

Museums, museology and cultural heritage studies in Sweden 1993–2017

Some experiences and effects

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Abstract: *In the last twenty-five years, the Swedish museum landscape has expanded and contains today several thousand museums, from the single local history museum to the merged governmental central museum, many of them organized in different networks. During the same period contemporary collecting, diversity issues and difficult matters became both attractive and urgent topics for the public cultural history museums. Also, museology and cultural heritage studies were established at several universities, with professorships as well as basic educational programmes. As a consequence, the perception of museology as research done at museums was replaced by research on museums, often with a critical view of the history of collections and exhibitions. During the last few years, however, a polarized media debate reveals that there might still be a gap between the actual, contemporary museum and the more traditional concept of the museum in (some) people's minds.*

Keywords: Museums, museology, cultural heritage studies, Sweden, contemporary collecting, difficult heritage.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the public cultural history museums in Sweden definitely oriented themselves towards contemporary society. What in many respects was new and perhaps unthinkable before, is today standard procedure, although media from time to time love to call it out as news that: “Museums are collecting today’s objects!” But sometimes a wider crack opens up, as when Stockholm City Museum’s documentation

of the public sorrow after the terror attack in April 2017 coincided with a media debate where some participants advocated a far more traditional form of museum activities. For many museum professionals, this worked as a reminder of the gap that sometimes occurs between the actual museum and the concept of the museum in people’s minds – a gap that at best could be bridged by museological research.

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MUSEOLOGICAL FIELD**

In this particular context, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the journal *Nordic Museology*, I have chosen to focus on some features that distinguish a specific Swedish museological experience and at the same time represent a concurrent Nordic and international movement. But since I have been a part of these processes myself, my choices also rely on experiences of being a practising curator and researcher.¹

In another article in this issue, the historian of ideas Mattias Bäckström examines the innovative and internationally oriented scholarly setting around Umeå University and the Västerbotten Museum in the 1980s and 1990s – the home environment for the first Department of Museology in Sweden as well as the journal *Nordic Museology* (Bäckström 2018). This was a response to a new international constructivist paradigm that gained ground at that time, when “museology”, “museum research” and “museum studies” step by step left its positivist focus on practical methods, factual object knowledge and research done at museums. Instead, the museum itself became the object of study, not least in a critical perspective and with diversity issues in the foreground (cf. Karp *et al.* 1991; 1992). As Bäckström shows, the discussions among the museologists in Umeå were shared with their colleagues in ICOM, the International Council of Museums, but also with other disciplines at the university, mainly the history of ideas (Bäckström 2018). However, I would like to emphasize the decisive influence from yet another discipline in Umeå – ethnology. Many ethnologists got attracted by “material culture studies”, first developed among American anthropologists, where the previous “objects research” was replaced by analyses of contemporary artefacts, focusing

on aspects such as meaning, context and social relations. An early Swedish statement was the edited volume *Människor och föremål* (People and Things), a Festschrift for the retiring professor of ethnology at Umeå University, Phebe Fjellström (Arvidsson *et al.* 1990).

Beside archaeology and art history, ethnology was the main educational background for curators at Swedish cultural history museums, and material culture had always been a defining part of the discipline. Now the new views on materiality reached the students and curators, according to both methods and time focus. Regarding time, however, the museums were already on their way to considering their own society a subject for field research and acquisitions. As early as in 1977, the network Samdok had been established, organizing at most eighty cultural history museums in the study of contemporary life and work, including the production, consumption and use of objects (Silvén 2004; Silvén & Gudmundsson 2006).

The decisive impulse behind the whole enterprise was an examination of the collections at the Nordic Museum, conducted for its centennial anniversary in 1973. The study revealed that both the lower social classes and the twentieth century were clearly underrepresented, and since this was the situation at almost every cultural history museum, the conclusion was that they needed to solve this together. The subsequent debates about collecting methods, selection criteria, representation, ethics, “filling gaps”, “type artefacts” and “contextual acquisition” developed museological knowledge from practice and deconstructed the process of musealization of everyday objects. This promoted reflexive and critical thinking among the museum professionals about the curatorial task, which was further developed in methodological training courses and

explorative projects (e.g. Silvéen 1992; Björklund & Silvéen 1996). The work was also shared with Nordic colleagues, and networks like Samdok were created in Denmark, Norway and Finland, although varying in scope and permanence. For the overall Nordic collaboration, the museum network Norsam was built to organize joint conferences and fieldwork.

