

A HOBBLING MARRIAGE

On the relationship between the collections and the societal mission of the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm

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In the late 19th century, the new Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm was a cutting-edge institution for the presentation of ideas of a universal human development from primitive to modern – ideas that were at the heart of the European colonial project. We argue that the archaeological collections with their unaltered 19th-century structures still represent a narrative that reproduces a colonial understanding of the world, a linear arrangement of essential cultural groups according to a teleological development model. Contrary to this, the contemporary mission of the Museum, inspired by the late 20th-century postcolonial thinking, is directed towards questioning this particular narrative. This problematic relationship is thus present deep within the structure of the Museum of National Antiquities as an institution, and it points to the need for long-term strategic changes to make the collections useful for vital museum activity in accordance with the Museum's mission.

Key words: Museum of National Antiquities, collection, narrative, colonial, postcolonial

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, heated discussions in the media regarding the Museum of National Antiquities as a centre for archaeology and/or modern art have revealed a tenuous relation between the Museum's mission and its collections. It has proven to be a complex matter to create exhibitions and educational programmes based on the Museum's own collections while keeping in line with the mission to focus on

humanity and to work for an increased democratization. In order to clearly fulfil the aims of its mission, the Museum has chosen to devote some of its exhibitions to expressions of modern art. At the same time, other exhibitions, such as the popular *Gold Room*, have had trouble achieving those same mission goals while strongly anchored in the museum collections and fulfilling the expectations of many visitors.

Events at the Museum of National Antiquities are symptomatic of the struggles of many archaeological museums to become as important in contemporary society as they were when first created. It is our intention in this paper to study the causes of the problematic relationship between the missions and collections of the Museum. We base this study on an analysis of the collections as representatives of an underlying ideological message, and end with a discussion on the possibilities of the archaeological museums in the 21st century.

THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

In order to understand the reasons for the failing relations between the archaeological collections and an updated mission that is relevant in contemporary society, we must begin by closely scrutinizing the collections of the Museum of National Antiquities. Even at first glance it is clear that the very *structure* of the archaeological collections, which the Museum manages, rests on a basic division into the periods of the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age established in the 19th century by Scandinavian researchers such as Christian Jürgensen Thomsen and Oscar Montelius. Today, the *three-period system*, i.e. the three development stages of humanity or ages that pre-date modern times, is a naturally integrated part of the global professional language of archaeology as well as the basis for museum activities and history lessons in schools throughout the world.

Let us therefore study the conception of the three-period system. When Thomsen (in the early part of the 19th century) and Hildebrand and Montelius (founders of the present structure of the collections in the Museum of National Antiquities in the later part of the 19th century) established the three-period system, and set the foundation for the current structure in the collections of the Museum, they were part of a larger perspective that made their work up to date and meaningful in contemporary society. The development thinking on which Thomsen's and Hildebrand and Montelius's work rested was also present in the

sciences adjoining archaeology, and the three-period system was thus developed as a part of a much larger perspective. In his work *The Order of Things* (originally published in 1966), Michel Foucault shows how a completely new view on knowledge, a brand new way of thinking that makes the development thinking possible, grew expansively within the sciences in the 19th century:

Thus, European culture is inventing for itself a depth in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their possible paths and routes, but great hidden forces developed on the basis of their primitive and inaccessible nucleus, origin, causality, and history.

[...]

Visible forms, their connections, the blank spaces that isolate them and surround their outlines – all these will now be presented to our gaze only in an already composed state, already articulated in that nether darkness that is fomenting them with time. (p. 274)

Modern Europe breaks with the previous classical ideas and invents a depth, a verticality that replaces the classical thinking's horizontal arrangement of identities and characters, side by side in endless possible combinations. On the contrary, the new vertical thinking seeks the primal cause for the contemporary European scientist and that which exist in his world. The scientist puts himself in the centre of science and his activities aim to explain why he is what he is. In this way, the scientist becomes the target, *telos*, for all development. The aims of science turn into an explanation of the way from a nucleus, the primal origin, upwards in a predestined shape towards the ever-developing *telos* (i.e. the European scientist) in the forefront of development. This paradigm shift enables the *teleologically* structured knowledge, and it is important that we understand it as an invention that characterizes the growth of modern Europe.

