Surroundings, beginnings and formation of a journal – a dialogue with NAR's alpha editor Bjørn Myhre

BJØRN MYHRE, interviewed by NAR editors Hein B. BJERCK & SIV KRISTOFFERSEN

Bjørn Myhre played a key role in the establishment of Norwegian Archaeological Review. All in all, 17 volumes of NAR were produced under his editorial leadership (1968–1978 and 1985– 1990). Bjørn Myhre was born in Stavanger in 1938. He did his degree at the University of Bergen (1964), and has since been engaged in research, editing, culture heritage management, excavations, teaching and administration – in Stavanger, Bergen and Oslo. He has produced important prehistoric overviews, cf. Magnus & Myhre 1976, Myhre 2002a, 2003, and 2004. The Iron Age society in south-west Norway has been central in his research. Of several important excavations, the Iron Age farm site Ullandhaug (1967-68) is fundamental. He has explored different aspects of Iron Age farms - agrarian development, settlement history, house construction and structure (e.g. Myhre 1973, 1978). His studies include discussions on social and political development (Myhre 1985a, 1987, 1998, 2002b). Methodology and theory became a focal point during his time as professor at the University of Oslo from 1985, e.g. 'Trends in Norwegian archaeology' (1985b) and 'Theory in Scandinavian archaeology since 1960' (1991). In 1993, he was appointed as Director of Museum of Archaeology in Stavanger. In 2008 he formally retired, but is still a very active debating and writing archaeologist. Initially, Bjørn Myhre was invited to write an article about the establishment and first developments of NAR. Subsequently, this was changed to a dialogue text based on questions and answers communicated by email during the autumn of 2007. The basis for questions and replies is a selection of diagrams prepared for the Editorial in this issue which display trends covered in the 40 volumes of NAR.

NAR: We are celebrating 40 volumes of NAR – a symphony of stability and change. The most visible change in the journal's Program is the renaming to Aims & Scope and the relocation from the first to the last cover page. The structure of *Article, Comment, Reply to Comment and Review* is nearly unchanged. In the editorial profile, there is less emphasis on Norway and Scandinavia, and a shift from 'discussion of archaeological methodology and theory' to 'discussion of theoretical and methodological problems'. The format is the same; however, cover designs are constantly renewed in line with changing ideals – symbolising shifts in general trends that also are reflected in the journal's scientific focus.

Bjørn, you played a key role in the establishment of NAR, and have been managing editor for two periods – times of opposing traditions in archaeology. When you leaf through 'NAR complete' ... what are your reflections?

BM: It is with great pleasure I find that Norwegian Archaeological Review – celebrating its 40-year anniversary – is still a vigorous journal, may be in better shape than ever since its birth in 1968. Looking at the many volumes that have been published through the years, I wonder how it was possible to keep the journal alive for such a long period. It was established under special circumstances at a time when Norwegian archaeology was a minor subject at the universities, and theoretical and methodological issues were rarely discussed. Since its layout and structure has mostly been kept unaltered, the main idea behind the journal must have met a need that still is in demand. It is impressive that the number of printed pages per year has nearly doubled since the start.

It is also with pleasure I find that the current editorial board once again has given priority to scientific discussions, which was one of the major concepts of the journal when it was started. The lesser focus on Norwegian and Scandinavian archaeology in recent years is an indication that the original aim of NAR, to present Nordic archaeology internationally, is no longer needed, as Scandinavian archaeologists long have become active members of the general scientific community. NAR now appears as an international journal on equal footing with other leading archaeological series that focus on general theory and methods.

NAR: Could you picture the circumstances in which NAR was created? Which were the motivating ideals, aims and ambitions? How was the process leading up to the establishment – acting institutions, discussion arenas, and power structures?

