

Tromsø Museum : museum and university in the north

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Tromsø Museum was founded in 1872. When the University in Tromsø was officially opened in 1972, the museum had already existed for a hundred years. For a long time the museum had seen itself as the central scientific institution in the north of Norway, and as the fundament for a future university. When the university plans were realised, though, they went far beyond the professional borders of the museum, and the museum soon found that it was more urgent to defend its traditional identity, than to be the starting point for university departments. In the following I will try to outline the background, the character and the main lines of the development of Tromsø Museum, and its relations to the university.

For a long time Tromsø Museum was a very small institution in a very small town. When the idea of a museum in Tromsø first was put forth, in 1846, Tromsø had 2000 inhabitants; in 1870 it had grown to 4500. The museum was primarily a result of scientific activity. Preparing his work “*Fauna littoralis Norwegiae*”, the marine biologist Michael Sars asked the schoolmaster P. Schmidt in Tromsø to help him collect species from the northern marine fauna. As a result, Schmidt in 1846 wrote an article in the local newspaper about the desirability of a museum of natural history in

Tromsø. From the middle of the century researchers living in the north also carried out scientific work. The forest master Johannes Musæsus Norman started his studies of the flora of Troms and Finnmark in 1852, and from 1860 he was settled in Tromsø. From the 1850s the Tromsø-geologist Karl Pettersen started systematic studies of the geological conditions in the northern counties. His interests also encompassed the Arctic, and he engaged the arctic sea shippers of Tromsø in his collecting activity. Tromsø had for a long time been the “gateway to the Arctic”, and the starting point for many polar expeditions. From the 1850s and 60s Sweden had been the leading country, concentrating on Spitsbergen, and the Swedish polar explorers, like Nordenskiöld, relied heavily on the arctic, maritime competence of shippers and fishermen in Tromsø and elsewhere in Northern Norway (Wråkberg 1999, 36). Sami society and culture had attracted European attention all since the 17th century. So there were several areas with 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, Bergen and Stavanger; Northern Norway was the only part of the country without its own institution.

The immediate occasion for the founding of the museum in 1872 was an exhibition held in Tromsø in 1870. The aim of the exhibition was to present the regions assets, and it contained, among other things, geological maps prepared by Karl Pettersen, whale skeletons, models of boats, fishing gear, and other utility articles, and a major collection of Sami objects. A lot of this could serve as a starting point for a museum, and already during the preparations Christian Holst, the university secretary 1841–78, called for a permanent exhibition, in other words, a museum. Steps were taken to secure what could be of interest for a museum, and after a huge effort particularly by

Karl Pettersen, Tromsø Museum was founded 16. October 1872. Economic support had been secured from the king, the three northernmost counties and from 148 other contributors.

I have not inquired into 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, do not indicate primarily 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 in this same period. Only later did these objects stand out as relics of bygone days (Birkeland 2004, 34–36, 46).

There was some discussion on the name of the institution. The founders wanted it to cover “the arctic regions”, at that time considered to include the three northernmost counties of Norway, the area that since the end of the 19th century has been called Nord-Norge, Northern Norway. In the 1870s the common term was “Tromsø stift”. But since “Tromsø Stifts Museum” would not easily be understood outside Denmark and Norway, the name Tromsø Museum was chosen. It did not go without discussion, though, and the new name created some difficulties for the museums regional ambitions.

The academic fields covered by the museum were from 1886 formalised by its organisation into five sections: The “Finne”-section, which is the collection of Sami

artefacts, the antiquities section, and the sections for zoology, botany and geology. From 1935 were added sections for biology-hydrography and for cultural history.

All from the start it was underlined that the tasks of the museum were both public education and research. In addition to a yearly “årsberetning” (annual report), the museum from 1878 to 1951 published the series “Tromsø Museums Aarshefter”, later to be followed by other series, with scientific publications both by the museums own people and by contributors from outside. The scientific ambitions were higher than the museums professional resources allowed for, though. For a long time the museum was rather a semi-professional institution. The museum’s first curator was the zoologist Hans Jacob Sparre Schneider, who was appointed from 1877. Until 1885 he was the only one, and in the second position then established there was higher turn over and vacancy periods. All from the end of the 1870s to his death in 1918 Sparre Schneider therefore was the key figure at the museum and in periods its only full time professional with responsibility also for other sections than his own. The managers of the other collections did their jobs as unpaid, leisure duties. The teacher O.M. Nicolaysen was in charge of the antiquities collection from 1880 to 1924. 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, Tromsø Museum was given the 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. The geology collection was for some years without management after Karl Pettersen's death in 1890, until a lecturer at the teachers' college took charge of it. The same was the case with botany. All in all, Tromsø Museum was heavily dependent on the teachers' college, 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. Important work was being done particularly in Finmark in the inter war period, but Tromsø Museum played no part in it, until the first archaeological curator was appointed from 1936.

It was not until after the Second World War that the museum was given a more solid professional basis. A curator of geology was engaged from 1946, of botany from 1947, of Sami ethnography from 1949 and of cultural history from 1959. From the 1950s the museum also had research fellows in residence. The total number of employees grew from 8 in 1938 to 15 in 1951 and 37 in 1961.

