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Tromsø Museum: museum and university in the north

The Tromsø Museum’s early years

For a long time the Tromsø Museum was a very small institution in a very small town. In 1846, when the idea of a museum in Tromsø was first put forth, Tromsø had 2,000 inhabitants and by 1870 it had grown to 4,500. The museum was primarily the result of scientific activity. Preparing his work Fauna littoralis Norwegiae, the marine biologist Michael Sars asked the school teacher P. Schmidt from Tromsø to help him collect species from the northern marine fauna. As a result, in 1846 Schmidt wrote an article in the local newspaper about the need of a museum of natural history in Tromsø.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, researchers living in the north also carried out scientific work. In 1852, the forester Johannes Musesus Norman began his studies of the flora of the counties of Troms and Finnmark and in 1860 he settled in Tromsø. During the 1850s, the Tromsø geologist Karl Pettersen initiated systematic studies of the geological conditions in the northern counties. His interests also encompassed the Arctic and he engaged the arctic sea shippers from Tromsø in his collecting activity.

For a long time, Tromsø had been the ‘gateway to the Arctic’, and the point of departure for many polar expeditions. During the 1850s and 1860s Sweden was the leading country of the region. Swedish polar explorers, like Nordenskiöld, concentrated on Spitsbergen and relied heavily on the arctic, maritime competence of the shippers and fishermen in Tromsø and elsewhere in northern Norway. Sami society and culture had already attracted European attention all since the seventeenth century, so there were several areas of growing scientific interest and activity, but there was no local institution responsible for collecting material and conducting research. Museums had been established in Trondheim, Kristiania (former name of Oslo), Bergen and Stavanger, and northern Norway was the only part of the country without its own institution.

The opportunity to create the museum came with an exhibition held in Tromsø in 1870. The aim of the exhibition was to present the region's assets and it contained, among others, geological maps prepared by Karl Pettersen, whale skeletons, boat models, fishing gear and other utility articles, as well as a major collection of Sami objects. A substantial amount of these materials could serve as a starting point for a museum and already during the preparations, Christian Holst, University Secretary from 1841 to 1878, had called for a permanent exhibition, in other words, a museum. Steps where taken to secure whatever could be of interest for a museum and after much effort, particularly by Karl Pettersen, Tromsø Museum was founded on 16 October 1872. Financial support had been secured from the King, the three northernmost counties and from 148 other contributors.

I have not researched exactly what objects and collections were acquired, but I think it is justified to say that the exhibition did not have an antiquarian purpose. The fact that models of boats and gear used in the fisheries were on display does not primarily indicate an interest in preserving objects representing a lost past. Instead, exhibiting such items was a means of demonstrating and furthering the development and modernization of the fisheries. In a similar way, exhibitions that presented innovations in the fisheries became the foundation of a fisheries museum in the county of Nordland during the same period. Only later did these objects stand out as relics of bygone days.

At the time, there was some discussion on the name of the new institution. The founders wanted it to cover 'the Arctic regions', which at that time were considered to include the three northernmost counties of Norway – the area that since the late nineteenth century has been called Nord-Norge (Northern Norway). In the 1870s, the common term was Tromsø Stift, but since 'Tromsø Stifts Museum' would not be easily understood outside Denmark and Norway, the name Tromsø Museum was chosen. This did not go without discussion, though, and the new name gave rise to some difficulties regarding the Museum's regional ambitions.

In 1886, the academic fields covered by the Museum were formally organised into five sections: The Finne section, which is the collection of Sami artefacts, the antiquities section, and the zoology, botany and geology sections. In 1935, other sections were added for biology-hydrography and for cultural history.

Right from the start it was emphasised that the tasks of the Museum were both public education and research. In addition to a yearly årsberetning (annual report), the Museum published the series Tromsø Museums Aarshefter from 1878 to 1951, later to be followed by other series, with scientific publications both by the Museum's own staff and by external contributors. However, the scientific ambitions were higher than the human resources allowed for and for a long time the Museum was rather a semi-professional institution. Its first curator was the zoologist Hans Jacob Sparre Schneider, who was appointed in 1877. Until 1885 he was the only curator, while the second position then established saw a high turn over and regular periods of vacancy. From the end of the 1870s until his death in 1918, Sparre Schneider was therefore the key figure at

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the Museum and at times its only full-time professional, with responsibilities for sections other than his own. The managers of the other collections were not paid and worked during leisure time. From 1880 to 1924, the teacher O.M. Nicolaysen was in charge of the antiquities collection. He had no formal archaeological education but carried out a lot of registrations and excavations, which he regularly published in the museum series. He soon made the antiquities collection one of the Museum's most important and his work was acknowledged to the extent that when parliament passed a new law on antiquities in 1905, the Tromsø Museum was given responsibility for most of northern Norway. Just Qvigstad managed the Sami collection from 1884 to 1931. He was head of the teachers' college in Tromsø, and never formally employed by the museum. From 1920, he was given the opportunity to leave his position at the teachers' college and awarded an annual scholarship for research. Qvigstad made basic contributions to the study of Sami language and culture. For some years after Karl Pettersen's death in 1890, the geology collection was without management, until a lecturer at the teachers' college took charge. The same was the case with the botany section. All in all, the Tromsø Museum depended heavily on the college teachers and the work done by single individuals. In all of its branches, fieldwork and studies were carried out as one-man enterprises, and these men were not easily replaced. When Nicolaysen died in 1924, the museum still had no professional curator for the antiquities to take over. During the 1920s and 1930s, important work was being done, particularly in Finnmark, but the Tromsø Museum played no part in it until the first archaeological curator was appointed in 1936.

