The Nordic meetings on Stratigraphy

– 20 years and 10 meetings later

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The first Nordic Meeting on Stratigraphy took place in Stockholm in 1996. The tenth session in Helsinki 2015 opened for reflections from the earlier meetings. What was the original intention when we started the conference? Which topics has been discussed over time, what can we say about geographical and chronological issues? Is it possible to detect new ways of thinking concerning stratigraphy and contextual archaeology? These are questions that will be addressed in this paper.

Genesis

The genesis of the conference in the mid 1990's was a need for a forum to discuss issues relating to managing excavation of complex stratigraphic sites. The idea to assemble a seminar to address these questions emanated from long ongoing discussions during the excavations at Birka on the island of Björkö (The Birka Project 1990–1995 cf. Bäck & Svensson 1996; Ambrosiani 2015). The archaeological remains at the site comprised extremely fragmented and compressed cultural layers with essentially no preserved organic material. By the second year of excavation (1991) it was decided to introduce single-context methodology, making the project the first large scale single-context excavation in Sweden operated with a full-scale digital documentation method. The members of the planning committee for the first Nordic Stratigraphy meeting (called "Nordiskt stratigrafiseminarium 1996 – ett arbetsmöte") in Stockholm were Johan Anund,

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Stockholm	Nordiskt Stratigrafimöte
Kristianstad	Nordiska Stratigrafimötet
Mariehamn	Nordiska Stratigrafimötet
Viborg	Nordisk Stratigrafimøde
Lund	Stratigrafi – och sen då? Synsätt, kulturhistoria och presentation
Trondheim	Det sjätte Nordiska Stratigrafimötet
Turku	Stratigrafins många nivåer
Jönköping	The VIII Nordic Meeting on Stratigraphy
København	Perspectives on Urbanism
Helsinki	The X Nordic Meeting on Stratigraphy

Figure 1. The conference titles over time. Note the switch into English from the Jönköping meeting and onwards.

Lena Beronius Jörpeland, Mathias Bäck, Louise Deutgen, Mary MacLeod, and Kenneth Svensson. Soon after the first successful meeting, Stefan Larsson became involved in the discussion about themes and structure of the seminar (Larsson 2000). At the time Larsson was working on a thesis on the history of archaeology in Lund, focusing on methodological issues. In addition to this, Neil Price – who had taken part in the first year of the Birka excavations – were also closely involved sharing his experiences from Britain (Price 1996).

Leviticus

As the title of the first meeting suggests it was a small scale conference with an ambition no greater than to gather people interested in the same issues. No one could at that time foresee the expansion of the conference driven by a massive interest for stratigraphic issues. Notwithstanding the small scale setup, the closing discussion of the seminar touched upon the possibilities of continued meetings. Since some of the participants had attended a conference series in Britain – "Interpreting Stratigraphy" – an idea was formed to use the conference as a model for further meetings. A crucial starting-point was to find a way to organize recurring meetings without a financial base. In concordance with the British setup, it was decided that by the end of each conference a new archaeological institution would volunteer to organize the next scheduled meeting. As of today, ten consecutive meetings reveal a good commitment by the archaeological institutions in the Nordic countries (fig. 1).

The hitherto published meetings should be seen as selections of the papers presented at the conferences. Selected papers – except the fully published two conference volumes from the meetings in Mariehamn and Viborg – have later been published in SKAS, The Society for

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Medieval Archaeology in Finland (2001) and in META, a journal for Medieval and Post-Medieval archaeology in the Nordic countries (1996, 2004 and 2015).

Numeri

Ten Nordic meetings on stratigraphy over a period of twenty years have generated plenty of statistics, which enables us to write a short chronicle of the contents (themes) and locations of the meetings over time (fig. 3). The first founding meeting was held in Stockholm and was hosted by Birkaprojektet and Riksantikvarieämbetet/UV Mitt. Since the initial meeting gathered people working with relatively untested field archaeological methods, the main focus was on documentation. Despite the awareness of the dangers of getting stuck in discussions on design and content of context sheets, the meeting revolved around these questions. The Stockholm meeting however found the topic not yet ful-



Figure 2. Until this date papers from six conferences have been completely or partly published.