BM: When the first issue of NAR was published in July 1968 it was the accomplishment of an idea that gradually had developed through the 1960s. When I then read archaeology, ethnology and social anthropology at the universities of Oslo and Bergen, I felt that the standard of Norwegian archaeology was far beyond the theoretical thinking of other subjects, and we were a group of students that often discussed the possibility of changing its content and attitude. The idea of starting a new journal that should focus on method and theory was often mentioned as a venture that might have such a positive effect. When I had finished my degree in 1964, and was employed by the archaeological museums in Stavanger and Bergen, I took the opportunity to present the idea to my older colleagues and was strongly supported by leading archaeologists like Anders Hagen, Asbjørn E. Herteig and Knut Odner in Bergen, and Odmund Møllerop in Stavanger.

Norwegian archaeology was at that time a minor subject at the universities. Only about 25 archaeologists held permanent positions at the five existing archaeological museums¹, and the museum directors in Oslo and Bergen were also professors at these two universities. As in most European countries archaeology was generally speaking a traditional subject that mainly focused on culture historical themes based on a theory that had developed during the first part of the 20th century.

The Norwegian archaeologists were organised in one common national institution called *The Norwegian Archaeological Meeting* (NAM), while the executive group consisted of the five museum directors, and was called *The Norwegian Archaeological Commission* (DAIK). If we were to manage to establish a new Norwegian journal we had to get support from these two institutions.

My first employer, Odmund Møllerop at Stavanger Museum, found the idea of a theoretical archaeological journal very interesting and he presented the concept to NAM in November 1965. It appears from the minutes of the meeting that he used some of the same arguments that were later to be printed in the Introduction to volume 1 of NAR (1968). The proposal was, however, voted down with the main argument that it would be too expensive, and it might lead to a reduction of the funds granted for the already existing journals. Instead Møllerop was asked to present a draft for a recension journal at the next meeting, with the aim of presenting Norwegian archaeological publications to a foreign public.

In January 1966 I was employed by Asbjørn E. Herteig to work at his large excavations at the medieval site Bryggen in Bergen. He was enthusiastic about the suggested new journal, and we made plans for a new attempt to persuade our colleagues. Our strategy this time was to try to convince the archaeological leader group DAIK before the proposal was presented to the next meeting at NAM. Based on the model of *Current Anthropology* a detailed suggestion of the content of the first volume was worked out. The draft obtained approval from DAIK, mainly because of a convincing argument by Professor Anders Hagen at the University of Bergen. In November 1966 it was also accepted by NAM as the result of a well-prepared presentation.

A committee consisting of Wencke Slomann from Oslo, and Asbjørn E. Herteig and myself from Bergen were asked to prepare a detailed budget, content and layout of the journal, as well as a name suggestion. Actually, it was intended that the plan would be presented to the next meeting of NAM. But the process was accelerated as DAIK had already accepted the suggestion during spring 1967. As a result of an application from DAIK, the *Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities* appropriated a sufficient amount of money for a three year trial period for the journal. At the NAM meeting in October 1967 Asbjørn E. Herteig could therefore announce that the first volume of *Norwegian Archaeological Review* was under preparation and would be published in 1968. NAM accepted this conclusion, and elected an editorial board that was identical to the preparation committee, with myself as the main editor.

Norwegian archaeologists had different opinions about the establishing of NAR and its program. In particular the archaeologists at the University of Oslo were afraid that it might lead to reduced support from the Norwegian Research Council for the then main archaeological journal *Viking*, which was issued by *Norsk Arkeologisk Selskap* in Oslo. For the editorial board it was therefore important that the journal was to be 'Issued under the Auspices of Norsk arkeologisk kommisjon (DAIK)' since we knew that a majority of the leader group supported NAR's program. On the other hand we had to accept that NAM appointed the members of editorial board.

This split responsibility influenced the editorial priorities over the next years. During the NAM meeting of 1970 the editor was, for instance, criticized by some Oslo archaeologists because volumes 3 and 4 according to their view contained too many articles by foreign scholars, a critique that strangely enough was supported by the Oslo students. These were volumes that the editorial board was specifically proud of; they resulted in considerable international interest and a rapid growth in the number of subscribers. At the same meeting the three- year trial period came to an end, and it was time for election of a new editorial board. After several trial votes the editorial board was re-elected thanks to strong support from members of DAIK.

