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Using object biographies to understand the curation crisis: lessons learned from the museum life of an archaeological collection

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ABSTRACT

The challenges related to the management of an increasing number of often poorly documented orphaned archaeological museum collections, described in literature as a ‘curation crisis’, are growing. This article proposes that writing collection-level object biographies (referring to the notion of Kopytoff) provides a means to generate useful insights into the *longue durée* of curatorial processes and to understand how curation crises emerge, how to avoid them, and how to manage orphaned, poorly documented and unorganised collections. The potential of using object biographies as a means to tackle the curation crisis is demonstrated through a study of the life history of the Valsgårde collection housed at Gustavianum – Uppsala University Museum relating to a well-known and often-cited archaeological site with the same name. It traces the management and use of the collection and scrutinises the causes and consequences of the problems of curating and making available archaeological collections.

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Introduction

Increasing costs, declining budgets and rapid expansion create pressure on organisations to justify the keeping of large and sometimes poorly documented archaeological collections. The problem, dubbed a curation crisis, has been debated in the literature for some time (e.g., Ford 1977; Marquardt, Montet-White, and Scholtz 1982; Fagan 1995; Kersel 2015), but in spite of these efforts, the means to cope with it, its consequences or even the crisis itself are not yet well understood. One of the key problems is that, apart from primarily anecdotal evidence in the literature (exceptions, e.g., Voss 2012) and often undocumented professional know-how, there is a lack of systematic documentation of what happens to archaeological collections after they have been deposited in a museum: how they are managed, used, and described; what types of objects are considered to be valuable, how the decision to deaccession an object is made, what hinders the optimal use of collections, and what makes managing collections easier. To address this gap in earlier research, we propose that by extending the concept of

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object biography (Kopytoff 1986) to encompass the museum life of archaeological collections, instead of merely individual objects or only the objects life stories before entering the museum, it is possible to discern mechanisms of the curation crisis at work. By identifying and describing these mechanisms it is possible to explicate critical points where efforts may be directed to tackle the on-going crisis.

The aim of this article is to show how writing collection-level object biographies provide a means to generate insights into the *longue durée* of curatorial processes and to understand how curation crises emerge in practice, how to avoid them, and how to manage orphaned, poorly documented and unorganised collections. The process and potential insights are demonstrated through a study of the archaeological collection of Valsgårde (Ljungkvist 2008), one of the most well-known Iron-age burial sites in Sweden and the whole of Scandinavia. By tracing the history of the management and use of this particular collection the study scrutinises the long history of problems and challenges of curating and making archaeological collections available.

Literature review

Research on archaeological collections

The bulk of archaeological collections held by museums around the world consist of fragments, mass objects and samples with primarily scientific and scholarly, rather than public, interest (Biddle 1994). Having said this, the scholarly interest in collections has been traditionally rather modest. Archaeology has been, and still is, epitomised by fieldwork, and more precisely by excavations, rather than the study of collections (Holtorf 2007; Voss 2012) even if the significance of finds research has been stressed repeatedly in the literature (e.g., Olsen 2010; Brown 1981). Therefore it is hardly surprising that there is relatively little evidence-based research on the curation and use of archaeological collections (Buchanan 2016b). Institutional histories of archaeological museums and collections are a partial exception to this trend but instead of examining the management and use of collections in detail, they have had a tendency to focus on broader custodial and organisational matters (e.g., Kirigin 1994; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Robson 2017).

There are, however, some exceptions. Voss (2012) has described in detail the history of, and work with, an orphaned archaeological collection from the Market Street China Town site in San Francisco. She stresses the parallels between scholarly and curatorial work, and how curatorial engagement with collections can lead to new insights in an archaeological site much like scholarly research. Buchanan's ethnography of archaeological curation in five different contexts (two excavations, a museum, a conservation laboratory, and an archaeological repository) provides one of the few comprehensive inquiries into the continuum (or, according to Buchanan, the discontinuum) of curatorial practices of archaeological collections (Buchanan 2016b). Moreover, in the recent literature, there are some examples of empirical studies of participatory collection management and exhibition design that also make some observations of the related curation processes (e.g., Nash, Colwell-Chanthaphonh, and Holen 2011; Cooper 2013; Longair 2015; Buchanan 2016a). Outside of archaeology, comparable ethnographic research (e.g., Trace 2006; Gracy 2004) and case studies of collection management (e.g., Jefferson and Vince-Dewerse 2008) have been conducted also in the context of archives and manuscript collections.

For instance, the work of Jefferson and Vince-Dewerse (2008) highlights the conflicting concerns and priorities relating to collection work, in their case study, between conservators and curators.

Similarly to the case of the Market Street China Town collection, it has been typical that many initiators and most prominent advocates of collection-based research have been researchers working at, or in close contact with, collection institutions (e.g., Gaimster 1994; Svensson 2005; Svanberg 2009; Voss 2012). A prevalent trend around the world has been to separate curatorial and scholarly work, and to strip curators of working time allocated for conducting research (Longworth 1994; Saville 1994). This has undoubtedly affected the volume of research on collections. However, at the same time, the concern for the future of collections-based research has been clearly articulated in a number of texts and anthologies that provide examples of how collections can be used as a resource in archaeological and historical research (e.g., Brown 1981; Lange 2004; Svensson 2005; Voss 2012), and advocate for strengthening collaboration between curators and researchers (e.g., Pearce 1990; Merriman and Swain 1999; Svensson 2005).