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Stockholm	Documentation of Cultural layers
Kristianstad	Stratigraphic methodology in rural environment, Medieval as well as Prehistoric
Mariehamn	To interpret Stratigraphy (variety of themes from the Mesolithic to Early Modern Times) with some emphasis on the Archaeology of Buildings
Viborg	Stratigraphy and science – Stratigraphy and finds material – workshop
Lund	Stratigraphy – then what? Perspective, Cultural History and presentation (wide range of themes, from The Bronze Age to Church Archaeology)
Trondheim	Digital tools and interpretation – Fieldwork and Stratigraphy (ex. Stone Age)
Turku/Åbo	On Stratigraphy – Stratigraphy and Prehistory – Documentation in 2D or 3D, problem, inovation – Historical Archaeology and Stratigraphy – Stratigraphy for Archaeologists and Geologists, openings for collaboration
Jönköping	The Post Medieval Experience & Archaeology of Early Modern Times – Stratigraphy of the Dead, New Methods and Perspectives on Graves and Burial Archaeology – Horizontal Archaeology, the Stratigraphy of the Landscape – Fifteen Years onwards...
Köpenhamn	The urban experience – Complex Stratigraphy, an Urban phenomenon? – How do we work with Stratigraphy
Helsinki	Emphasis on scientific methods – prospecting methods and technique in the Stratigraphic work (the conference was held in collaboration with the XI SMIA meeting)

Figure 3. Summary of the main content from the ten Nordic meetings on stratigraphy 1996–2015.

ly exhausted which led to a sequence of subsequent meetings.

The second meeting was held in Kristianstad at Kristianstads Länsmuseum. Discussions on documentation continued but it became evident that there was a need to widen the archaeological framework to include rural as well as pre-historic sites. It was mainly since, stratigraphic analysis at the time primarily was associated with urban archaeology as the development of stratigraphic analysis was basically triggered by complex stratification on urban sites. The third meeting in Mariehamn at Museibyrån Åland focused on the interpretation of complex sites with a special theme relating to stratigraphy and standing buildings. As at the previous meeting in Kristianstad, the papers at the Mariehamn session comprised a wide chronological span from the Mesolithic to Modern times (Eriksdotter et al. 2000). A

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Figure 4. Geographic distribution of towns where the hitherto ten Nordic meetings on stratigraphy have taken place.

publication followed this meeting which thoroughly presented the results. Up to this date, together with the Viborg assembly the following year, these are the most thoroughly published conferences.

The fourth meeting in Viborg, held at Viborg Stiftsmuseum, had a scientific theme, blending aspects of scientific methods with stratigraphic analysis (Bodilsen et al. 2003). In a sense this was the first interdisciplinary meeting. This session also saw the first and only workshop where attendants discussed issues associated with stratigraphic analysis in smaller groups. By the time the fifth meeting was held in Lund hosted by Kulturen, Riksantikvarieämbetet/UV Syd and the University of Lund, it was time to call forth the central question of how we use the stratigraphic units we excavate. In fact this meeting may be regarded as an unofficial breaking-point where a discussion arose concerning the practice of stratigraphic excavations in relation to scientific quality and legislative reality. This was the first time both internal and external issues of field archaeology were addressed and central discussions related to scientific output in relation to choice of excavation methods as well as on governmental guidelines and demands. Furthermore, the meeting offered a wide range of themes from Bronze Age to church archaeology.