Also at later NAM meetings there were extensive debates on NAR's program,



Fig. 1. Bjørn Myhre in his early years as an archaeologist at Stavanger museum. Photo: Museum of Archaeology, Stavanger.

conventions and content, and critical voices were heard about the priority of articles on theory and methods. Each year one of the members of the editorial board was on election. As a rule the editor's proposed candidate was elected, but sometimes only after extensive discussions. In such situations it was supporting to have DAIK as the responsible publisher.

But in general the cooperation between the editorial board and the archaeological society was good. When for instance our main sponsor, the Norwegian Research Council, mentioned in 1973 that the journal published too many articles by foreign authors, and therefore discussed the possibility of claiming 'page charge' from them, a unanimous NAM supported a protest letter that led to a withdrawal of the claim.

NAR: Could you give us some glimpses of the editorial work? How did you manage without 'post-it-stickers', copying machines, e-mail and word processing facilities?

BM: NAR had copied *Current Anthropology*'s editorial practice of inviting special archaeologists to discuss main articles and previous publications. This was a demanding task for the few editors – originally only three persons. Without copying machines and electronic mail all correspondence was made by post, and when discussions became difficult, it was the editor's job to calm the debaters via telephone and letters. After 1971, when increased funds made it possible to publish two issues a year, the editorial work became much more demanding. Our goal to print articles, comments and reply to the comments in the same issue was therefore seldom reached. However, the situation became better in 1979 when an editorial secretary was engaged.

NAR: Peer reviewing was introduced early in the 1990s. How did you manage standards of scientific quality before this? What are your thoughts about the pros and cons of peer reviewing? May this system unintentionally result in cementing mainstream opinions – making it more difficult to oppose to the scientific *establishment*?

BM: Peer review was used when the editorial board found that its competence was insufficient, but in general the manuscripts were read by the editors and discussed in common meetings. This procedure resulted in the journal's attitude being relatively homogenous, and not dependent on evaluations made by specialists, who may sometimes have been of different opinion. The referee system will of course contribute to the improvement of many articles, but a consequence might be that controversial parts of manuscripts are removed prior to publishing, and the readers will thereby miss inspiring discussions between author, referee and editor, that otherwise could have been printed in the journal.

NAR: How were the relationships within the scientific community – between the Norwegian and the Nordic/international network of archaeologists – at the time of the establishment of NAR? In the first four volumes of the journal half of the articles are by non-Norwegian authors, dominated by authors from Sweden, Denmark and USA, with Finland, Canada, USSR, France and UK also represented (Fig. 2). The strong orientation towards Sweden and USA is indeed striking, as is the near absence of British archaeologists. Is this an expression of the main lines in the archaeological network around 1970? Or are there other explanations?

BM: It came as a surprise to the editorial board in 1967 that the Norwegian Research Council so quickly agreed to fund the new publication. The content of the first volumes was only superficially planned, and we had only a few articles ready. We therefore had to rely on personal contacts and interests. I wanted to introduce the theoretical thinking of American archaeologists like Walter W. Taylor, Phillip Phillips, Gordon Willey and Lewis R. Binford, and I had been impressed by recent publications by the Swedish archaeologists Mats P. Malmer and Carl-Axel Moberg. Asbjørn E. Herteig had just begun the major task of registering and classifying the enormous material from the excavations at Bryggen in Bergen, and he was engaged in international studies on the use of computers and systems of data treatment of archaeological material.

The first volumes were therefore partly influenced by such personal interests, for instance the articles by Carl Cullberg and Carl-Axel Moberg from the University of Gothenburg on problems connected to different classification systems, and the discussion of the article *Computers in Archaeology* by Mario Borillo from *Centre d'analyse documentaire pour l'archeologie* in Marseille. In these and other contributions NAR focused on a topic that was of major interest at many archaeological institutions, and the journal became an international forum for such discussions.

