

Interpretative Methods and Exhibits in Archaeological Museums and Prehistoric Sites. Some examples from Sweden

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Since I don't represent any specific archaeological museum in Sweden, I will be more general in my approach and describe some of the ongoing discussions in my country concerning interpretation of archaeological material and prehistoric monuments in the landscape. *My key-words are; Involvement, Activity and Use.* Though I am an archaeologist by profession I have to confess that I have very short experience of excavation activities and in fact know very little of archaeological classification periods and of identification of archaeological material.

I probably never would have studied archaeology at all, if I didn't happen to live in Gothenburg at the western coast of Sweden, when I was younger. By chance I had the opportunity to meet a very special person at the university. In the 60's professor Carl-Axel Moberg was one of the most well-known archaeologists in Sweden. He had a very broad scientific approach to the subject and he worked both as an anthropologist and an archaeologist. But he was not only a clever researcher and an inspiring teacher. He frequently appeared in radio programs and his lectures were very popular. Besides his work at the university he also was a well-known poet. As a young student I was impressed by his intellectual capacity, but most of all I was influenced and inspired by him. Among his many published poems, I have chosen a very short one named; *An image of a profession.* (The translation is my own).

*This has been your destiny;
They come to you with stones and ask you to tell about people,
But you get this feeling of anxiety
Because you think they come to you with themselves
and you tell them about stones.*

Figura 1. Mrs Inger Liliequist, the Director General of National Heritage Board in Sweden meets a "viking" at Birka. Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg, NHB.



This poem express the common feeling of being insufficient as a humanist in the task of giving people possibilities to reflect upon their own background, history and destiny. It shows the feeling of not given the answers that are asked for; who am I, where will I go, how is humanity developed during the ages. Questions like these are basic for every living person.

But how can stones give you the answers? Archaeology is a science concerned with the interpretation of the human traces in the landscape. It gives the landscape a humanistic time dimension. People living before us have left different kind of marks in the ground – by purpose or unintentional. Many prehistoric traces can be fixed to special spots like graves, buildings, constructions and so on. But they can also consist of small objects of everyday-life like pieces of broken porcelain or clay vessels, items of wood, metal, bone or stone. All these small pieces of broken things which you will find during excavations and archaeological investigation must be puzzled together and put in a wider context to be understandable to us. Archaeologists all around the world are aware of this and they collaborate with the museums in order to spread the results of their research. Museums are important venues for historical and archaeological reflections and places where common people get the opportunity to relate themselves to traces of other societies and cultures in order to better learn about their own background.

Much has changed since the Swedish archaeologist Oscar Montelius in the end of the 19th century sorted the axes in a chronological periodic system of stone- bronze- and iron age and exposed them for the public. Montelius was interested in the development of form and arranged the objects in series in order to show how the different sizes, patterns and colours of the axes had changed during time. Today we prefer showing the function of the axe by putting it into a context or furthermore testing how to use it, to get a real understanding of its capacity. Museums have a great responsibility in the interpretation of the archaeological material into these contexts of meaning. They create stories, in which we have the opportunity to meet – or at least get a glimpse of - people from other times and worlds. How do we handle this important work? We all know that the museological approach to archaeology and history have changed since the birth of the first museum. In the late 18th century pieces of antique art were put in royal galleries in Europe in order to give ordinary people a chance to learn about their great history of past cultures. Since then a transformation of the museum from private collections to public exhibitions has taken place. The purpose of the museum has changed from being institutions for teaching people what good taste is, to arenas of discussions and reflections on life in general.

Museums today are more like institutions for informal learning and entertainment. They are places where you may reflect over life and where you can experience art and history in a pleasant and inspiring way. Some museologists claim that museums in some countries have been given the role of churches, because the museums are public rooms, where the quietness and peacefulness may help you to meditate and rest.



Figura 2. Children are testing archaeological methods at Birka. Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg, NHB.



Figura 3. The interpreter interact with the visitors at Birka and makes them use all senses. Photo: Ewa Bergdahl, NHB.