These curatorial experiences helped to develop museology, when presented at lectures and seminars at the universities.² As the head of the Samdok Secretariat at the Nordic Museum, I was frequently asked for such contributions, from the 1990s onwards when courses and programmes in museology – or under the broader name of “cultural heritage studies” – expanded all over the country (Olausson 2004; Smeds 2006; 2007).³ Per-Uno Ågren, the first editor in chief of *Nordisk Museologi* and head of the Department of Museology in Umeå, was awarded a personal professorship in 1995, the year before he retired. A permanent chair was set up in 1997, but the appointment was delayed until the position was taken by the cultural historian Kerstin Smeds in the early 2000s. Also, the Department of Conservation at Gothenburg University got its first professorship in the 1990s, and a programme for International Museum Studies was created in collaboration with the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg and the School of Museum Studies in Leicester, UK.

Another expression of the growing interest in museology was the formation of the independent Council for Museological Research, in 1995, on the initiative of Erik Hofrén, head of the Museum of Work in Norrköping.⁴ This was a time when a discussion of “museum research” was growing, both inside and outside Sweden, including research *at* museums as well as *on* museums, and the latter – museological – point was still to be made. The Council

collected around twenty-five members, mainly from museums, cultural heritage administrations and universities. It became a body for promoting museological research and education and was engaged in establishing the professorship in Umeå and suggested that Stockholm University do the same. Also among the activities were the organization of conferences and seminars and the editing of museological publications (e.g. Palmqvist & Bohman 1997).⁵

From the 1990s on, the Swedish museological field was also strongly affected by the international movement for preservation and research on the industrial cultural heritage, with the Division of History of Science at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm among the research institutions involved (Alzén & Burell 2005; Geijerstam 2013). And at the beginning of the new millennium the department Theme Q – Culture and Society was established as a part of Linköping University/Campus Norrköping, with focus on the construction of cultural heritage and *historiebruk* (the uses of history) (e.g. Aronsson 2004; Aronsson & Elgenius 2015). Campus Norrköping also saw the birth of an initiative regarding museum displays as subject for museological analysis, education and methodology, taken by exhibition designer Eva Persson (Persson 1994; cf. Bäckström 2016). Today the digital journal *Utställningsetiskt Forum* (Forum for Exhibition Aesthetics), is still the main Swedish platform for reviews and reflections about museum exhibitions.⁶

THE SCHOLARLY OUTCOME – MUSEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

In accordance with this multifaceted field of research, museological knowledge in the form

of doctoral dissertations has not only been produced within the formal discipline, in Umeå. There, seven theses had been presented by April 2018, and beside these there is a range of dissertations from other disciplines that have also dealt with issues relevant to museology and cultural heritage studies. Together all these works amount to at least forty, published during the years 1987–2017, recently at a faster pace than before. In addition to the dissertations, there has of course been a lot of other research done, published in monographs, edited volumes and journals, which have further expanded the field.

In parallel, museology and heritage studies have become mainstream at many contemporary universities, albeit at a slightly different pace in different countries (cf. Macdonald 2006). One example is Stockholm University, where the earlier BA Programme in Cultural Studies has been replaced by BA Programme in Museums and Cultural Heritage.⁷ Another tendency is represented by the museologists in Umeå, who will change their current BA Programme for Museums and Cultural Heritage to a new Sector Education for Museums and Cultural Heritage, in collaboration with the Department of Ethnology. The focus will still be mainly on the museum field, but also include the growing cultural heritage sector with its small-scale, private-run companies in tourism and consulting.⁸ A third tendency can be tracked down to Gothenburg, where the Department of Conservation, giving practice-oriented BA programmes in object conservation and urban preservation since the 1980s and a Ph.D. programme since the 1990s, is now part of the cross-faculty research centre Critical Heritage Studies, run in partnership with University College London.⁹ More courses at BA and Master levels are available at other universities, run by different disciplines.

