

# Strategic research plan 2016–2020

## The Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger

### Introduction

The Archaeological Museum as a cultural institution aims to take its social responsibility seriously by contributing to critical reflection and discourse on major global societal challenges related to the environment, climate change, natural disasters, migration and cultural conflicts. Having a knowledge of our cultural history is important and relevant to these challenges. Understanding and knowledge of the past and about people and their environment in a long-term perspective is a necessary starting point and provides an extra dimension to today's complex society. This has been a common thread in the museum's strategies through the years and is as relevant today as it was 40 years ago.

This plan is anchored in the museum's areas of expertise and in the research conducted here. It is founded on the museum's heritage management practices, our collections and previous strategic research plans. With this as our starting point, it has been natural to concentrate the museum's R&D activity on four equal priority areas. Interdisciplinary science is key and "identity" and "long-term studies" are concepts that link all four priority areas:

1. Identity and encounters with "the other(s)"
2. The past as structure and freedom of action
3. Developing future research on the past
4. Research communication/Museology

The plan is formulated on two levels. Each topic has a framework with a focus on overarching perspectives and issues that see relationships in space and time. The museum's areas of expertise and interdisciplinary academic breadth are integrated into the framework.

Then follows a series of proposals for thesis/research questions that are conceived as a bank of new ideas. These ideas should stimulate and generate curiosity to see Rogaland material in a broader context and to present one's own research questions based on the given framework. The plan may be used without the proposals.

We encourage interdisciplinary research topics of current interest and participation in the public debate.

## Topic 1. Identity and encounters with “the other(s)”

The field of museum studies paves the way for a realisation that “our own” history is the story of an encounter with that which is different – “the other(s)” – other ways of life, other living conditions and mental frameworks. This is in a dynamic relationship with the common human condition across time and space generating recognition and fellowship. The tension between the defined “us” and “the other”<sup>1</sup> is a fruitful intersection for the study of relationships between figures and phenomena that were in contact with each other in the prehistory.

This topic is based on “identity”, a fundamental concept within archaeological research that will be touched on by most analyses, whether consciously or unconsciously. The concept incorporates and is shaped by the dynamics between the known and the unknown. The term can be specified by linking it to different research traditions: cultural identity, religious identity, material identity, ethnic identity, political identity, social identity, gender identity, identity in relation to the natural surroundings and to other species. AM has the potential to develop the concept of identity and how it is understood in various historical periods through the importance of landscape and climate as both living conditions and mental frameworks.

An increased understanding of that which is different can contribute to current debates and perspectives, and thereby to multicultural tolerance, and serve as a critical corrective to the way we live.

Another actualised perspective is man’s understanding of himself as part of the whole. There is a general scientific consensus that many of the global (environmental) challenges we face are because the human population has come out of balance with its surroundings. Did prehistoric people identify themselves as part of an ecological interaction with an understanding of ecological balance as a prerequisite for their existence? To what extent have people made choices to the best of their own “flock” or to achieve a more holistic adaptation, where the biosphere has an intrinsic value?

Relevant research topics/thesis questions may include:

### Identity, meetings and mobility

- Exploring the idea of an “Anthropocene”<sup>2</sup> epoch. What processes led to these changes in the tension between “us” and “the other(s)”?
- Different kinds of contact and networks – meetings through migration, traveling and warfare. Exchange of objects in of various types.
- Conflicts in the face of “the other”. What caused them to arise and escalate?

---

<sup>1</sup>“The other” comes from a feminist deconstruction of what science has traditionally portrayed as the scientific norm (the white, middle-aged western man). This has shown that all societies are heterogeneous and consist of different groups of individuals who define their identity through a scale of convergence and difference. This scale operates at various levels, both in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, species, etc. as well as in terms of regional and ethnic identity, where groups of people are defined as others in relation to those perceived as “us”. Modern people perceive people in the past as “the others”. “The other(s)” may also include other species and biological phenomena.

<sup>2</sup>The Anthropocene is frequently used to describe the modern age, but there is no agreement on how far back in time it goes; to the Industrial Revolution or the Agricultural Revolution in the Neolithic period?

- Migration patterns, degrees of settlement, organisation of space on different scales.