Curation crisis

The notion of curation crisis, which first appeared in archaeological literature in the 1970s, refers to the uneasy imbalance between the pace of growth of archaeological collections and the resources used for their curation (Marquardt, Montet-White, and Scholtz 1982; Voss 2012; Kersel 2015; Flexner 2016). The start of the escalation of archaeological collections in Europe and North America dates back to the emergence of rescue and salvage archaeology in early and mid-twentieth century (Demoule 2012; Buchanan 2016b). Towards and after the turn of the millennium the adoption of cultural heritage legislations based on the polluter pays principle, which effectively permit the destruction of archaeological sites if they are first excavated, has led to a massive increase in developer-funded investigations and, consequently, exponential growth of archaeological collections (Silberman 2015). What Brian Fagan dubbed 'archaeology's dirty secret, (Fagan 1995) – the existence of unused and often undocumented orphan collections – has burgeoned into an uncomfortably large problem with major financial, administrative and principled consequences. The continuing excavations and a simultaneous failure to publish findings has also been argued to undermine confidence in archaeology and its relevance in general (Cherry 2011).

One of the most palpable consequences of the massive growth of collections are the problems museums are facing in finding space to house them (Kersel 2015). In some cases, the collections have not even ended up in museums but stay at provisory premises at field archaeology units (e.g., Huvila 2016; Winsa 2018). To address the problems, in the UK for instance, the Society for Museum Archaeology and Historic England has published guidelines for the rationalisation of archaeological collections (Baxter, Boyle, and Creighton 2018). The problem is that many collections have their origins in hastily planned, development-led excavations conducted without a well-reasoned research plan (Voss 2012). As a result, they are not necessarily perceived as equally useful for research as more systematic collections (Brown 1981). As Kletter (2015) reminds us, the storage problems relate to 'bulk items' rather than 'goodies' i.e., uncommon or rare, often complete, and aesthetically pleasing artefacts. The rarity and appeal of the

goodies mean that they end up being used more than mass objects and their lower number mean that they are hardly a problem from a curatorial perspective. They take fairly little space to keep and experienced curators remember that they exist without referring to a catalogue (cf. Huvila 2013). The effective redundancy of bulk finds for most of the conceivable users and uses means that the majority of them are used only seldom if ever (Kletter 2015). The problem of Kletter's categories is, however, the difficulty of determining what would count as 'goodies' and also as Kersel (2015a) and Silberman (2015) note, that studies of mass finds can make substantial contributions to archaeological knowledge in many areas, including the study of everyday life and, for instance, patterns of trade in the past.

A common counter-reaction to curation crisis has been to suggest that excavating should be stopped, but as Voss (2012) notes, these appeals are by no means uncontroversial nor do they help with the massive amount of existing orphaned, unreported and poorly organised collections. Another proposal, which is similarly obvious but at a closer look also problematic, is to focus on *in situ* preservation and stop collecting finds (Silberman 2015; Butler 1979), even if it is apparent that in many cases much more could be done especially with preserving archaeological contexts intact (Silberman 2015). Other suggestions include the packing and keeping of bulk items in more compact storage to save space (Kletter 2015), and to house collections at foreign institutions (Green 2015). None of the suggestions alone is a solution to the problems of curation crises or uncontroversial in the long run. In contrast to these straight-forward proposals, there have also been more general calls for coordination and shared commitment between different actors to take care of the collections (Sullivan and Childs 2003), to improve the education of archaeologists, and to develop legal measures (Kletter 2015) to avoid the orphaning of artefacts and collections. Similarly, it is apparent that even if it is far from being uncontroversial, there is a need to develop measures to evaluate the significance of individual collections to inform the allocation of resources (Jamieson 2015) and to develop procedures concerning how to release and discard redundant finds in a controlled fashion to avoid contaminating archaeological stratum with foreign finds (Kletter 2015). Apart from frequent sidestepping of curatorial priorities in the planning of field projects and shortcomings in the management of collections during and directly after fieldwork (Longworth 1994; Huvila 2016), another factor that has been argued to contribute to the curation crisis is that the funding of archaeological work tends to be heavily focused on fieldwork, and obtaining financing for curatorial efforts and collection-based research is often much more difficult (Voss 2012). Working with orphaned collections is time-consuming (Voss 2012) and with lacking contextual information, very difficult (Meyers 1993). In the end, as Silberman (2015) suggests, the real problem might well lie in the contemporary ideology, which bestows archaeological finds a relic-like aura (Silberman 2015) and defines cultural heritage through 'things' (e.g., Gonzalez-Perez 2018) – both of which make discarding objects highly controversial.