The genesis of this new vertical knowledge system coincided with the great European colonization of large parts of the world, and these two projects were intimately linked (e.g. Bhabha 1994:279f). The different European countries had widely different *modus operandi* for conquering their colonies, ranging from physical military violence to argumentative persuasion (which by no means necessarily translates as less invasive). Archaeology played a leading role mainly in the French

and British colonization projects through its scientific manifestation of a universal human development in predestined purposeful stages.

The three-period system of archaeology contributed to the colonial project through its manifestation of a universal human development in three essential stages and through the connection between *time* and *cultural distance* as two measurable units in the study of man. Through the archaeological development schedule, all people on Earth, living and dead, could be placed on different levels along a teleological line of development by measuring the material and technological complexity in their tools, weapons and other items. The modern colonizers and their science-using countrymen in Europe studied and assessed other contemporary and ancient peoples and placed them along the different stages of the development line. The explicit aim was to explain the conception of modernity, but at the same time this was a powerful tool for taking power in the entire world. Through the texts of the colonizers, the inhabitants in the colonies become living representatives of everything from the “Stone Age stage” to the “Middle Ages”, while the colonizers represent modernity and the absolute forefront of development.

However, the individual's location within the development line also encompasses a possibility for change. The archaeological development thinking thus opens up the possibility of human *fast-forward* development, where an individual is given the opportunity to quickly develop from a “primitive” stage to a “civilized” modern one. Nevertheless, since, according to this logic, this is an unnatural (albeit positive) development, it follows that the primitive individual must get assistance in this development from somebody who has already reached the perfection of the modern development stage. This development logic was a prerequisite for the *mission civilisatrice* – the civilizing mission that formed the core of the French colonial argumentation (and which was also present in a slightly different form in the British colonial culture). Using the scientific support of archaeology, the French colonizers could persuasively argue for the primitivism and barbarianism of the colonized. They could convince not only their countrymen but also themselves that colonization was through and through a good deed, since it gave the inhabitants in the colonies the possibility of a rapid development towards the higher stages that they could not reach on their own. The texts of the colonizers show a clear pattern: without their intervention, the primitive barbarians who were chained in a cultural infancy and incapable of their own cultural change would be forced to live for

thousands of years in underdeveloped misery. It is only through the influence of a ready-developed modernity, as represented by the colonizers, that they would be able to hasten all the development stages and go directly from the Stone Age to modernity and cultural perfection. Panivong Norindr has very aptly called this *the rhetoric of paternalistic benevolence* (Norindr 1996:44).

Thus, archaeology forms a fundamental building block in the discourse that ethically legitimizes large parts of the European colonial project in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As part of the larger scientific knowledge package invented by modern Europe in the 19th century, it contributes to a categorization and stigmatization of human differentiation according to a teleological development model with modern Europe in the forefront of development. Archaeology becomes particularly valuable since its absolute development perspective on humanity is a prerequisite for the rhetoric of paternalistic benevolence.

COLONIALISM AND THE MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

The thought that modern man had been created through a teleological development in distinctive stages from a primitive origin to a perfect modern shape was thus established in the European colonial project already before the Museum of National Antiquities and its collections were formed. Nevertheless, the Museum, its collections and exhibitions played a major part: they illustrated and illuminated the teleological development to the Swedish bourgeois public. Early on, the general public could see the scientific evidence of the development from the primitive Other in Swedish ancient times (analogous with the presence of distant countries that was simultaneously represented by the ethnographica in the collections of the ethnographical museums) to *telos*, a completely developed us, here and now, in the very forefront of the development line. According to the same logic, the exhibitions and the new development knowledge that they represented formed the evidence that “we” Swedes already had passed through all the necessary stages to perfect modernity and thus could rest at ease in our modern culture.