### **People as part of a larger whole**

- Living conditions and mentality through climate and various landscapes. How have people perceived themselves on an axis of otherness/convergence in relation to the world in which they lived? Is the biosphere “us” or “the other”?
- Human impact on and changing of natural environments as an irreversible effect. Prehistoric “tipping points” and episodic disasters (e.g. floods, famine) – and what caused them? Has, for example, overexploitation of local resources been an underlying cause of discontinuity?
- Consequences of climate change and disasters (both natural and societal). Challenging emotionally, but attitudes and beliefs related to possible consequences are often divergent. How does this manifest itself?
- People’s adaptation to and impact on the landscape, plants and animals through the basic need for food – hunting, gathering, animal husbandry, cultivation.
- The social practice of human-animal relationships. How human interaction with animals co-shaped various aspects of society.
- How is our contemporary normative view of people’s role in nature reflected in environmental management legislation, and is this an obstacle to implementing social changes?

### **Identity and material culture**

- Expressing and forming identities through material culture. Including artefacts, technology and function-oriented studies, aesthetics, the biography of objects and places, historical relics and landscapes.
- Problematising biological, social and cultural identity. Changing identity from living to dead.
- Structures and objects in settlements/houses, tombs, depots or other sites in perspectives where ritual activity is materialised and performed: “opening” and “closing” of the house, house offerings, processes in the construction of gravestones and conducting funeral rituals. Deposited objects (depot-sacrifice).
- Elitist processes and centralisation of power.

## **Topic 2. The past as structure and freedom of action**

The enormous stream of data within the fields of natural sciences and archaeology in recent decades has improved our ability to study *historicity over the long term*, increasing interest in and opportunities for museum studies to examine prehistoric individuals, their actions and their freedom of action, and how collective or cultural memory can shape developments.

In addition, work methods employed in museum studies are based on acknowledging that the acquisition of knowledge and our understanding of history presupposes a long-term perspective. We need to study the long lines in order to understand the cause and effect of historical developments. This has given us the opportunity to study change

processes over time, including trans-historical processes that are greater than the individual (environment, climate, social units, structures, technology and knowledge). We must also have a long-term perspective if we are to gain a basic understanding of the physical landscape in which we live and the processes that cause changes to biotopes.

In other words, the field of museum studies focuses on the relationship between social structures and history, between the choices of individuals, the economic and ecological processes on which they may sometimes have an influence and determine the outcome of, and the social networks and collectives to which they belong. We have gained greater insight into how prehistoric people dealt with and handled social, economic and ecological transitions.

The field of museum studies allows us to combine different analytical levels (micro/macro) through studies of overarching social and ecological processes and the freedom of action of individuals. Research in this field can thus contribute with topical knowledge in discussions taking place in other fora, both inside and outside academia. Increasing our knowledge of the root causes of extensive changes to material culture, which were probably contingent on prior changes in perception and can be considered paradigm shifts, will improve our understanding of the change processes occurring in the modern world. Not least, it will be an important tool in the proper management of our natural resources and our cultural heritage.

Relevant research topics/thesis questions may include:

- Understanding large-scale processes and the dynamics between micro and macro levels:
  - How climate affects the way humans use nature. E.g. in the transition from nomadic/semi-nomadic animal husbandry to animal husbandry/agriculture based on a settlement culture and as the cause of changes to the economy and preferred place of settlement.
  - Human influence on the local climate and landscape, through e.g. opening a forested landscape and changing drainage conditions during the consolidation of agriculture. Climatic versus anthropogenic changes in treeline ecotones.
  - To what extent has access to local resources and favourable topographical conditions (i.e. good harbours, sheltered from wind and weather, good pastures and favourable conditions for establishing farmlands) been decisive for where people have settled?
- Studies of the relationship between production techniques (*chaînes opératoires/the technological chain*) and individuals, e.g. studies of “style” and of the prehistoric “entrepreneur”.
- Studies of how people respond to changes (to e.g. climate, the environment, etc.) through material culture (objects, building practices, burial customs, etc.).

- The organisation of settlements and agricultural holdings/houses in relation to resource management with regard to climate, landscape and the environment, as well as in the design and layout of settlements, farms and houses; this would also include the proliferation of objects and activity analyses.
- Research that examines how knowledge of how people dealt with climate change in prehistory could make a contribution to the discussion of adaptations and actions with respect to current climate challenges. How have climate challenges affected human behaviour and can this be traced to changes in material culture or use of the landscape?