In the museums the real stuff, the original object still is in focus. This might be one of the most specific features with the museum institution. "Objects justify museums." (BURCAW, 1975, 47) The interest in the authentic thing is very strong today. Maybe much stronger than only thirty years ago, because the digital IT-revolution has turned us into big consumers of virtual experience. To meet a real person or to touch a real thing has become something valuable and extraordinary. Museums in general offer this opportunity.

Another thing that has changed since the first museums opened its doors to the public is the way we look upon visitors. Nowadays they are actors and participants in a way that wasn't possible just a few decades ago. And modern visitors demand this. James Bradburne - a museologist from USA - has described the differences between the museums and the libraries by the term "use". You *pay a visit* to the museum, but you *use* the library. Bradburne's thesis is that every museum, that wants to survive, has to become a place for users, not visitors. Museums are forced to develop a new approach to the public. They have to involve their visitors both in the practical work with history and archaeology and in the interpretation of the results.

I think this is what's going on around us today. The result of this process will be a more intensive communication between professionals and the public, an ongoing dialogue in which history will be created and recreated. The collections in the museums have also been put into broader contexts and the connection between the museum with its collections and the surrounding landscape is today much closer. History is not to be found only in museum's showcases. It has to be interpreted in the landscape by the users of the land and by the inhabitants in the societies.

The European Landscape Convention stresses the fact that all kind of landscapes have their characteristics and stories worth taken care of. Even the backyards have qualities and values. By signing the convention and ratifying it, every country in Europe has a responsibility to make sure it will be followed. To fulfill this task we have to develop methods in inviting people to be involved both in interpretation and preservation work. The big challenge is how to show the importance of taking care of heritage. To be successful we have to turn visitors into "participants" and even "users". There is a clear line between *involve – engage – understand – and take care*. I have picked some examples of work in this direction in Sweden.



Figura 4. Photo: Bengt A. Lundberg, NHB.

AMATEUR-EXCAVATIONS

Involving people in the practical and theoretical work at an archaeological excavation site might be a challenge for professionals, but it is a very popular activity for those who participate.

Birka in lake Mälaren is an archaeological site with rich layers from Viking age. The place is listed on the World Heritage List and it is famous as Sweden's first known town dated from 750 – 970 AD. It has been excavated since the end of 19th century by many archaeologists. National Heritage Board, which has the managing responsibility of the site, has arranged excavations with amateurs for a couple of years with good results. The courses are five or ten days and start with visits in archives. The participants then are introduced to the research purpose and hypothesis and to the archaeological field methods. After a couple of days of field activities the work finishes with the writing of a scientific report together with the instructors. These amateur activities have sometimes been criticized by professional archaeologists. They fear that the quality of the work will be low, but instead we have been able to prove the opposite.

ARCHAEOLOGY AS INSPIRATION FOR A PLAYGROUND

In the suburbs Täby and Vallentuna north of Stockholm, many rune-stones have been found. There are also traces of an old Viking road called Jarlabanke's bridge after a Viking named Jarlabanke. He built the road in the year 1050 over a wetland and thereby marked the entrance to his farm. The site is very close to a contemporary highway and an area with modern family houses. The visible part of the bridge is today reconstructed after a sketch from the 17th century. Close beside the bridge a playground has been built. It is constructed around a small artificial lake, which is a miniature of the real lake some kilometers from the place. There are nine sites dated from Viking age around the lake and these were used as an inspiration when creating the playground. By using the Viking theme for this purpose, the history can be presented to small children in an amusing and natural way without any pointers. Parents and children living in the area often use this place and enjoy it.

GEO-CACHE – A NEW SPORT WHICH LEADS TO HERITAGE SITES

GPS equipment is today something that is used not only by professionals as a navigation instrument. GPS stands for Global Position System. Four years ago an activity called "geo-cache" started in the USA