Even if the explicit discussion on the curation crisis has remained as a distinctively archaeological matter so far, the general outlook of framing collections from the perspective of use rather than, for instance, their intrinsic value, is common in contemporary cultural policy. In Sweden, the demands for presenting more compelling arguments for keeping collections became more explicit in the preparatory work for a new national museums policy in the mid-2010s (Frykholm, Kihlberg, and Widén 2015). This policy

recommendation advocates for a more 'active management of collections' (Frykholm, Kihlberg, and Widén 2015, 271) that includes a more proactive approach to deaccessioning (Frykholm, Kihlberg, and Widén 2015). Similar trends are also visible in other contemporary policy documents and guidelines from the same year, including the Swedish translation of the UK Collection management standard SPECTRUM (Dawson, Hillhouse, and Riksantikvarieämbetet 2015), with an explicit aim to aid Swedish collection institutions to improve their work processes, and new guidelines for 'effective management of finds from archaeological investigations' (Amréus and Jansén 2015). An interesting conclusion that can be made by scrutinising the literature is that even if collection management practices are heavily influenced by national policies, local guidelines and contexts, the central problems reported in different studies are conspicuously alike to each other – it would seem that both the problem and its solution have global similarities (Kletter 2015). The findings of the present study provide some nuance to this picture but as discussed later in this article, it is striking how many similarities there are with the results of earlier studies.

Object biography and collections

Archaeologists and cultural anthropologists have been using object biographies for some decades now and as a method it has experienced peaks and troughs of interest over the years. The key assumption of the method is that cultural phenomena can be studied by investigating the biographies of objects. By comparing these biographies to what is expressed, within a specific society, as an ideal biography of a specific type of object and finding where the two narratives diverge, a researcher can expose new aspects of cultural practice (Kopytoff 1986). Several researchers, mainly anthropologists, have applied the method to study what the relationships between people and objects may tell us about cultural practices of trade, identity and societal structures (e.g., Strathern 1988; Gell 1998; Hoskins 1998). Within archaeology, the use of object biographies has often been directed towards the reconstruction of original contexts of artefacts (Gosden and Marshall 1999; Joy 2009). Furthermore, the assumption is that the study of the biographies of certain artefacts, the choices made in their production, the amount and type of usage and the manner of final disposal, may tell us a great deal about the practices of their original owners (Gosden and Marshall 1999). In those cases, the point of interest is, again, the different ways in which humans have interacted with the object, and what that interaction may tell us about past societies – even if a comparison between actual usage and ideal usage may be impossible.

We propose that object biography can be useful when studying archaeological collections and provide in-depth contextual understanding of how they may have been affected by curation crises. In addition to using object biographies for studying the original context of the artefacts (cf. Gosden and Marshall 1999; Joy 2009), or the way in which they were redefined as artefacts rather than ordinary objects (Holtorf 2002), we argue that the method can be used to study the cultural practices of curation and collection management. Holtorf ends his biography of archaeological objects with the artefacts being laid to rest in a museum. In contrast, we propose that important knowledge can be obtained by expanding the narrative to encompass the museum life of artefacts. Granath Lagercrantz (2018) provides an example of this direction by studying the museum life of a collection of Ghanan terracotta artefacts in the British Museum, but unlike what we propose, her emphasis is

on artefacts rather than the collection and its curation *per se*. By extending the biography beyond the study of a single object and to focusing on a collection in its entirety, the biography may shed light on the broader contexts of the management and use of collections and the mechanisms of the curation crisis may be made visible in the way the actual biography of a collection diverges from the ideal biography of curatorship.

A case study: the Valsgärde collection

In the following, we use a case study to exemplify the use of object biographies for investigating a curation crisis in action and for identifying contributing factors that can cause a collection (even one of undeniable importance) to be left largely unpublished and unmanaged for an extended period of time. More importantly, however, the case study exemplifies how the writing of an object biography can be useful in providing insights into the *longue durée* of curatorial processes and the emergence of curation crises.

The case study traces the museum life of the Valsgärde collection, a collection housed in the Historical Collections of Gustavianum – Uppsala University Museum (UUM). The collection is comprised of artefacts from the Iron Age burial site at Valsgärde, north of Uppsala, spanning a time period between 400 and 1100 AD. Among the artefacts are helmets and other armour, textile fragments, bone material and wooden remains (Museum Gustavianum Research Group [MGAF] 2013). The biography was written by the first author, who completed a month-long internship at UUM in 2015, but neither she nor the second author was involved in the Valsgärde project or the curation of the collection. In this sense the authors' perspective on the case study and curation crisis in general is not that of a primary stakeholder – this contrasts to the majority of cases in earlier literature (e.g., Gaimster 1994; Svensson 2005; Svanberg 2009; Voss 2012).

The object biography of the Valsgärde collection treats the entire collection as an object and focuses on its museum life starting from the end of the excavation. The analysis was based on an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996, 2004) of archival material housed at the UUM both in the specific Valsgråde Excavation Archive and in the general archive of the museum, consisting altogether of nine archival series. In finding and accessing these archival series, the first author received valuable help from the staff of the UUM. The archival material was first inventoried to obtain an overview of its contents and to specify a preliminary coding scheme. The material was itself diverse and ranged from records relating to the management of the collection, loan agreements and meeting protocols to reports, letters of authorisation, newspaper articles and correspondence. Records shedding light on the issues of a) physical management i.e., storage and moving of the collection, b) curatorial responsibilities, c) curatorial work, and its d) use for research and exhibition (i.e., issues with a direct impact on the collection), were chosen for a closer analysis. Summaries produced of the records and their contents were then used in writing a chronologically structured narrative with overlapping thematic chapters.