It was fortunate that several Norwegian archaeologists wanted to publish their research projects in NAR, and articles by Egil Bakka, Peter-Emil Kaland, Hans-Emil Liden, Knut Odner and Arne B. Johansen were subjects for interesting discussions in volumes 1–4. It was also pure luck that the editor managed to convince the leading Russian archaeologist Daniil Avdusin to publish his lecture at the University of Bergen in volume 2. *Smolensk and the Varangians* was a provocative article that inspired several of his Leningrad colleagues to participate in a heated discussion in the next volumes.

But what really made NAR internationally known was the discussion of David L. Clarke's famous book *Analytical Archaeology* in volume 3. His thesis, which was one of the corner stones of "New Archaeology" in Europe, had been met with great interest when it was published in 1968. It had been much discussed at a seminar in Flagstaff, Arizona in 1969 where Professor Anders Hagen was one of the participants, and he invited Clarke to publish his introductory lecture *Analytical Archaeology – Epilogue* in NAR 1970 together with several of the contributions at the seminar. This volume made NAR known among archaeologists in USA and Canada, and the number of American subscribers increased considerably.

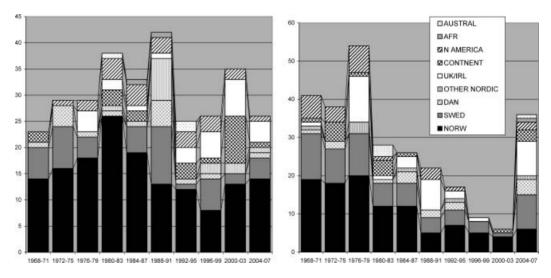


Fig. 2. Contributors and nationality in Norwegian Archaeological Review 1968–2008, absolute numbers. The diagram to the left shows Articles, to the right is Comments/Reply to Comments. The latter also displays the gradual decrease of the number of contributions in the Discussion section from the heydays in the 1970s – a trend that the current editors are happy to have reversed. Diagrams prepared by H. B. Bjerck, cf. Editorial.

During the 1960s interest in archaeological theory was moderate in the UK, and generally speaking David L. Clarke's book was met with a cool reception by the archaeological establishment. But especially at the University of Cambridge he had many young followers who later, during the 1970s and 1980s, were going to change English archaeology by introducing and developing New Archaeology and post-processual Archaeology. Because NAR was among the first journals to take *Analytical Archaeology* seriously through the discussion in the 1970 volume, it attained a high status among this group of innovative theorists.

So, partly by luck, partly by introducing discussions on methodological and theoretical topics that were of great interest to both American and European archaeologists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, NAR got a surprisingly good start that was much better than the editorial board ever had in mind.

NAR: There are strikingly few Danish authors – bearing in mind their long traditions as "big brother" in the family of Scandinavian archaeologists in the decades before and after the establishment of the journal. It is tempting to regard the scarcity of Danish contributors as a process of breaking loose from the establishment, a new-archaeological-youth-rebellion where archaeologists in Sweden and Norway joined forces. Is this trend an expression of an editorial line, or a lack of interest among Danish colleagues to publish in NAR?

BM: The explanation is quite different. The editorial board was of the opinion that Danish archaeology in general was rather traditional in the 1960s, and we found few archaeologists from Denmark to invite as contributors or participants in NAR discussions. One exception was the small group of archaeologists who were working on classification problems and the use of computers in archaeology. We were thereby of the similar opinion as the younger generation of Danish archaeologists who were in strong opposition to their older colleagues, as for instance expressed in an article by Kristian Kristiansen, *Dansk arkæologi – fortid og fremtid*, and in several articles in the student journal *Kontaktstencil* from 1970 onwards.