But this early museum business was in fact anything but a neutral presentation of objective evidence, as has been shown so convincingly by Tony Bennett in his book *Pasts Beyond Memory*. It was precisely in order to manifest the highly politicized ideas of a universal teleological development of humanity from primitive to modern that the museums of cultural history were created in Europe in the late 19th century. They

were fresh and vital in a changing present (*cf.* Maleuvre 1999:10). The collections functioned as laboratories where the scientists could materialize their theories on the development stages of humanity and experiment with different ideas. In the historical collections in Stockholm, Oscar Montelius experimented with the *typological method*, among other things, and arranged the prehistoric artefacts in series from simple to complex, creating new periods – subgroups to the three main periods – such as “Bronze Age period IV”. He called the clearly discernable object groups within the different periods *types*, and he spent much effort on arranging these types into an appropriate line from embryo to developed form – a *typological series*. Like his contemporary colleagues, Oscar Montelius was mainly interested in the artefacts themselves, and he thought that they developed on their own through an inherent force that drove them towards perfection. This typological method would prove to outlive Montelius and become one of the most prevalent analytical methods of global archaeology. During the 20th century, archaeology changed its main focus from artefacts to ancient people, and the artefact types defined by Montelius and others were translated into representations of essential groups of ancient people. *Types* were then equated with *cultures*, such as the Bell Beaker culture and the Battle Axe culture.

Let us now briefly resume our description of the new museums of cultural history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here, the collections functioned as laboratories for ideas on man’s cultural development, and the artefacts were arranged into typological series. Purpose-built elongated exhibition halls and the linear classification structure of the collections cooperate in the exhibitions to disseminate the idea of the teleological development to the bourgeois public. Thus, the ideas leave the scientists’ closed discussion rooms and reach with full force the public space, with the general public thirsting for this fresh new knowledge. In this way, the museums of cultural history enable both the *embodiment* of the previously abstract ideas as well as the *publication* of the new way of thinking through dissemination to the bourgeois general public (Bennett 2004:2).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS AND THE MUSEUM MISSION OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In order to realize the strength and attraction of the teleological development perspective, we must recognize that it forms an unproblematic

and natural part of the bourgeois culture in Sweden and in the rest of Europe around the turn of the 20th century. One reason for its great incursion is that the rhetoric of paternalistic benevolence provides the European colonizers with a positive self-image. It is not until the arrival of the postcolonial critique, i.e. when colonized objects become subjects and turn their critical eye on the modern Western world, that the development perspective and the paternalistic benevolence are really questioned. Many postcolonial theoreticians maintain that the modern society of the 20th century cannot be understood without an analysis of the post-colonial existence, since its self-image is built on the earlier colonial structures (i.e. in our case, the teleological development thinking from primitive to modern), while simultaneously being dependent on the post-colonial critical unveiling of the same thing (e.g. Bhabha 1994: chap. 9). Hence in today's modern Western society there is a will to consume stories that confirm the teleological development thinking, while, at the same time, the critique coming from both within and outside the self-defined central position of the Western world becomes increasingly stronger. In his book *Den koloniala bumerangen (The Colonial Boomerang)*, Michael Azar writes the following about the reaction of the French regime to the riots in the Parisian suburbs in 2005:

De andra ska återföras till *sin förmodat givna plats* (oavsett om det är förorten eller världen utanför Europas gränser) och sin historiska tid (ännu inte lika rationell och civiliserad som oss) och därigenom fortsätta med att bekräfta den diskurs som gör de andra till andra och oss till oss i en maktdelning som gynnar det senare ledet. Det postkoloniala Europa av idag återupplever och återupprepar på ett kusligt sätt element ur sitt koloniala förflutna. (Azar 2006:37, italics in the original)

The others will be returned to *their presumed given place* (regardless of whether it is the suburb or the world outside the borders of Europe) and their historical time (not yet as rational and civilized as ours) and through this continue to confirm the discourse that makes the others other and us to us in a division of power that favours the latter. Today's post-colonial Europe re-lives and re-iterates in a daunting way elements from its colonial past. (Azar 2006:37, italics in the original)

Supported by recent research results and reports, Azar convincingly shows that the revival and reiteration of colonial elements is not only valid for France and the former colonial powers, but also for contemporary Sweden. Many people feel that the rhetoric of paternalistic benevolence provides them with a sense of security, and we see its expressions in politics and media on a daily basis. A critique of the same is often perceived as threatening, since the self-image of the modern Western world rests upon the belief in our own paternalistic benevolence.