Through its history Tromsø Museum has had three different locations. After the relevant collections from the exhibition of 1870 had been bought and stored for a couple of years, the museum from 1874 rented two stores of the Baptist church. Here, the collections in their entirety were on display. The opening hours were only two hours every Sunday, but the public interest was quite impressive the first decades, with around 10 000 visitors a year. The museum soon grew out of these localities, and in 1894 it moved into its own building. The state financed half of it; the rest came from local authorities, the local bank and money collected from the whole region,

even from contributors in the south and abroad. The new museum building was probably the biggest house in Tromsø at the time, fireproof, impressive and with a rather pompous entrance hall. The museum now disposed 1500 m² on four floors. But the architecture did not reflect the institution's scientific ambitions: Only two small working rooms were provided for its academic staff. And also for exhibition purposes the new building soon became inadequate. The exhibitions were not renewed, and public interest dropped till around 7000 per year. From the late 1920s rooms had to be closed as lack of space for constantly growing collections became acute, and public visit dropped even more, till an annual of 5000 in the 1930s. When the war came the Germans requisitioned the building, and after the war the Norwegian authorities in charge of the reconstruction of Finnmark used it. After the war all efforts were put into realizing a new building project. The goal was achieved when Tromsø Museum in 1962 moved into the localities it is still using.

With the growing engagement of the state in the museum, the museum's responsibility for administering laws and regulations, bigger budgets and growing personnel, its organisation was changed in 1949. So far a small museum association had owned it. Now a board with appointed representatives from the state, the local and regional governments, the museum association and the personnel took over.

The post-war building project was not only directed at solving the problems with exhibition and storage capacity, but also at lifting the museums 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 in 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 northern youths were given the same opportunity to get higher education as youths in the south. And that could only be achieved by establishing a university in the region, located in Tromsø. Tromsø lay in the middle of Northern Norway, and it had the teachers' college and the museum, and it was about to get a geophysical institute dedicated to the study of geomagnetism and the northern light and to weather forecasting.

The problem with the museum in relation to the university plan, 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 1 or 2 of the 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. So university plans were put aside for the time being.

In 1945–46 they turned up again. Several initiatives came up to create a viable "Arctic research institute" in Tromsø. Local authorities once again linked this to more ambitious plans for a university, but the government made it clear that it was only the university in Bergen that was on the agenda. The efforts to raise 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 to the museum's 75th anniversary in 1947 it was underlined that one had now secured a site

big enough to accommodate “all the scientific institutions that one can reasonably envisage in Tromsø the next hundred years” (*Tromsø museum gjennom 75 år : 1872–1947*, 27).

In Tromsø in the beginning of the 1960s, a university was still considered to be a question 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 60s soon changed all that. 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 go for a university in Tromsø. Parliament supported that, and a planning committee was put down. This committee broadened the plans considerably, by including full-scale medical education in the plans. The arguments for extending educational capacity by building a new faculty in Tromsø, was exactly the same that had been 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, eastern counties in the south.

With medicine included - a proposal that met strong professional resistance, but that 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 institution. Also in other areas the major educational needs lay outside the fields that were already represented in Tromsø, like the languages. Another important factor also contributed to marginalizing the museum

in the building of the university. After Parliament in March 1968 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 Tromsø Museum, Ørnulv Vorren, and the interim board located its first meeting to 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 Tromsø Museum fought intensely to have the university located at the alternative nearest to the museum. The whole board stood behind this choice, for different reasons. The reasons that were emphasised were that the university should build on the existing institutions, and that one should avoid dividing research communities by building groups both at the university and the museum. This mistake had been done in Oslo in the 1920s, museum people claimed, when Blindern was chosen as 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 (Fulsås 1993, 121).

The alternative favoured by the museum and the interim board had met local resistance all the way, and after the university was secured, the local authorities could push harder for their alternative. They wanted the site considered by the interim board to be the worst, with no connection to any of the existing institutions, and saw the university as a means of redirecting the expansion of the town centre northwards on the island where Tromsø is located. In the end the state authorities backed them.

As a result research communities in for example archaeology, Sami studies, and biology has 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 in general the museum became more concerned about guarding its traditional identity and tasks as a museum in the new university organisation, then to take upon itself new educational tasks. The university too 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.

The incorporation agreement went into effect from 1977, and since then 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 now for the first time is gathered on the site that was decided in the early 1970s, the museum is still located in the buildings from 1962. As one could easily foresee, building for all the other purposes have all the way had priority above moving Tromsø Museum to the university site. When all the other disciplines are now housed on the university campus, Tromsø Museum feels that it is their turn. At the moment the museum is once again concentrating its efforts on getting new and larger localities and getting in closer contact with the university that it was once considered to be foundation for.

A relocation will once again bring up the question of what kind of relations there should be between the museum and the university. After the incorporation of the museum it 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 the last decade. A moving of the museum will probably rise expectations in both these areas.

Also when it comes to its museum functions the environment has changed dramatically. A lot of local museums have grown up the last decades, and the tasks and responsibilities of Tromsø Museum for instance in managing heritage laws and regulations have been reduced and partly taken over by regional authorities. In this environment Tromsø Museum's specific identity is its status as a university museum. 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.

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