### **Topic 3. Developing future research on the past**

The Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger (AM-UiS) has the ambition to continually improve all stages of collection management to optimise the information potential of our collections, both scientific and archaeological, and to safeguard this information as scientific source material. This also applies to permanent cultural heritage sites, petroglyphs, medieval buildings, listed furnishings and fittings, etc. that are conserved and/or restored as part of the museum's activities.

The introduction of digital tools presents us with many new opportunities and challenges within field methodology and collection management. AM aims to be an actor in the use, implementation and development of new digital tools and methods.

Within conservation methodology, new analysis technology facilitates opportunities to better understand complex materials and processes. It is a goal to reconstruct the material's taphonomic history to allow for correct interpretation at all levels. Equally important and equally challenging is extrapolating information from past and present sources to allow us to look into the future in order to assess the effects of current collection management practices.

In step with technological advancements, the use of various scientific analyses to elucidate archaeological problems has become increasingly important. New modelling tools and statistical software are also in development. The museum aims to implement tools that provide new knowledge in relation to scientific challenges related to people's use of the landscape. The museum must also build up its experience and expertise by using new scientific methods on our own material.

It is important that we activate museum collections and archives at different levels. Most studies of the past presuppose groundwork based on archaeological and scientific empiricism. A first step in the transition from fundamental empirical studies to more general discussions related to specific topics is to synthesise conclusions.

Another type of method development is to increase the understanding of how certain processes can be recognised in a specific material. This can be done by linking scientific and archaeological evidence from curation and research projects with metadata and

environmental variables in interdisciplinary quantitative or qualitative analyses. This provides a basis for studying interdisciplinary research topics on micro and macro levels.

For many of the aforementioned topics, knowledge of other disciplines is essential, and collaboration across disciplines will be a natural part of such research. Keeping up to date and adopting methods from various disciplines also includes developments within other humanities and social sciences.

Relevant research topics/thesis questions may include:

- Consequence analyses of the use of new digital technology in the field in relation to e.g. the handling/storage of scientific data.
- Studies aiming to improve conservation practices, such as analyses of the effects of long-term storage of organic materials in museums versus in-situ conservation.
- Improving conservation practices through style, technique and material analyses of buildings, art and furnishings and fittings to provide new knowledge about authenticity and provenance in order to underpin prehistoric and historic city or regional research.
- Studies aiming to improve conservation practices, such as analyses of the effects of long-term storage of organic materials in museums versus in-situ conservation.
- Studies that include DNA analysis of the bioarchaeological part of the collection to gain a better understanding of processes such as migration and domestication.
- Examine how biodiversity has changed in anthropogenic environments throughout prehistory. Studies on various levels (i.e. landscape, ecosystems, society or species) can be seen in relation to changes in soil conditions and the local climate/microclimate and the degree and type of human influence.
- Chemical analyses of soil from archaeological structures (e.g. 'pits') aimed at detecting and identifying human activity (including through the use of biomarkers).

#### **Topic 4. Research communication/Museology**

As part of its mission, the Museum of Archaeology (AM) aims to integrate the public as a resource and help people to think and act creatively with regard to major and relevant social issues of the times. The archaeological collection has a specific character with considerable room for interpretation and staging that can break down barriers between

science and society, and create a free space for softening the distinction between research, management, and dissemination. The museum wishes to develop the institution as an arena for dialogue, where various topics related to research, method development and source criticism can be formulated and discussed. AM should aim to give the public a greater understanding of the scientific research process as well as the critical thinking skills necessary to be able to understand and participate in the public debate.

Relevant research topics/thesis questions may include:

- Analyses that contribute to innovative thinking about society/the community and develop new practices for the museum's contact and communication with the public.
- How can the museum be used as an arena for critical thinking about the question of "the other"?
- Analysis of museological expertise.
- Experimentation with and analyses of participatory research.
- Studies of the museum as a discussion venue for current challenges and issues related to e.g. the environment, people's place in nature (human-animal-environment relationships), understanding of time, earth history and human history, etc.
- Analyses of museological organisation and the publication of archaeological and scientific sources and data to communicate research to different users.
- Analyses of multi-media strategies, methods and techniques for communicating research within internal and external information dissemination venues.