Archaeology continues to form a legitimizing institution for the idea of teleological development in modern society. Despite some internal criticism, the linear conceptualization of a Swedish cultural evolution through the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age is very much alive, not only between the lines of archaeological research but also in children's history education in school. Of particular interest is the prevalence of archaeological metaphors in the Swedish language. "Stone Age" according to the National Encyclopaedia not only denotes the prehistoric period that precedes the Bronze Age, but is also generally synonymous with "ancient". In this respect the Stone Age is often present outside the archaeological context, for instance in the expressions "taken a step backwards to the Stone Age of television" (DN 20060405) and "Stone Age Islamic propaganda" (SvD 20040316) taken from the daily press. Here, the Stone Age exists outside the direct archaeological context but acts as a metaphor to reproduce the same archaeological thought of teleological development. In the same way, there is often a reference to "medieval" in contemporary media reports from Northern Africa and the Middle East. Every reader understands that the actual time is of no consequence, but that the reference is rather to the development stage towards perfect modernity that corresponds to what the European medieval period represents in the archaeological/historical story. These examples indicate that the idea of teleological development is alive and kicking, to the extent that it has become a natural part of the everyday Swedish language.

What role does the Museum of National Antiquities play in this context, and above all, what is the problem in the relationship between its mission and its collections? As we have seen above, the collections and spatial form of the Museum were created with the clear and outspoken aim to embody and publicise the idea of the common teleological development of humanity in Sweden from a primitive past to a modern present. As we have also seen, in the Swedish society of today there is

a will to consume narratives that confirm the idea of teleological development and the rhetoric of paternalistic benevolence – but there is also a questioning of this, as expressed in the mission of the Museum of National Antiquities. This is how we must understand the hobbled marriage between the Museum's collections and its mission of the 21st century. The structure of the collections corresponds directly to the 19th-century need to categorize and rank humanity along a teleological development line from primitive to modern, and *it is this image of the world that the collections continue to represent, between the lines*. It is not the contents, i.e. the individual artefacts, that form the link between the collections and the teleological development perspective (and, in addition, a view of culture as essentially delimited units according to the typological method), but instead the categories and structures that they are made to represent. Through the names and locations they have been given in the archaeological categorization system, such as *Late Neolithic flint dagger* or *glass eyelet fibula Period V*, they become silent representatives of a colonial world picture that is contrary to the missions of the Museum of National Antiquities of today, which are politically determined and relative to the mission given to the national museums and cultural heritage management by the Swedish parliament.

In short, the aims set up by the Museum administration to meet these missions are to put focus on the human being, to let productions be characterized by multi-dimensionality, and to show a broad perspective of realities to strengthen a democratic development of society. This shows how the archaeology of our time, just as in its early days in the 19th century, is deeply entwined in the political ideas and ideals of its present society. Notwithstanding this, it is clear that the possibilities to use the collections as mere illustrations to our current important questions about cultural diversity or to provide alternative perspectives to what we call societal development are limited by the unspoken theoretical charge which is already inherent in the archaeological collections and their surrounding language.