NAR: In the *Program* of NAR there is an explicit editorial profile, which emphasizes methodical and theoretical debate, a profile that is clearly visible in the first volumes of the journal. It is obvious from the content of these volumes that the editors encouraged debate and discussion: on printed short versions of various Norwegian publications (e.g. K. Odner: *Vivik near Holmevatn on Haukelifjell*, Vol. 1/1968, Vol. 2/1970), on new development within methodology (e.g. Mario Borillo: *Formal Procedures and the Use of Computers in Archaeology*, Vol. 4/1971), and discussions on Viking Age material of Nordic origin found behind the Iron curtain (Daniil Avdusin: *Smolensk and the Varangians according to Archaeological Data*, Vol. 2/1969, Vol. 3/1970, Vol. 4/1971, Vol. 5/1973). Above, you give the impression that the editors of NAR were quite active in putting together the journal – more active than today. We sense a lot of editorial work here.

BM: As mentioned above NAR was luckily presented with several papers that were suitable for discussion during the first years, but mostly the editorial board invited the contributors, especially when already published books or articles were selected for further debate. Among the papers mentioned, the articles by Avdusin and Borillo were offered for publishing in NAR, while the participants in the discussions were invited to contribute.

The most demanding task for the editors was to coordinate all the short comments and replies to be printed in the same volume. It went tolerably well for the first four years when only one issue was published each year, but it became much more difficult after 1971 when we persuaded the Norwegian Research Council to fund the costs of two issues a year. We then often had to let some discussions continue through several years, and it was therefore necessary to engage an editorial secretary in 1979. When the number of discussions gradually decreased between 1980 and 2003 it was probably the result of a changing editorial policy during these years.

NAR: A shift from debates concerning methodology to theoretical issues is a significant development through the forty volumes (Fig. 3). If we leave out the 1990 double volume (Vol. 23 – comprising 22 papers from 4th Nordic Conference on the Application of Scientific Methods in Archaeology), which stands out as the last convulsions of a true processual archaeology, this change in focus gradually developed throughout the 1980s. From 1990 and onwards the theoretical debate has had a prominent position in the journal, in addition to a stronger focus on critical research history. This shift is obviously connected to the processual/post-processual schism within the discipline around 1980. The impression of a radical change, which we sometimes get from discussions on research history, is, however, not that obvious when we look at the actual contributions in NAR, where a more gradual re-orientation is revealed. Your last period as editor (1986–1990) is simultaneous with this time of confrontation and opposition. In what way did you experience this? Did the editorial work have any impact on this shift in NAR?

BM: Yes, I agree that the changing focus from methodological to theoretical themes had to do with the introduction of post-processual archaeology in the 1980s. But I cannot see that the editorial work had a special impact on this shifting; it was rather the new paradigm that had an impact on the editorial priorities. My first editorial period (1968-1978) was contemporary with the breakthrough of New Archaeology in Scandinavia and its emphasis on methods is reflected in the first 10 volumes. We can see an early orienteering towards post-processual topics in Vol. 10/1977, which focused on the problems of studying ethnicity in prehistory. Personally I became more critical to the processual archaeology in the early 1980s, and I remember being very pleased with the main topic of the first volume of my second editorial period (Vol. 18/1985) when an article by Knut Odner on ethnic processes in Fenno-Scandinavia was discussed. Besides the presentation of David L. Clarke's book in 1970, I must confess that I was most content with the discussion in Vol. 22(1)/1989 of the article by Michael Shanks & Christopher Tilley, Archaeology into the 1990s. The 'last convulsions of processual archaeology', as you call Vol. 23/1990, was due to lack of inspiration, and I had to accept the publishing of a number of seminar papers to fill up the last volume I edited.