The museum life of the Valsgärde collection

In 1927, local gravel miners in Valsgärde, in central Sweden, exposed the cranium of a horse with a bridle and notified archaeologists at the nearby university in Uppsala. This

initial find would prove to be part of one of a great number of graves in a substantial Iron Age burial site that would keep the archaeologists affiliated with Uppsala University busy for many years to come. Over the years (there were two campaigns, 1928–1936 and 1946–1954) they uncovered 15 boat graves, 60 cremation graves and 15 chamber graves as well as other inhumations (MGAF 2013).

From the beginning, the curatorial work was carried out by the staff of the Museum of Nordic Antiquities (MNA) of the Department of Archaeology (DoA) at Uppsala University alongside the continued excavation on the site. However, due to several reasons, discussed in more detail below, the resulting collection still lacks a complete inventory and only a small portion of the total number of graves has been published. This does not mean that the material has lain forgotten for all these years. On the contrary, the collection has been exhibited and cited frequently over the years. Furthermore, the efforts to comprehensively report the Valsgårde collection have never completely ceased throughout the chapters of its long museum life.

Chapter 1. Issues of curatorial responsibility

A central theme during the first two decades of the museum life of the collection was its contested ownership and a consequent lack of clarity about curatorial responsibility. As excavation continued on the site, the finds were processed in the MNA but the question of the final home of the collection was not yet decided. It was by no means certain that the university would be allowed to keep the excavated finds since all decisions on the depositing of finds were made at the Swedish National Heritage Board (SNHB), the national archaeological authority. The representatives of the SNHB did indeed argue that the finds from Valsgårde were of national importance and should be assigned to the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm rather than to the MNA. Representatives of the MNA in Uppsala argued, on the other hand, that since they had carried out the work, both the excavation and conservation of the finds, and since they needed the collection for research and educational purposes, they should be allowed to keep it. This debate took place within a broader context of change in the heritage sector in Sweden, making the issue not only about the Valsgårde material but also about centralisation of cultural heritage resources, the position of the Swedish History Museum and its relationships with provincial and university museums.

In the Valsgårde archives of UUM some of the letters and meeting minutes concerning this debate survive [1], (references to archival documents will be given in brackets, a list of documents can be found in [Appendix 1](#)) showing an, at times, heated debate concerning not only the finds from Valsgårde but also the purpose and status of the MNA within the Swedish heritage sector [2]. It would take twenty years to finally settle the matter of where to house the Valsgårde collection, and in the end the MNA was allowed to keep the collection in its museum. However, the uncertainty surrounding the curatorial responsibility had already had a negative effect on the planning for the collection's long-term management. It made the early work on the collection short sighted, which would affect the management of the collection for many years to come. The effects of this lack of long-term planning were most clearly seen in the financial security of the Valsgårde project and the consequent collection.

Chapter 2. Issues of financial security

Eventually, the writing of a comprehensive publication series on the Valsgårde site was begun, but the work was faced with difficulties early on. A lack of funding from the very beginning was only one of several issues. The publication of the Valsgårde series, including the processing of the finds, analysis of the material, writing and printing, was dependent on external funding. During the 1940s and 1950s the MNA repeatedly applied for grants for publishing the collection. Several application forms and related documents survive in the Valsgårde archives [3] and they tell a story of constant financial struggle. The department was usually granted financial aid, but never anywhere near the amount applied for. Without grants, the work on the analysis and publication of the Valsgårde material had to be carried out alongside the researchers' daily work, sometimes unpaid, and even when a publication was completed, there was trouble financing its printing. As a consequence, the work on the Valsgårde series progressed slowly. The first volume, on grave 6, was published in 1942 (Arwidsson 1942) but in 1945, when the publication on grave 8 was finished, the department lacked the funds to print it. The subsequent application for a grant also stated that the department was unable to provide salaries for the researchers (i.e., staff with research training in archaeology) working on analysis and publication of graves 5 and 7. Grave 8, eventually published in 1954 (Arwidsson 1954), was the second publication in the series. The third, a volume on grave 7, was published in 1977 (Arwidsson 1977) and these would be the only complete volumes published in the Valsgårde series *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgårde*. Students carried out much of the work on the collection at the DoA, [4] that kept the costs down, but neither this nor the reliance on grants was ideal for strategic management and publishing of the collection in the long run. This way of working on the collection made the process very vulnerable and heavily dependent on the department head, Sune Lindqvist, who was the author of all the funding applications and kept up correspondence with researchers, printers and representatives of other museums to ensure progress on the project.

Chapter 3. Issues of management

Alongside the issues of finance, other factors seemed to slow down the progress of curation. In spite of the uncertainties of curatorial responsibility, the archaeologist working on the Valsgårde site did keep up with compiling proper find lists and small reports on every grave during the first decades of excavations. Most of the graves excavated were at least partly published in archaeological journals within 3–4 years of excavation (Dyfverman 1929; Fridell 1930; Odencrants 1933). Several researchers were involved in the publication of the site and had been given the responsibility, or privilege, to publish particular graves in journal articles, the main publication, or in a separate thematic series which focused on noteworthy finds from the site.

