. The idea inherent in this concept seems to be that archaeologists should not integrate in museums, learn museum skills and widen their set of competences. They should keep to being straight archaeologists, doing archaeology in its classical fashion, though for the moment being based in museums.

This way of thinking, this narrow idea of the potential roles of archaeologists in museums, seems to me to be the core of current problems. If the only possible relation between archaeologists and museums is a relation in which archaeologists based in museums are doing typical archaeological projects or contract archaeology, that is, if archaeologists do not want to integrate with the full range of typical museum work, then

how can the consequence of this idea be anything other than a widening gap? The latest developments in the nature of Swedish contract archaeology described in the keynote may be adding to the lack of integration, but these developments are not its core.

MUSEUM WORK IS WIDER THAN TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES

My own personal experience of having worked in Swedish contract archaeology for a ten-year period in the 1990s and early 2000s, then in different roles in the major Swedish archaeological museum for slightly longer and currently heading a museum unit involving several archaeologists should give me some basis for commenting on current issues.

To begin with, 'Archaeologist' is not a standard position in Swedish museums, where positions related to knowledge production or the keeping of collections are typically titled 'intendent' or 'antikvarie' (both concepts translating as 'curator', in some cases maybe 'keeper'). These titles indicate that museum work is typically wider and different from basic training in disciplines such as archaeology and ethnology, from which most or at least many museum professionals in Sweden were traditionally recruited.

A very small number of Swedish museums are specifically archaeological museums while by far the most museums have a much wider scope, where archaeological collections and exhibitions are just one part. Museum work is typically, for example in the latest government assessment of the museum field, divided into three major blocks: collection management, exhibitions plus pedagogical work, and knowledge production (which includes regular scientific research but also the building up of the specific kind of museum information systems). All three parts have their specific skills, challenges and relate to an international basis of knowledge and research.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRAINING DOES NOT PREPARE ARCHAEOLOGISTS FOR MUSEUM WORK

Basic archaeological education in Swedish universities and university colleges is weak when it comes to preparing archaeologists for museum professionalism. Unlike ethnologists, archaeologists are, very often, strangers to museum systems and the special roles and skills in museums. Though there are certainly exceptions, this is my overall ex-

perience. Many archaeologists tend to see museums as little more than storage places for finds. In particular, there is a general lack of interest within archaeology for a deeper understanding of different kinds of public interaction.

Ethnologists study museums and museum literature in basic training and quite a few move on to do research within ethnology specifically directed at museum issues. Since the nature of museums and current museum questions are seen as part of the subject, adequately taught, and since ethnologists are therefore easily integrated in museums there is no need for a concept of ‘museum ethnology’. Museums and museum work quite simply lie within the sphere of what ethnologists know about and do.

A CHANGE OF ATTITUDES IS NEEDED FOR THE FUTURE

Museums, on the other hand, and this should also be acknowledged, have done less well in following up on the massive public interest in archaeology. In particular the exploring and interpretative process of archaeology – offering both a tool for investigating the past and a very practical, pedagogical illustration of how history is made – have a strong relevance for museums and could have a greater presence there, involving professional archaeologists of course. Needless to say, museums should also be careful to maintain archaeologically trained staff to keep their competence regarding prehistory and the early parts of history and its material remains, which no other staff can provide.

My principal hopes for the future, however, would be for a general change of attitudes within archaeology. There is need for a deeper understanding and competence among archaeologists regarding museums. This should be established in basic academic training to a much higher degree than is currently the case. The full complexity of museum issues needs to be pulled into the sphere of what archaeologists know about and do, because museums and archaeologists need each other.