CHALLENGES

These conclusions regarding the creaking relationship between the collections and the mission of the Museum of National Antiquities render, in turn, a large number of challenges. Even though the archaeological collections are difficult to make use of within the clearly reflective museum activities of the 21st century, a divorce – to completely give up the

use of archaeological material in the exhibition activities and instead solely use modern art – is neither a possible nor interesting solution to the crisis. Instead, new creative ways must be found to use the artefacts in the archaeological collections in such a way as to make use of the attraction power of archaeology for the general public as well as to create a critical discussion on the colonial world picture that these collections unavoidably represent. Thus, we need to identify important questions and areas with which to work in order to reshape the archaeological collections into a powerful tool for a vital and important Museum of National Antiquities in the 21st century. Two great challenges can immediately be discerned.

1. Increase the knowledge of the relationship between object and narrative

In order to generally increase the potential of the archaeological material for a broad and reflective cultural communication, we need wider and deeper knowledge of how images of the past are created. We all have a historical consciousness that rules our perception of the connection between past, present and future. Thus, it is important to increase the knowledge of this historical consciousness, its content and which history usages maintain and naturalize it (terms translated from Aronsson 2004:17). We have shown how archaeology's way of classifying and categorizing its source material is a history usage that contributes to a historical consciousness, which reproduces a colonial understanding of the world.

In a similar way, we need to increase our knowledge of what the artefacts as such do to us. The reason objects are important as bearers of narratives is that they have the ability to influence us physically and psychologically. During the entire history of archaeology, the archaeological artefacts have had a strong existential appeal to the contemporary consumers of archaeological narratives, and it is this char-

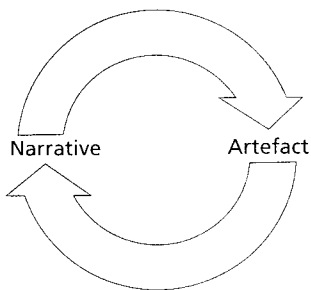


Fig 1: We need deeper knowledge of the narratives inherent in the present artefact categories and classifications as well as how the artefacts and their materiality influence us.

acteristic that has made them such powerful naturalizing messengers of subtextual ideological messages. Of what does this ability consist? How are we influenced by the form and materiality of an artefact? This is a strongly growing research area in Swedish archaeology (e.g. Burström 2003) and elsewhere. Objects awaken memories. The decay of remains and objects makes us reflect existentially on our own fates, on what is left of us when we are dead. Increased knowledge of these things enables a broadening of the possibilities of communicating with archaeological objects in alternative ways. However, a deeper knowledge of the influence of artefacts does not necessarily change the underlying ideological messages, and thus is not *per se* the solution to the problematic relationship between the collections and mission of the Museum of National Antiquities. Instead, the great challenge is to let the objects carry completely new and radically different narratives through the support of a deeper knowledge – narratives that distance themselves from an essentialist understanding of culture and a teleological development thinking, and which by reflection *challenge* the self-image of contemporary society.

2. Create a holistic thinking around the process of contract archaeology

Another important challenge is the work through which museums become more active in relation to the activities that generate the main part of the archaeological find material annually added to the museums, i.e. contract archaeology. For the change in usage of the archaeological collections, a new holistic perspective of the contract archaeology process is needed.

The great increase in collections over the past decades has occurred without any active strategy from the museums. The collections have expanded because the growth of society has generated thousands of commissioned archaeological investigations, which in turn have generated large amounts of archaeological material. A large part of this material has finally ended up in the collections of the Museum of National Antiquities. The geographical distribution of investigation sites is linked to the construction of roads and houses. The extent and direction of the investigations have been decided by the different county councils in connection with the permit process. The selection of the artefacts finally gathered from the field has been made by the investigative institutions. This selection has been based on the scientific and

antiquarian questions that were present in the excavation situation. The museums' need for archaeological material for their communicative activities has only been a guiding principle in exceptional cases. From the perspective of the general public, perhaps the museums do not need more objects of a type already well represented in the collections, whereas there might be a great need for other types of artefacts that, from a scientific perspective, might not be necessary to preserve but which nonetheless have great potential for helping to illustrate people's living conditions.