By 1947, at least three graves (grave 3 dug in 1929 and graves 61 and 62 dug in 1936) had no report or publication. It is unclear what resulted in the lack of reports for the latter two. However, according to a progress report from 1948 [5], the reason for grave 3 not being published, almost twenty years after its excavation, was simply that the person responsible for its publication had not gotten around to it. Additionally, one of the funding applications [6] suggests that the researcher working on grave 8, Greta Arwidsson,

declined an offer of help with parts of the editing of the publication. She denied the offer even though she had had difficulties finding time to work on the publication alongside her other responsibilities, wishing to see the important work through [7]. Something similar could explain why grave 3 was not published, since the task of publishing it had not been assigned to another researcher even if the first researcher failed to get it done.

It appears that to some extent, the ambitions of individual archaeologists involved in the research work took precedence over the curation of the collection. An important nuance to this is that there was no financial structure to ensure that the archaeologists assigned to publish the material would be paid for their work on the collection. This meant that the personal ambition to complete the publication became the central mechanism that propelled the excavation and curation efforts. Furthermore, establishing a more structured approach that would have allowed different researchers to work on specific graves in a more systematic way (with follow ups and enforcement) was difficult because of the uncertainty surrounding the curatorial responsibility.

The management of the excavations and the collection, including the acquisition of funds and coordination of the different researchers' work was, as noted above, led by the head of the DoA and MNA, Sune Lindqvist. His retirement in 1954 was a critical moment in the biography of the collections. In the terminology of Voss (2012), the retirement of this key person left an already underreported collection orphaned. In stark contrast to the retiring archaeologist in Fagan's *Archaeology's dirty secret* (1995) however, Lindqvist made a significant effort to ensure that work continued on the Valsgårde collection. He formulated a status report and plan for the continued work on publishing the collection, with specific researchers assigned the responsibility to publish specific graves. There is no indication that the financial situation at this time was any more stable than during the previous decades, but as evidenced by the documents concerning grant applications dated two years after Lindqvist retired, he was still trying to remedy the situation (Friberg 2016), refusing to leave the collection orphaned and unfunded.

Even though the collection was not entirely orphaned by the retirement of Lindqvist the archival material directly relating to the Valsgårde collection became sparser after the mid-fifties. The rest of the biography of the collection had to lean more heavily on the UMM's main archive and documents relating to the MNA in general. Judging by these general documents and the fact that there are few documents in the Valsgårde archive dated after the retirement of Lindqvist, the activity, documentation and institutional engagement in the collection seem to have declined following his retirement.

Chapter 4. Issues of storage and preservation

In the 1960s new problems arose. The field courses held by the DoA had generated large collections that flooded the MNA. Parts of the Valsgårde collection spent at least five years in temporary storage during the 1960s while the rest was exhibited in outdated cabinets, resulting in a real concern for the preservation of the collection. In an attempt to remedy the situation, the DoA applied for financing of new and updated interiors for the MNA. However, the application was denied, arguing that it would be more suitable for the DoA to manage their artefacts as research collections rather than aiming to, as stated in the application, build a new public exhibition [8]. In 1968 the situation prompted the then head of the DoA, Bertil Almgren, to petition the university for more storage space

[9], and in 1970, for new exhibition cabinets. Without them, he feared, he could not fulfil his duty of keeping the artefacts in safe for research or even basic preservation [10]. Possibly as a result of these difficulties, several finds from the collection underwent conservation between 1977 and 1980. Some of the textile finds were sent to the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm for conservation in 1979 [11] while a large number of finds received renewed conservational attention within the frame of an agreement with the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, Germany in 1977. The museum in Mainz offered to perform any necessary conservation in return for being loaned the artefacts for an exhibition [12].

Apart from what can be learned from loan agreements, the data did not allow for a detailed narrative of the management of the collection during the 1980s. The loan agreements showed that at least parts of the collection were on loan for several different Swedish exhibitions between 1980 and 1988 (Friberg 2016) but other documents made it clear that, in 1985, some artefacts from the collection were kept in boxes in the attic of a university building [13].

By 1995, the collection was housed in several different university buildings, in some cases in basements with no environmental control, to the detriment of the finds. Iron artefacts from the Valsgärde collection were especially affected and in acute need of conservation [14]. The poor state of the finds could be discerned also in the loan documents. In 1993 a loan request regarding the armour from grave 8 was denied, in part due to its poor state of conservation, which prevented it from being transported. When, in 1996, a transfer of the DoA's collections to a new more appropriate facility was planned, the ramifications of the earlier lack of proper storage and care became apparent. In the original budget for the move, conservation of damaged artefacts was allotted 16,000 SEK, but in the end the necessary conservation cost 99,044 SEK [15]. This indicates not only the poor condition of the collections but also the lack of a functioning information infrastructure with the contextual information needed to properly estimate the damages.

The data suggest some discrepancies between the use of the collection and the management of it, with several documents showing struggles to manage the collection in outdated, unsuited and cramped conditions while loan agreements and research requests shows a collection of national and international interest.