The post-war years: consolidating the scientific role

It was not until after the World War II that the museum was given a more solid professional basis. A curator of geology was hired in 1946, one for botany in 1947, for Sami ethnography in 1949 and for cultural history in 1959. From the 1950s onwards, the Museum also had research fellows in residence. The total number of employees grew from eight in 1938 to 15 in 1951 and to 37 in 1961.

During its history, the Tromsø Museum has had three different locations. After the relevant collections from the 1870 exhibition were bought and stored for a couple of years, the museum rented two floors of the Baptist church in 1874. Here, the entire collections were on display. Opening hours were limited to two hours every Sunday, but during the first decades public interest was nevertheless quite impressive, with around 10,000 visitors a year. The museum soon became short of space and in 1894 it moved into a building of its own. Half of the costs were provided by the state and the rest came from local authorities, the local bank and funds collected from the whole region – even contributions from the south and abroad. At the time, the new museum was probably the biggest building in Tromsø – fireproof, impressive and with a rather pompous entrance hall. The museum now ranged to 1500 m² on four floors. However, the architecture did not reflect the institution's scientific ambitions: there were only

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5 Ø. Vorren, op.cit.
6 Ø. Vorren, op.cit.
two small working rooms for academic staff. Also for exhibition purposes the new building soon became inadequate. The exhibitions were not renewed and public interest dropped till around 7,000 per year. From the late 1920s, rooms had to be closed as lack of space for the constantly growing collections became acute, causing public attendance to drop even more, till an annual number of 5,000 in the 1930s. During WWII, the Germans took over the building and after the war the Norwegian authorities in charge of the reconstruction of Finnmark used it. During that period, all efforts were put into realizing a new building project. In 1962, this goal was achieved and the Tromsø Museum moved into the premises it is still using today.

With the growing influence of the state in the museum, its responsibility for administering laws and regulations, larger budgets and growing personnel, its organisation was changed in 1949. Until then, a small museum association had been its owner. Now, a board with appointed representatives from the state, the local and regional governments, the museum association and the employees took over.7

The post-war building project was not only directed at solving the problems with exhibition and storage capacity, but also at enhancing the museum's scientific standing. In 1918, the first call for a university in the north had been made, and it came up again immediately after the war. The initiative of 1918 came as a response to an old problem: how to recruit officials, particularly clergymen and doctors, to the north? The only effective way of solving the problem, it was claimed, was that the northern youth was given the same opportunities of higher education as the youth in the south. This could only be achieved by establishing a university in the region, to be located in Tromsø. Tromsø is in the middle of northern Norway, it had the teachers' college and the museum and was about to get a geophysical institute dedicated to the study of geomagnetism and the northern light and to weather forecasting.

The University ‘factor’: uncertainty and dilemmas

The problem with the museum in relation to the university plans, both then and later, was that the fields of study represented by the museum did not cover the educational needs that a university was supposed to solve. Except for archaeology and lappology, the museum represented the sciences. Northern Norway had 200,000 inhabitants. One could estimate that one or two of 20 science candidates that graduated from the university per year would come from the north and educating them in Tromsø, apart from being extremely cost-ineffective, would do nothing to solve the demands for clergymen or doctors. Therefore university plans were put aside for the time being.8

In 1945–1946 they emerged again. Several initiatives to create a viable ‘Arctic research institute’ in Tromsø were put forward. Local authorities once again linked this to more ambitious plans for a university, but the government made it clear that only the university in Bergen was on the agenda. The efforts to construct a new building for the museum were seen in this broader perspective, though. The museum was allocated a site outside the centre of the town, and in the historical account published in 1947, on

7 Ø. Vorren, op.cit.
the occasion of the museum’s 75th anniversary, it was stressed that a site big enough to accommodate “all the scientific institutions that one can reasonably envisage in Tromsø the next hundred years” had now been secured.9

At the beginning of the 1960s, a university in Tromsø was still considered to be a matter for future generations. People at the museum even found the idea of full-scale university studies in Tromsø dubious because Tromsø could not provide the broad cultural, institutional setting that was required for Bildung in the traditional sense. But the ‘student explosion’ of the 1960s soon changed all of this. Already in 1962, when plans for how to handle growing demand were discussed, the government for the first time made it clear that it would endorse a university in Tromsø. Parliament was supportive and a planning committee was established. This committee broadened the plans considerably by including full-scale medical education into the plans. The arguments for extending educational capacity by building a new faculty in Tromsø were exactly the same as put forth in 1918: it was the only way of securing a more even distribution of medical doctors, while the only certain effect of extending the capacity in Oslo was an even greater concentration of doctors in the central and eastern counties in the south.10