It could be argued that the find material has long had quite a low status within contract archaeology. The artefactual queries have not been in focus for the discussion within contract archaeology, which instead has focussed on the scientific interpretation of the investigation, that is, on the report. The find material has been seen as an unproblematic by-product and the handing over of finds as the final station in the chain of contract archaeology. However, for the museums the handing in of finds is not the end of the chain but instead the beginning of a process of registering and storing, of visits by researchers, loans, exhibitions and learning processes.

Thus, the museums' needs for archaeological material for communicative purposes have taken second place within the contract archaeological process, which instead has been almost completely defined by other archaeological and scientific needs. It is therefore important that broad and structured discussions are initiated among many actors with regard to the questions of which archaeological materials should be given priority in investigations.

As a consequence of the demands for broader results in contract archaeology, there is also a need for a broader discussion in the initial archaeological process, one that deals with the questions of what is investigated, why and how. In several counties, work has been initiated on knowledge overviews and scientific plans to coordinate individual

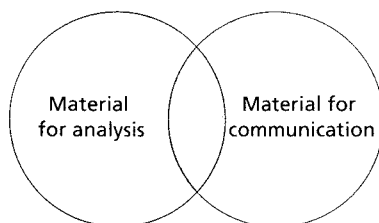


Fig 2: The major part of the artefacts and the material gathered during contract archaeological investigations are selected to solve the antiquarian and scientific queries of the individual investigations. The museums' requirements for archaeological material for their communicative activities are only partly covered. A holistic perspective is needed within the contract archaeological process.

investigations in larger knowledge processes. Although such initiatives are praiseworthy, there is a need for more strategic programmes that deal with what the region wants from the archaeological process rather than what the archaeological process wants from the region.

Through such programmes, doors are opened to contract archaeology with alternative goals for knowledge. By alternative goals for knowledge is meant objectives where the scientific results are not the goal as such, but the means through which other aims are reached. These aims could be to increase the local population's engagement in their environment or to problematize the question of the right to a location on historical grounds (e.g. Högberg 2004). Such a public-sensitive archaeology creates credits both within and outside the scientific archaeological field, while also providing contract archaeology with greater possibilities to gain a higher societal relevance than it has today. In this area, the museums with their contacts and requirements from society have an important function as demander and developer of methods (cf. Svanberg & Wahlgren 2007). At the same time, a greater focus on public archaeology will challenge the traditional form of exhibition and the museum's role in society. The communicative work begins already in the field, and each investigation site becomes a satellite museum where contact and communication with the general public takes place.

Public archaeology is a method that opens up for a wider communication with contemporary society, and thus it has great potential to tie other narratives to the archaeological collections than those that speak of universal teleological development and essential cultural groups. However, similar to the knowledge of the existential appeal of the artefacts, public archaeology as such is no solution to the crisis in the marriage between the collections and the mission of the Museum of National Antiquities. It has equally great potential as a tool to disseminate both colonial and alternative narratives. Public archaeology will only function as a tool for change if we simultaneously work actively and consistently by changing the problematic narratives that hide between the lines.

FINAL WORDS

We have demonstrated how the archaeological collections of the Museum of National Antiquities with their unchanged 19th-century structure represent a narrative which reproduces a colonial understanding of the world and which creates stable categories of Us and

Them in a linear arrangement of essential cultural groups according to a teleological development model. The contemporary mission of the Museum, inspired by the late 20th-century post-colonial thinking, is instead aimed towards a questioning of this particular narrative. Thus, this problematic relationship is present deep within the structure of the Museum of National Antiquities as an institution, and points to the need for a long-term strategic change to make the collections usable for vital museum activity in line with the Museum's mission. This is a difficult task, but it is also exciting and stimulating. Two main areas – an increased knowledge of the possibilities of the objects, and public archaeology – are discernable as immediately important in this dynamic change, but both must be accompanied by transparent and consistent work in changing the subtextual narratives of the artefacts. The aim is to find completely new and radically different narratives which distance themselves from the ideas of essential cultures and teleological development, and which by reflection *challenge* rather than conveniently confirm the self-image of contemporary society.

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