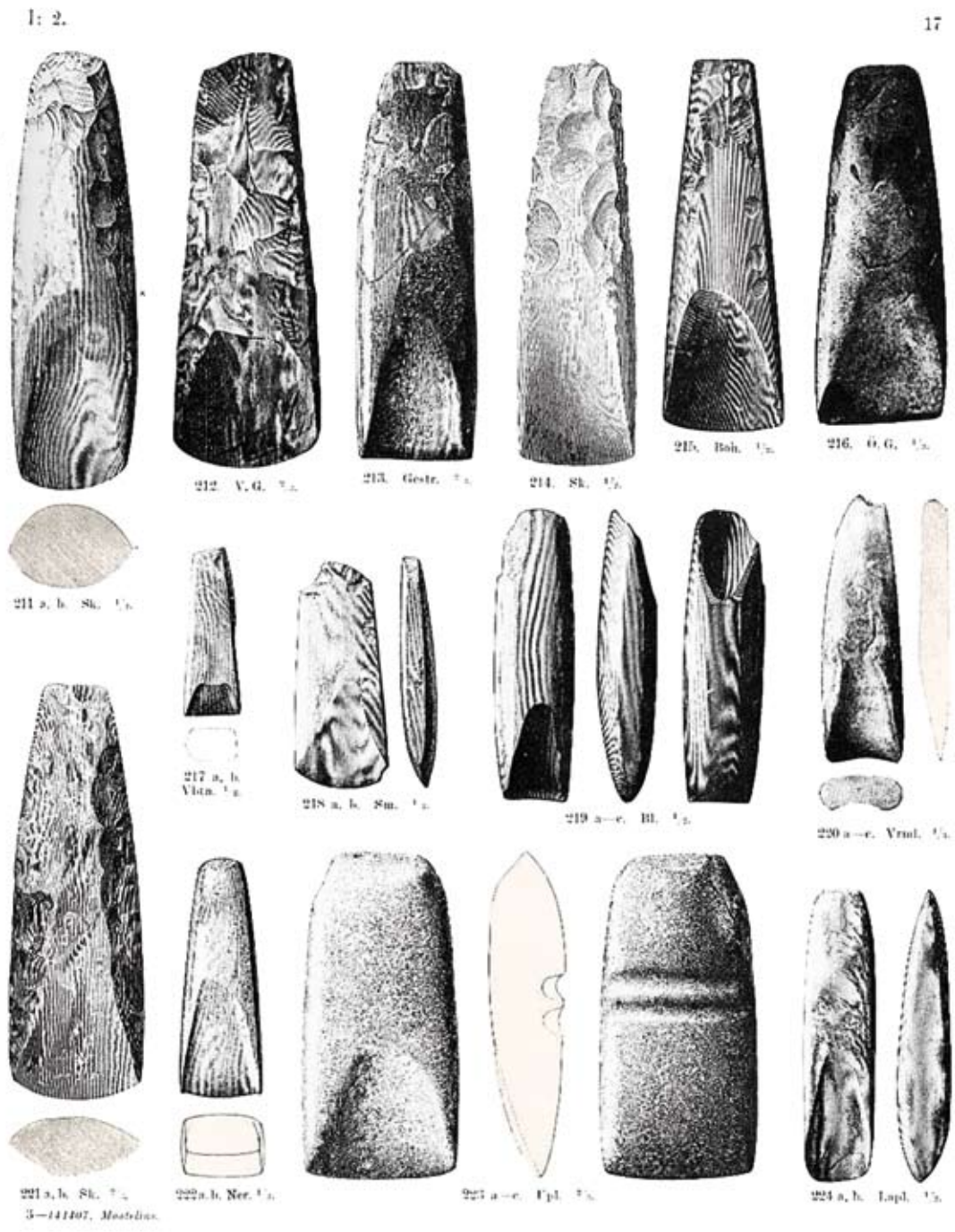


Figura 5. From Oscar Montelius: *Minnen från vår forntid*. 1917.

by some young men, who owned devices GPS. Geo-cache can be described as a digital orienteering over huge areas. The participants themselves choose a spot and then put information about it's coordinates on the web. The cache could be a small metal box and inside it a log-book, where the finder sign and make a note about the time and date. The spots that are preferred are often connected to historical places and prehistoric monuments. This is an unusual way of bring yourself closer to history. When the activities started in Sweden about three years ago, the National Heritage Board was told, that caches often were hidden very close and sometimes inside grave monuments. By taking part in these activities and thereby coming to know the initiators, information about the restrictions concerning the prehistoric sites could be spread without being in conflict with the organization or stopping their activities. Knowledge about the prehistoric monuments is by this way spread to groups of people who seldom visit museums.