With medicine included – a proposal that met strong professional resistance but was supported by government and parliament – it was clear that the university had to be built more or less from scratch and that the existing institutions would be almost insignificant as foundations for the new university. Moreover, in other areas the major educational needs were also outside the fields already represented in Tromsø, like the languages. Another important factor also contributed to marginalizing the museum in the building of the university. In March 1968, after parliament had formally decided that Norway’s fourth university should be built in Tromsø, an interim board was appointed. One of its members was the director of the Tromsø Museum, Ørnulf Vorren, and the interim board had its first meeting at the museum in 1969. One of the first and most difficult questions it had to deal with was where to build the university. Three alternatives had been offered at an early stage and the Tromsø Museum fought intensely to have the university located as near as possible to the museum. The whole board backed this choice for different reasons: it was emphasised that the university should build on existing institutions and that dividing research communities by building groups both at the university and the museum should be avoided. This mistake had been made in Oslo in the 1920s, museum people claimed, when Blindern was chosen as the site for the new university at a time when several museums of natural history already existed at Tøyen. “Today it seems incomprehensible that Blindern was chosen”, it was said.11

The alternative favoured by the museum and the interim board met local resistance and after the university was secured, local authorities pushed harder for their location of choice. They wanted the site that was considered by the interim board to be the worst, because it had no connection to any of the existing institutions, and they saw the university as a means of redirecting the expansion of the town centre northwards on the island on which Tromsø is located. In the end, state authorities supported them.

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9 Tromsø museum gjennom 75 år: 1872–1947, op.cit.
10 N. Fulsås, op.cit.
11 N. Fulsås, op.cit.
As a result, research communities of, for example, archaeology, Sami studies, and biology, have in fact been doubled. Initially there were efforts at integrating the old and the new. For instance two of the curators at the museum were appointed professors of Sami ethnography and archaeology, respectively, while their curator positions were withdrawn. In the field of Sami studies, disciplinary disputes soon made cooperation difficult and generally the museum became more concerned with guarding its traditional identity and tasks as a museum in the new university organisation, than with taking up new educational tasks. The university also saw it as beneficial that the museum, as a well-established institution in the town, the region, the nation and even abroad, was upheld as a separate entity. Instead of integrating the existing milieus into the new university departments, the museum as a whole was incorporated into the university as an Institute for museum activities.\(^\text{12}\)

**Recent years: identity challenges**

As of 1977, the incorporation agreement came into effect and since then the Tromsø Museum has been a separate unity in the university organisation. Today it has a staff of around 70 and its exhibitions are seen by 80-90,000 visitors a year. While the rest of the university is for the first time gathered on the site that was decided upon in the early 1970s, the museum is still located in the buildings from 1962. Throughout, as one could easily foresee, building for other purposes had priority over moving the Tromsø Museum to the university site. With all other disciplines housed on the university campus, the Tromsø Museum feels that it is their turn now. At the moment, the museum is once again concentrating its efforts on getting new and larger facilities and getting in closer contact with the university for which it was once considered to provide the foundation.

Relocation will once again bring up the question of the type of relations between the museum and the university. After the incorporation, the museum has taken a rather defensive attitude towards the university, guarding, for good reasons, what it considers to be its core museum functions. It has not engaged itself extensively either in teaching or in research cooperation - research cooperation with other parts of the university seems to have dropped rather than increased during the last decade. Moving the museum will probably raise expectations in both of these areas.

With respect to museum functions, the environment has also changed dramatically. Many local museums have emerged during the last decades and the tasks and responsibilities of the Tromsø Museum, for instance in managing heritage laws and regulations, have been reduced and partly taken over by regional authorities. In this environment, it is its status as a university museum that gives the Tromsø Museum a specific identity. It could decide to take upon itself to be the major public outreach institution of the whole university. This would, however, imply a major reorientation concerning its traditional disciplinary orientation.

\(^{12}\) N. Fulsås, *op.cit.*
II. I. The Tromsø Museum today (photo taken by Adnan Icagic in 2002, courtesy of the Tromsø Museum)
**STRESZCZENIE**

*Muzeum w Tromsø: muzeum i uniwersytet na północy*

Muzeum w Tromsø zostało założone w 1872 roku. Podczas oficjalnej inauguracji Uniwersytetu w Tromsø w 1972 roku, Muzeum mogło pochwalić się już stuletnią historią. Przez długi okres muzeum postrzegano jako centralną instytucję naukową na północy Norwegii, a także jako fundament dla przyszłego uniwersytetu. Po utworzeniu Uniwersytetu według założonych planów, okazało się, że plany te, odnośnie do muzeum, wykraczają daleko poza jego tradycyjną funkcję, a w samym muzeum wkrótce stwierdzono, iż pilniejszym zadaniem niż funkcja bazy dla wydziałów uniwersytetu jest obrona swej tożsamości i odrębności. W niniejszym artykule staram się nakreślić tło, charakter oraz główne linie rozwoju Muzeum w Tromsø, jak i jego relacje z uniwersytetem.
II. 1. The old Tromsø Museum building in a photo dated 1914 (photo by Carl Dons, courtesy of the Tromsø Museum)