Chapter 5. Lack of issues – and issues – of use

The museum in Mainz was not the only museum interested in the Valsgärde collection. Despite suffering from being stored under less than ideal conditions and not being completely published, the Valsgärde collection has received substantial attention over the decades. Artefacts from Valsgärde had been exhibited in the MNA in Uppsala from the very beginning, but parts of the collection were also exhibited in other museums. The earliest documented loan dated to 1933 when a helmet from grave 5 was exhibited in Stockholm, but it was in the 1960s that artefacts from the Valsgärde collection began to be loaned regularly for exhibitions in different Swedish museums. From the 1970s onwards, there was also growing international interest in the collection. Artefacts from the collection were exhibited in several German cities in addition to Mainz as well as in Austria, Switzerland and France. Artefacts from Valsgärde have also been exhibited at the British Museum in the UK, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Minneapolis

Institute of Art in the USA during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Interestingly, the interest in the collection for exhibition use was not impeded by the fact that it had not been published, regardless of the lack of a comprehensive publication, the collection was well-known internationally. The fact that some artefacts could be sent on loan to other museums also suggests that, even though the MNA lacked storage space and feared for the condition of the finds, there was a measure of curatorial functionality.

Similarly, the physical management issues in the 1990s did not lead to a decline in attention to the collection. A number of institutions, researchers and private individuals showed interest in the collection even in the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, archival documents show a resurgence in requests of access to the collection for research purposes. Interest in the collection had predominated been about exhibitions since the 1950s (Friberg 2016).

Chapter 6. Attempts to get to grips with the collection

In the mid-1990s, the archaeological collections of Uppsala University were moved to new larger facilities. However, in 2003 the rapid accumulation of new material from field courses resulted in new issues concerning storage space. At this time the DoA made an effort to survey the state of the collections from different department-led excavations, trying to establish such basic information as where the excavations had been carried out, who had been responsible, and whether there were any publications of the sites. There seemed to be no record of the excavations and the survey was largely dependent on what current and past staff members could remember of their work. This is a common issue when day-to-day curatorial work relies too heavily on informal information exchange. Among the collections mentioned in the survey was the Valsgårde collection, which was marked as one of the prioritised collections for publishing. At this time, three researchers had taken on the responsibility for the graves that remained unpublished. In keeping with the tradition and history of the collection, it was also noted that funds to support this work would be highly useful. In 2004 there were plans to apply for a grant to improve the conditions and documentation of the departmental collections, including the establishing of a database and work on digitisation of photos and plans. Specific plans to apply for funds for the Valsgårde collection were included in the proposal [16].

Chapter 7. New issues of custodianship

Simultaneously, the possibility of depositing the boat grave material in the Maritime Museum in Stockholm was discussed as a possible solution [17], breaking with earlier traditions of fighting to keep the Valsgårde collection at the university. In fact, a year later, in 2005, the then head of the DoA petitioned for the majority of the collections from the departmental excavations to be re-deposited in other museums. Furthermore, if no other museum could be persuaded to take the collections, it was suggested that some of the materials should be disposed of, to free up funds for the care of the more important collections. In the petition, the department head argued that the Valsgårde collection should remain at the university, but that the department should be freed from any financial responsibility for it. This coincided with a decline in external use of the collection,

both for research and exhibitions. In a contemporary questionnaire submitted to all departments within Uppsala University with collections, the DoA stated that they made little or no use of its collections for educational purposes and had no researchers studying material in the departmental collections. Furthermore, the department reported having few international or Swedish researchers visiting the collections [18]. The loan documents seem to confirm this, with a clear decline in requests from 2004. In response to the petition, the dean stated that no such action could be carried out with collections lacking both site reports and complete catalogues. The department was, however, granted funds for two months salary for two people to survey the situation and formulate a plan for remedying the situation.

The resulting survey was completed in 2006 and confirmed the conclusions of the smaller survey conducted in 2003. A plan of action was presented, including the establishing of an archive for excavation reports and working on long-term financial solutions for the management of the collections. Collections, including that of Valsgärde, which already had people working on reporting and publication, should be followed up every two-to-three years to make sure that work progressed. It appears that a real effort was made to describe and publish the Valsgärde collection with, at least some, funding procured for that purpose [19]. During the following years, the existing loan documents suggest research on the Valsgärde collection was indeed carried out by those responsible for working on the publications of graves.

Despite these measures to ensure the management, documentation and publishing of the material, there is no clear sign of lasting improvement in the physical management of the collection at this time. In 2008, the artefacts from the Valsgärde collection were included in a list of items that had been damaged by water and in 2011, the DoA's collections had once again outgrown the storage facilities and a new move was planned. In the preparations for this move a report stated that the bone material of the Valsgärde collection was in danger of deterioration, as it was kept in unprotected finds boxes [20].

Chapter 8. Revived interest and future plans

The planned move took place in 2012 to its current location in the Gustavianum Historical Collections. Since the move, the curation of the collection has continued, again with the help of students working with the material as part of their studies. The bone material from Valsgärde was documented and digitised by a student of museology (Lönnegren Wikensten 2012) and the archival material from the excavation was sorted and given a proper archival description by a student of archival science (Brodin 2012). In 2015, the DoA won a substantial grant for a ten-year research project, focusing on contextualising the Viking age. The Valsgärde collection will likely be central to this project and as a consequence, its curation could perhaps be allotted the funds it has awaited for almost a century.