NAR: Discussions were a trademark of NAR. We can sense that the character of the discussions has changed – in the first volumes they were tougher, and some of them were continuing debates that lasted for years. We, who then were students, remember hearing interest-arousing door-banging that we never really got to the bottom of – in spite of trying very hard. It seems to us that it was more important to 'be right', which probably is a part of a positivistic position. The sharp tone in the debate certainly had an entertainment value. But how did it influence scientific community? Did these discussions create destructive antagonism – or openings for new and wider perspectives? Do you sometimes long for the old days with more distinct oppositions?

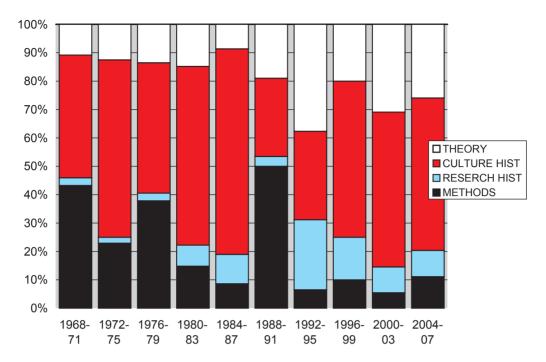


Fig. 3. The 481 contributions (Articles/Book Reviews) in Norwegian Archaeological Review, classified after their respective focus in methodology, research history, culture history and theory. Comments/Reply to Comments are not included. Diagram prepared by H. B. Bjerck, cf. Editorial.

It is, however, a paradox that through the 1980s and 1990s post-processual pluralism was accompanied by a gradual decrease in debate contributions. Do you think that the tension went out of the archaeological debate when parallel understanding was accepted?

BM: To the question about why the number of discussions decreased during 1980s and 1990s, I will first of all express my opinion about my two periods as main editor (1968–1978 and 1985–1990). The main reason why debates then were given priority was that we closely followed the program of NAR. When the number of discussions became fewer in the 1990s, my qualified guess is that it was due to a changing policy of the editorial boards rather than the result of a general post-processual attitude. Still there were archaeologists with different theoretical and methodological priorities, and I am sure that if the editors had wanted to publish discussions, there would not have been a lack of debaters.

I agree that a positivistic position may contribute to a heated debate about 'the right' methods and interpretations. But in my opinion there is nothing that prevents strong contradicting opinions within a post-processual exchange of views, especially since the opinions of different authors are strongly influenced by their own past and present, and therefore the debate can easily become rather personal. I can for instance refer to the heated debate of the mentioned article by Shanks & Tilley (Vol. 23(1)/1989).

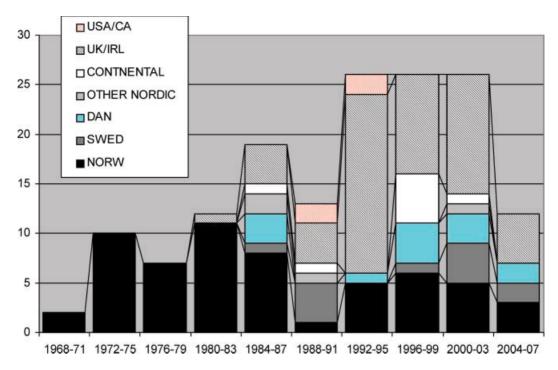


Fig. 4. Number of Book Reviews in Norwegian Archaeological Review 1968–2008, also showing nationality of publisher. Diagram prepared by H. B. Bjerck, cf. Editorial.

According to the theory of Thomas Kuhn debates have a tendency to be specially heated in times of transition, when a subject is to be found in a critical period between two phases of different paradigms. My two periods as main editor happened to be contemporary with the shifting of two major paradigms, from culture-historical archaeology to processual archaeology in 1968–1978 and during the introduction of post-processual archaeology in 1985–1990. These were times of personal engagement and strong feelings about the content of the subject. In my opinion it will always be important for NAR's editorial board to identify and present for its readers researchers with controversial ideas and theories and invite to debate of their works.