Figura 6. Traces of contemporary history surround us. Photo: Ewa Bergdahl, NHB.



MARITIME HERITAGE TRAILS AND SHIPWRECK PARKS

GPS equipment is also common today in many leisure boats used by people on vacation trips along the coasts of Sweden. The mean depth of the Baltic Sea is only 45 m and due to the absence of the ship worm (the water is not salt enough), thousands of wrecks are still preserved at the bottom of the sea in the archipelagos. All known wrecks have been documented and information about their positions is compiled into a database. In order to meet the interest of the public, plans are made to create “shipwreck parks” where you are allowed to dive and explore the wrecks. One of these parks is projected at Dalarö outside Stockholm. Similar projects can be found in Germany, Finland and Denmark. By using the GPS there are also good possibilities to give tourists, who are passing by boat, detailed and thrilling information about the wrecks beneath. A kind of undersea-tourism based on the marine archaeological heritage is developed.

LIVING HISTORY AND LEARNING BY DOING

One of the most popular methods of archaeological interpretation is to offer so called “living history” or re-enactment activities for people to participate in. The way these performances are arranged, differs from place to place, but they all have some components in common. The visitors at the site - or in the museum – are given a specific role in the performance by the guide. The guides cooperate both with professional actors and with craftsmen, who can demonstrate handicraft or daily work. Sometimes the guide will be interrupted by an actor dressed like a historic person, who corrects the story. The guide may lead the audience to different spots in the landscape, where actors will interfere or create a situation, which will illustrate the story. Since many people are used to be looked upon as visitors and not as actors, they are sometimes unfamiliar with the rules in these games. And there are also people, who feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when they have to face the fact that they will be involved. This must of course be respected. Today there are a lot of experience in training interpreters and guides to handle both the active visitors and the passive ones and to switch from one approach to another, depending on the person in front of you.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY

I would also like to mention the new, so called contemporary archaeology, which has been growing during the last ten years in Sweden. Archaeological methods are used to investigate places, which are part of our

contemporary history in order to confirm the historical documents as true sources and to add more detailed knowledge through items and traces of daily-life activities. This is also a way to make us more familiar with the lives of ordinary people from past times. These types of excavations are sometimes carried out by school teachers in order to give the pupils a feeling of reality, when speaking of past times. To find a rusty screw cap or a piece of an old toy, will be as thrilling as finding flint stones from prehistoric ages. It is the experience of touching something real, which has been used by people a long time ago, that will start your imagination and your thoughts.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK OF MUSEUMS?

Museums will always be institutions with collections of objects that have to be stored, taken care of and exposed to the public. Do young people use the museums? And if they do, what do they like to meet in the future exhibitions? In late autumn 2006 Riksställningar (The Traveling exhibition organization) in Sweden put four questions about exhibitions in museums to 550 young people between 15 and 25 years old, living in the suburbs of Stockholm; *Have you visit an exhibition recently? Do you remember what it was about? What is the subject of your "dream exhibition"? Give three suggestions. What do you think is important with an exhibition?*

The results are interesting and surprising. 55% visited an exhibition during the last year and 20% of these during the last month. Almost everyone remembered what the exhibition was about. The most popular subject of all suggested was "love and relations", but political issues like "feminism" "environmental questions" and "conflicts" were also high ranked.

Few of these young people wanted to visit an exhibition about racism or multi-culture in spite of the fact that they live in areas, where these phenomena are defined as everyday problems.

For young people, the most important thing with an exhibition is its capacity to touch their feelings and to make them start thinking new thoughts. But a good exhibition - according to the answers - also must be easy to understand and overview. It shall be high-tech and have an extremely good layout and graphic form. It shall invite to inter-activities. It shall be free of charge or with a very low entrance fee. It shall be open during weekends and evenings and placed near your home and last but not least, a good exhibition shall be full of nice professional persons to guide you and to answer your questions.

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