Discussion

The Valsgärde collection and curation of archaeological collections

It is obvious that the Valsgärde collection cannot be considered representative of all collections or the state of curation in general – in Sweden or internationally – and therefore it

is important to be mindful when applying the specific findings of this case study to other contexts. Diverse factors relating to historical and contemporary developments, conditions and traditions, local customs, disciplinary and professional differences in archaeological and curatorial practices have an impact on the life of collections. In this light, it is remarkable how well the problems discussed in conjunction with the curation crisis map with the ones represented in the biography of this specific collection. The Valsgårde collection does not have its origins in development-led archaeology, as the majority of orphaned collections (Voss 2012), and there has been, by all accounts, a genuine effort to publish and take proper care of the collection, which as a whole comes closer to being a 'goodie' than a 'bulk item' (Kletter 2015). Despite this, the biography of the Valsgårde collection shows a museum life of issues very similar to those described in the curation crisis literature (e.g., Voss 2012; Kersel 2015). Even if the analysed documents did not provide direct evidence of explicit conflicts between new excavations and curation of old material, there is a clear undertone that carrying on with fieldwork is inevitable, something which curators and older collections just have to accept (cf. Holtorf 2007). In keeping with the observations of Voss (2012), funds, even if limited, are available for fieldwork whereas the curation work is, in practice, expected to be done with no or little extra resources. Students have been an indispensable resource for the management of the Valsgårde collection, demonstrating a similarity with the circumstances of the Market Street China Town site (Voss 2012).

Considering that Valsgårde is one of the most celebrated Iron Age sites in Sweden and that the material has captured attention not only in Sweden but also internationally, it is conspicuous that the use and interest in a particular collection has had only a limited impact on the resources available for its management and how the collection has been prioritised in administrative decision-making. Also, in the life history of this particular collection, a temporary period of lower interest in the mid-2000s was immediately raised as an argument for a need to find a new host for the collection, much as others have suggested that it could be possible to find committed hosts for redundant collections at other institutions (Green 2015). At the same time, however, the state and resources available for the Valsgårde collection should be compared to the, presumably even worse situation of other, lesser known collections. Within this context it is possible to understand the rationale behind the radical demands to stop excavating (Voss 2012). As a whole, the situation underlines the urgent need to discuss the premises and desired outcomes of archaeological fieldwork and the building and keeping of finds collections. The biography of Valsgårde collection does, however, also show that coordination and shared commitment of different actors is difficult to achieve in practice (cf. Sullivan and Childs 2003) especially post hoc. The life history of the Valsgårde collection is a long continuum of attempts to engage different actors, including individual researchers, university administration, heritage administration and museums, and coordinate their actions to ensure its usability and longevity. It underlines the importance of having legal measures in place and assigning responsibilities and sanctions to relevant stakeholders *before* a collection begins to accumulate. At the same time, it offers a highly informative look at the local issues that contribute to the escalation and perpetuation of this problem. In the case of Valsgårde, things were worsened by the lack of continuity of financial resources and the reliance on staff who were either only temporarily assigned to the project or who were, in practice, unavailable to conduct the work for years or even decades.

The analysis also confirms the observation of Huvila (2013) that museum work tends to be based on social information exchange rather than the use of formal documentation and keeping of databases. Individual curators (i.e., staff with a responsibility for managing the collections) with in-depth insights in specific collections hold a key position in the documentation, publishing, use and keeping of collections. Even if this dependence can be remedied – with, for instance, something like the careful documentation and planning work Lindqvist did in the mid-1950s – the situation still remains precarious. The reliance on social exchange in curatorial practices contributes to the occurrence of curation crises and also indicates why so little is done to remedy the situation. Even if formal curation and documentation are seen as important, they are not necessarily crucial to the short-term success of the daily work at a museum – or at a university department. As Kersel (2015a) notes, curation is indeed almost always a problem for someone else – even for curators that supposedly carry the final responsibility.

Doing object biography on a collection

The case study of the Valsgårde collection shows that an object biography of a collection can provide useful insights into the emergence of a local curation crisis and into points of departure from an ideal biography of a well-managed and completely published collection. In addition to the findings on local, specific mechanisms of curation crisis, there is more directly generalisable findings of the present study. The Valsgårde case shows that it is possible and useful to produce a useful biography based on archival material. An obvious possibility would have been to complement the analysis with, for instance, an interview study or a study of the traces of curatorial history in the literature and media. A specific advantage of an interview-based object biographical study is that it can be used to collect and structure informal undocumented curatorial knowledge (that has been noted to play a crucial role in curatorial information work, e.g., Huvila 2013) held by key individuals before they retire or change jobs, or in some cases, to rediscover knowledge thought to be lost. However, if an archival study is possible and it appears to give a reasonably comprehensive insight into the life story of a collection, it has several practical advantages to other and more comprehensive approaches – especially if the aim of the exercise is not to write a biography of a collection *per se* but to provide an instrumental understanding of its curatorial past. In comparison to retrospective interviews and, for instance, a large-scale investigation of references in the literature and media, a focused archival study is less time-consuming, archival materials can help to put forward contemporary professional concerns in different moments of time (cf. retrospective interviews and published opinions), and, especially with older and less notable collections, it is probable that even very comprehensive investigations would provide only very limited amounts of additional information, when little or no additional information is available.