NAR: Book reviews are another important part of NAR, and quite clearly have undergone changes (Fig. 4) through these four decades. In the beginning it seems to have been important to exhibit Norwegian archaeological research to an international and English speaking scientific milieu. Until 1985 (Vol. 18) only Norwegian publications were reviewed, most of them culture historical studies. From 1985, in your second period as an editor, a radical change took place, where international, mostly Anglo-American studies and theoretical debate, were focused. What caused this change in editorial profile? Is it due to changes in the network within the discipline? Does it reflect an ambition to play a more prominent and active part in the international debate?



Fig. 5. Bjørn Myhre as Director of Museum of Archaeology, Stavanger in 1993. Photo: T. Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, Stavanger.

BM: The diagram (Fig. 4) clearly shows an interesting development from a predominance of Scandinavian book reviews during the period 1968–1987 to a stronger focus on Anglo-American publications in the 1990s. The reason for this change is in my opinion that during the first 20 years the different editorial boards followed NAR's program closely, which was to publish information about Norwegian and Scandinavian archaeological research, while later editors found that such a priority was no longer necessary. Instead they wanted to make NAR into an international journal on a similar level as other leading archaeological series. I will also mention that the 1980s and 1990s was a period when British archaeology played a leading role, and it is obvious that publications from the United Kingdom were often discussed and reviewed in NAR.

NAR: Research history tends to over focus internal trends in the discipline itself, as expressed in sequences of scientific publications. Obviously, these trends are easier to grasp than the complex dynamics in the interweaving of relations between discipline and its general cultural surroundings. This is a more subtle relationship, which is often next to invisible in the chaotic present, and needs long-term development to be revealed. Looking back, it is apparent that the general focus on environmental issues during the 1960s was a capital driving force in directing the archaeological discipline. 'Women's liberation' and 'equal rights' came to influence much more than dance steps and clothing in the 1970s and 1980s. Were the ideals behind the 'pink scarfs and soft soled brown suede shoes' perhaps a more important force in the focus on gender than all the references in Liv Helga Dommasnes and Randi Håland's articles in NAR Vol. 15/1982? And perhaps it was not a coincidence that NAR itself was founded in the rebellious year of 1968, in a storm of anti-authoritarian ideals?

Trends emerge when looking back. You have been a devoted and engaged scientific professional through important changes in the development of our discipline; but also a former owner of soft soled shoes, voter in political elections, consumer in a world of changing culinary fashions, movie watcher and newspaper reader. How do you look upon the relationship between the past and the present throughout these years, as an archaeologist and a member of your cultural surroundings? Has life itself given you a more subtle view of the dynamic relationship between scientific discipline and contemporary society?

BM: It is correct that the first issue of NAR was published in the revolutionary year of 1968, contemporary with David L. Clarke's *Analytical Archaeology*, but just as his book and his ideas of a new archaeology had been prepared for several years, the discussions that led to the establishing of NAR had already started in 1965. The post-processual archaeology of the 1980s also developed gradually through the late 1970s. It seems to me that archaeology for the time being is in an intermediate period of theoretical stagnation, but I am sure that we soon will enter a pre-paradigmatic phase when different views will be strongly debated and 'days with distinctive oppositions' will once again appear. I am looking forward to that.

You are asking if my life has given me 'greater vision' in the dynamic between the discipline and the present. I am totally convinced that the present time strongly influences our interpretation of the past, but I find it much more difficult to see that archaeology can contribute to much more than entertainment, adventures and information about other forms of life and societies. A famous chess player was once asked if training and better knowledge about the game contributed to increase the player's knowledge in general. He answered that it only contributed to make him a better player.

NOTES

¹ The five regional archaeological museums in Norway were Universitetets Oldsaksamling, University of Oslo (now Museum of Cultural History); Stavanger Museum (now Archaeological Museum of Stavanger), Historisk Museum, University of Bergen (now part of Bergen Museum); Det Kgl. Norske Videnskabers Selskap, Museet (Trondheim, now NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet); and Tromsø Museum (now University of Tromsø, Tromsø Museum – Universitetsmuseet).

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