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	Stock-holm	Kris-tian-stad	Ma-rie-hamn	Vi-borg	Lund	Trond-heim	Turku	Jönkö-ping	Kö-pen-hamn	Hel-sinki
Conference extent (days)	1	1	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	2
Papers given	6	5	15	12	12	17	19	21	18	18
Partici-pants	58	≈ 60	58	43	68	77	60	86	73	
Countries repre-sen-ted	Sw.No. GB.	Sw. No. De. Fi	Sw. No. De. Est. Fi. (Ål). GB.	Sw. No. De. Fi. (Ål).	Sw. No. De. Fi.	Sw. No. De. Fi. Po.	Sw. No. De. Fi. Po.	Sw. No. De. Est. Fi. Po.	Sw. No. De. Est. Fi. Ger. Austr.	Sw. Fi. No. Austr. Ru.

Figure 5. Number of participants and countries represented over the years.

The first and only meeting so far held in Norway took place at NIKU in Trondheim. This time the conference focused on digital documentation and ways to interpret digital data, but also on stratigraphic issues in fieldwork spanning from the Stone Age onwards. The seventh Nordic meeting on stratigraphy took place in Turku at the University of Turku. As in Mariehamn and Trondheim, the gathering in Turku/Åbo stretched over three days presenting no less than five themes: "Om stratigrafi "; "Stratigrafi och förhistoria"; "Dokumentering i 2D eller 3D, möjligheter, problem, innovation"; "Historisk tid och stratigrafi"; "Arkeologers och geologers stratigrafi – möjligheter till samarbete" Amongst a wide variety of themes a special theme dealing with prehistoric sites can be noted as well as a discussion about collaboration between archaeologists and geologists in order to resolve stratigraphic matters on site. The eight gathering in Jönköping held by Jönköpings länsmuseum and Riksantikvarieämbetet (UV Mitt and UV Öst) is hitherto the largest meeting in respect to the number of papers given and participants attending. At this assembly a short summary of the first 15 years of Nordic meetings on Stratigraphy was presented. The crammed program was structured under three main sessions: "The Post-Medieval Experience & Archaeology of Early Modern Times"; "Stratigraphy of the Dead – New Methods and Perspectives on Graves and Burial Archaeo-

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logy" and "Horizontal Archaeology – the Stratigraphy of the Landscape".

The second time in Denmark, the ninth meeting was held in Copenhagen at the Museum of Copenhagen. This conference had a clear focus on urban stratigraphy (hence the conference title Perspectives on Urbanism) although occasional papers treated rural sites. Like the previous meeting the Copenhagen gathering was organized in three sessions: "The urban experience"; "Complex stratigraphy – an urban phenomenon?" and "How do we work with stratigraphy?" The gathering in Copenhagen attracted participants from seven countries which is the widest geographical representation so far in the history of the conference. Finally, the tenth jubilee meeting in Helsinki hosted by the University of Helsinki was a joint convention with The XI Nordic Conference on the Application of Scientific Methods in Archaeology (SMIA XI). The stratigraphic meeting comprised of no less than six sessions, one of which was a joint session with SMIA. A fair number of the papers discussed scientific methods and digital applications but a few papers on stratigraphic practice from specific excavation sites were also presented. For the first time participants from Russia attended the conference.

Exodus

So far four meetings have been held in Sweden, three in Finland, two in Denmark and one in Norway (fig. 4). There is a slight emphasis on Sweden which might be explained by the geographical background of the conference. The only meeting held in Norway so far, took place in Trondheim, the only town in the northern half of the Nordic countries to host the conference.

Concerning the number of participants, it is interesting to note that the numbers have not increased radically over time (fig 5). However meetings that have offered

	1996	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2008	2011	2013	2015	Summa
Urban	5	1	4	5	4	4	3	3	8	4	41
Rural		3	1		2	2	1	4	1		14
Buildings		1	6			1	1	1		1	11
Prehistory			2	1	3	5	2	2	2		17
Science				3	1		4	2	2	4	16
Digital tools	1			1	1	4	3	1		5	16
Miscellaneous			2	2	1	1	5	8	5	4	28

Figure 6. The presented papers over the years grouped into seven themes.

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varied themes appear to have attracted more participants from more countries.