In the Valsgårde case, it would have been possible to broaden the investigation. During the course of the study, it became evident that there was a strong oral tradition surrounding the collection (Friberg 2016) and because of the significance of the site, there is also a lot of additional material available, including books, newspaper articles, documentaries, brochures and more. However, considering the aim of the present study – to use the Valsgårde collection as an example to illustrate the possibilities of the object biography

approach and its potential in shedding light on the phenomenon of curation crisis – and the limited space in a journal article, an exhaustive analysis of all possible evidence relating to this specific collection was considered to be beyond the scope of the present undertaking.

In the Valsgårde case, a specific advantage of limiting the investigation to the archival record of the museum housing the collection was that it highlighted clearly the shortcomings in record-keeping practices. It is crucial that records documenting the curatorial practice are made and kept to provide *paradata* (Huvila 2012) of what curators have done and why. Failing to do so and relying on informal information sharing (cf. Huvila 2013) is a strong antecedent of an emerging curation crisis. In the case of the Valsgårde collection, there was a clear decline in record-keeping from the 1960s onwards that led to very real curatorial problems in the 1990s. The lack of documentation was compensated by costly surveys of the state of the collection that could have been avoided, at least to a degree, with systematic record-keeping throughout the years.

As a whole, the studies of the museum lives of collections should consider archival documents, interviews and even meticulous studies of the collections themselves as possible source material for a biography. The chosen data should reflect what questions the study aims to answer and of course, the circumstances and the data that is available on a particular collection. The same applies to the analytical approach for producing a biographical narrative. Different flavours of content analysis (Altheide 1996, 2004) including close reading (DuBois 2003), open- and close-ended coding, and qualitative and quantitative summarisation of the material can be useful approaches as well as using writing as an explicit form of enquiry (Richardson 2000). As noted before, in many cases, it is conceivable that the available material is scarce. If the curatorial history of a collection is poorly documented and archived, or, for instance, if the key individuals working with the collection are deceased, it is obvious that this will have implications for the writing and interpreting of a biography.

Implications of collection-level object biographies

In comparison to an object-level object biography, using the method to encompass an entire collection, and extending the perspective to include the museum life of a collection allows for a more holistic perspective. Such a comprehensive outlook is necessary in bridging the gap between the practices of archaeology and collection management, a gap identified as one of the causes of curation crisis by several researchers (Longworth 1994; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Voss 2012). Regarding the entire collection as one object and studying its biography helps to make visible broader social practices of curation and provides a framework within which to describe and document these practices.

The proposed use of object biographies to trace the life history of collections can simultaneously help to parry problems caused by a curation crisis and to contribute to our knowledge of how these issues emerge and function. The use of object biographies as a tool for collection management can help to re-contextualize individual orphaned collections, thus enabling new collections-based research and improvement of management practices in the future. In the Valsgårde case, a recurring task in the initiatives to take up the curation work was to survey the state of the collection, a step which could be easily avoided if a biography of the collection were in place. Collection-level object biographies can illuminate the pitfalls of collection management, provide guidance for the

formulation of proactive management strategies and, retrospectively, help to bridge those same pitfalls by re-contextualizing the collection. Furthermore, the method can just as easily be used to study collections which are not similarly affected by curation crises, giving those collections additional context and helping to identify factors that help to keep a collection from becoming orphaned or underreported.

Finally, it is obvious that object biographies can also serve other functions. The accessible, narrative form of biographies allows for the knowledge of the collection itself and its life in the museum to be communicated to both the public and to decision makers. The narrative produced can also be used as a starting point for developing new exhibitions or new research, and can provide glimpses into the work of museum professionals, showing the efforts and struggles involved in the curation of collections. This approach can, consequently, help in making the museum come alive in the eyes of the public through a more transparent curatorship and building public support for continued work (see Buchanan 2016a). Further knowledge of the mechanisms involved in curation and the curation crisis combined with a narrative description of such mechanisms might also facilitate communication with decision makers who put pressure on museums to actively curate and make use of their collections.

Conclusions

The present article has showed how a collection-level object biography of a museum collection can be used to open up new perspectives on its curatorial history, current state, and future opportunities relating to its use for research purposes and, for instance, exhibitions. Collection-level life histories also help to better understand the underpinnings of the curation crisis in archaeology, the exponential increase in the number of orphaned collections, which are poorly documented, unorganised and hardly used at all. Understanding and documenting the mechanisms of how collections become orphaned helps to develop measures to avoid that they become lost as well as helping in their later documentation. A closer look at the Valsgårde materials held at Uppsala University in Sweden shows that the concerns and challenges documented with other collections around the world remain largely the same. Lack of funds and a failure to prioritise collection management; a reliance on social rather than inscribed information exchange in curatorial work; the physical deterioration of materials; and a lack of continuity in efforts for the conservation and study of the collection are just a few of the common problems that contribute to the emergence and persistence of the curation crisis.

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Appendix 1. Archival documents

The archival documents all originate from the archives held at Gustavianum Historical Collections at Uppsala University. Where there was a clear author of the document, this will be stated first, followed by the year or date of the document. If the document has a title, this will be given first in its original Swedish followed with by a translation or summary in English. Documents lacking a title have been given a summary of its content in English within brackets. This is then followed by the archival collection to which the document belongs.

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