

A comment on recent trends in the prerequisites for Swedish development-led archaeology

In sports there is a firmly rooted saying that you do not change the organization of a winning team. In my view Swedish development-led archaeology – for many years organized in mutual understanding and collaboration among the National Heritage Board, county museums, county administrative boards, university departments, and foundations and private corporations – can be described as such a winning team. This is in the sense that open and creative attitudes towards collegial collaboration and a consequent testing and application of new theoretical perspectives and excavation methods steadily improved our knowledge about the past. During the years 1985–2005 approximately 70 % of the doctoral dissertations published by archaeological departments at Swedish universities dealt in some way with the presentation and further analysis of material that was produced within development-led archaeology. More than 65 % of the dissertations were actually produced by the excavating archaeologists themselves. During this period the archaeological research arena in the traditional university environment was expanded to include archaeologists at museums and the National Heritage Board. The expansion was fruitful, and in retrospect we can conclude that it largely improved not only our knowledge but also the quality of Swedish archaeology as a discipline. Academic borders between archaeologists employed at museums and in universities were slowly erased. The number of research projects grew steadily, and hence the awareness of the importance of archaeology increased in the surrounding society. A variety of theoretical approaches were used and projects were often multidisciplinary both in perspective and organization. At the same time an older and in many ways national perspective that long had governed Swedish archaeology became of less importance. Projects were implemented and carried out, fundamentally changing our knowledge of everything from past settlement patterns

to burial traditions and human living conditions in different periods as well as regions. The increased international collaboration made the Swedish region part of European prehistory in a wider sense. Far-reaching collaborative projects between scientists at museums, the National Heritage Board and university departments ensured the survival of a creative and innovative scientific milieu for research.

During the last five or six years the possibility to maintain high scientific quality in development-led archaeology has, in my view, altered drastically in Sweden. The recent changes in this archaeology have nothing to do with the establishment of any new theoretical paradigms or excavation techniques. The way in which the legislation concerning development-led archaeology is now being applied and regulated, mainly through the formulation of new formal guidelines from the National Heritage Board concerning the conditions for this archaeology, has resulted in a situation where ancient monuments are more and more being regarded as commercial commodities rather than as potential sources of new knowledge. Instead of a further natural increase in collaboration, archaeological institutions that deal with development-led archaeology are now expected to compete with each other in order to be assigned a certain developer-funded excavation project. A natural consequence of this competition is, of course, that almost all collaborations between institutions, and hence also between scientists, has ceased to exist. The new situation has ultimately created a fundamental paradox; of course it is reasonable to assume that the purpose of these far-reaching changes in the application of the legislation concerning development-led archaeology was to increase archaeological knowledge and to decrease the archaeological costs for the developers and for society at large. But at least in retrospect of the last five years, it is clear that the situation has instead become the opposite, which is quite alarming. Archaeologists at museums, in private corporations, and at the National Heritage Board no longer collaborate. Instead we compete with each other for the assignment to carry out a certain excavation project, and though the new regulations have been in "operation" for only a couple of years, it is reasonable to conclude that this development will result in a very distinct decrease and fragmentation in the production of archaeological research and ultimately in the general knowledge about the past. In several geographical regions the competition has led to a concrete decrease in costs for

archaeological excavation; this is definitely true. But one can seriously doubt that a “cheaper archaeology” will prove to be economical in a longer perspective from any other perspective than the developers’. It is quite obvious that the economical competition has created a situation where less and less time and funds are spent on the analysis of the results from the development-led archaeological excavations. It is also clear that the time and costs spent on the actual field excavations have decreased in many aspects and regions. As a consequence of the competition, the number of multidisciplinary projects and collaborations between institutions has naturally decreased as well.

Since 2005, approximately 21 % of the archaeologists that held positions at county museums and the National Heritage Board’s department for excavation have lost their jobs. Presumably for economic reasons, steady employment has been transformed into project- or seasonal employment, thus creating a feeling of social uncertainty within the group of archaeologists and scientists. A direct effect of this social uncertainty is that much important research can no longer be produced. It is already evident that the new policy, where archaeologists are supposed to move around in the country in search for jobs, is quite fatal in relation to a more qualitative goal when it comes to the production of vital archaeological knowledge. I can also conclude that the possibility to carry out research within the institutions that deal with development-led archaeology has become limited in the academic and analytical sense as well as the economical. This negative development will, of course, in the end lead to a situation where the universities find there is no flow of new archaeological material and archaeologists from the museums into their departments. The employment possibilities will become rare. Ultimately I fear that this will lead to a situation where archaeology as an academic discipline will attract young students to a much lesser extent than before.

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