The first two assemblies differ in the sense that they were shorter in duration than the following ones. This basically reflects the contemporary unawareness of the great interest in a joint Nordic stratigraphy meeting. Although the number of papers given over just one day is less than at the other gatherings, the attendance is not particularly low. At the other end of the scale, as already noted, three meetings stretched over three days without having substantially more attendants. One visible trend is that the number of papers given in relation to the length of each conference has increased during the last three conferences. Until the Jönköping assembly, an average of five to six papers per day was given in relation to nine or in the case of Jönköping more than ten papers per day. Once again this confirms the need for a conference of this kind. From a modest start with participants from three Nordic countries (the British participants were at the time active in Sweden), the number of represented nationalities has increased to now include also non-Nordic countries.

Deuteronomium

Our final reflections address the spectrum of themes and the geographical representation of the Nordic countries. The summary presented in figure 6 might not be called a "law on history" but it mirrors spheres in which people have been discussing stratigraphic issues the last 20 years.

The presented papers can roughly be divided into seven groups according to themes. It is obvious that urban archaeology forms an important foundation for the conference although a few papers discussing prehistoric projects are presented at each meeting. It is also clear that if a meeting has sessions with specific themes, more papers will be presented regarding this specific theme. One example is the theme focusing on the Archaeology of Buildings given in Åland 1999.

However this type of rough grouping does not make obvious the wide range of papers presented over the years. It is not possible here to discern any specific tendencies except that the conferences seem to mirror contemporary archaeological discussions. If one should wish for new themes this would perhaps concern ways of presenting and communicating stratigraphic analysis on complex and comprehensive sites. A thorough discussion on ways of dealing with stratigraphy in fragmented and compressed stratigraphic sequences on prehistoric sites is also desirable. There is also a need for defining and characterizing phases in sites lacking physical stratigraphic relations. How to demarcate chronological sequences and identify phases of desertion in these cases is a big challenge. New technology and science based analysis will continually have an impact on stratigraphic methods and analyses – something to look forward to but which will no doubt raise new questions for discussion at future meetings.

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Having attended most of the meetings, we observe that there is one apparent lacuna among the subjects discussed over the years. Very little attention has been directed toward the finds material and its relation to the stratigraphic sequence. Since the artefacts is a crucial source material in most archaeological investigations, this subject field need to be addressed in the future. The relationship between finds material and stratigraphy is essential in many ways. A thoroughly conducted contextual excavation with well-preserved cultural layers and finds material open for critical discussion on chronological sequences, find-dating and circulation of artefacts (artefact biography), action-based analyses of the use of material culture and not least the understanding of the formation of cultural layers. Suggestion for a future conference theme could be; "Finds are everywhere – or are they?"

The map in figure 4 displays a distinct southern bias in the geographic representation of cities hosting the conference. By focusing on only the southern parts of Scandinavia we run the risk of overlooking the important urban development in the north (Bäck 2015). One example motivating a future meeting in the northern part of Fennoscandia is the many thorough studies made on the early modern town of Tornio/Torneå (Herva, Ylimaunu & Symonds 2012; Nurmi 2011; Puputti 2010; Ylimaunu 2007, 2013). Over the years the geographic sphere of the Stratigraphy meeting has expanded from the Nordic area to include other parts of the Baltic area as well (Estonia, Germany, Poland and Russia). Further, note the presence of participants from Austria. This of course is a positive trend from the side of the organizers, but at the same time puts forward questions about the content, objective and future scope of the conference.

Future meetings should, if we want to develop the stratigraphy meetings, take place in a wider geographical sphere. This is essential since the meetings have always had a strong relation to ongoing field archeological excavation projects, as they tend to reflect the projects overall ambitions and the need of methodological developments as well as being a milieu for new theoretical and archaeological discussions. We should therefore encourage participants from other parts of the Nordic countries, including Iceland and the North Atlantic Islands. And there are of course others.

We look back on twenty years, ten meetings and more than 140 papers. We look forward to twenty more years of stratigraphic discussion, starting with the next meeting in Stockholm 2024.

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