TODAY'S MUSEUM LANDSCAPE – ORGANIZATION AND PRACTICE

Compared to twenty-five years ago, the number of museums in Sweden has increased, but in a very rough view the organizational landscape looks almost the same. Firstly, we have the public municipal and regional museums, mostly cultural historical in character, but also including collections of art, archaeology and natural history. Secondly, there are the central or governmental museums, mostly located in Stockholm, with specific orientations, for example the Maritime Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Museum of Ethnography. Also foundations with governmental support and national missions belong here, like the Nordic Museum, the National Museum of Science and Technology and Åjtte – the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum. Thirdly, a wide “category” consists of museums all over the country with specific orientations and varying ownership, financing and professional standards, such as the Prison Museum, the Dance Museum, the Jewish Museum, the Guitar Museum and some biographical museums and collections. Art museums form a fourth growing type, mostly privately owned, apart from the governmental Nationalmuseum and Moderna Museet in Stockholm and some others in the hands of municipal authorities. As a fifth kind, there have long since been hundreds of voluntary small local museums all over the country, and during the last few decades a parallel network of small working life museums has exploded. Some local and regional museums also still contribute to the Swedish tradition of open-air museums.¹⁰

The public museums in particular have a history of working together in different organizational forms, with permanent collabora-

tive boards as well as temporary commitments, sometimes initiated by the government, such as the *Diversity Year* in 2006. An organizational change, with consequences for the museums' cooperation and methodological development, occurred when the Samdok Secretariat was closed in 2011. Today, the corresponding work is carried out in the more sparse network DOSS – Documentation of Contemporary Sweden and in COMCOL – the ICOM Committee for Collecting, created in 2012 on the initiative of Samdok.¹¹

The last twenty-five years have seen several museum inquiries, with suggested changes regarding aims and organization, but most of them with little effect on the museum landscape, at least from the visitors' point of view. Considering the framework, however, several governmental museums have been merged into larger administrative authorities, and then often reorganized according to matrix models.¹² As a result of the latest inquiry and the subsequent government bill (2015–2017), two already amalgamated institutions – on the one hand the National Historical Museums and on the other LSH (Royal Armoury and Skokloster Castle with the Hallwyl Museum Foundation) – have recently been mixed into one body, with a shared responsibility for supporting public knowledge and interest in Sweden's history.¹³ Another result of the bill is the closure of the Swedish Exhibition Agency (Riksställningar), which since 1965 has produced hundreds of travelling exhibitions, beside working as a hub and a driving force in the development of the exhibition medium (Broms & Göransson 2012). Some parts of that task will now be continued by the Swedish National Heritage Board (Riksantikvarieämbetet), whose general responsibility for cultural heritage issues now has been expanded to supporting development

and cooperation among the museums, on behalf of the Department of Culture.¹⁴ Yet another result of the government bill is a new Museum Act, which states that any public museum, in accordance with its own mission, shall contribute to society and its development by promoting knowledge, cultural experiences and the freedom of opinion. In doing so, the museums shall have a deciding influence upon the content of its activities and not be governed by political representatives on any level.¹⁵

The museums' actual practices during the period in question here have to a great extent been focused on the professionalization of collection management, digitization (for all purposes) and the visitors. Regarding the featured content and direction of the museums' exhibitions, fieldwork and collecting during the 2000s, contemporary issues concerning diversity and public participation have engaged many, along with the representation of minorities, both ethnic and others. As for many other European museums, the last years' migration situation has been mirrored, for example with the Mediterranean refugees and their mobile phones as a topic for exhibitions and collecting – a survival tool and simultaneously a piece of contemporary material culture.¹⁶ In addition, testimonies from the #metoo movement have been saved – yet another problematic current issue with international coverage. (Fig. 1.) This kind of "difficult heritage" has in the 2000s become a general term for the records of contested and problematic incidents and conditions in contemporary society, as well as for memories and remnants of historical abuse like war and genocide. In Sweden, the concept was introduced around the millennium by the collaborative exhibition and book project *Svåra saker* (Difficult Matters) (Silvén & Björklund 2006).¹⁷ (Fig. 2.) The project attracted international

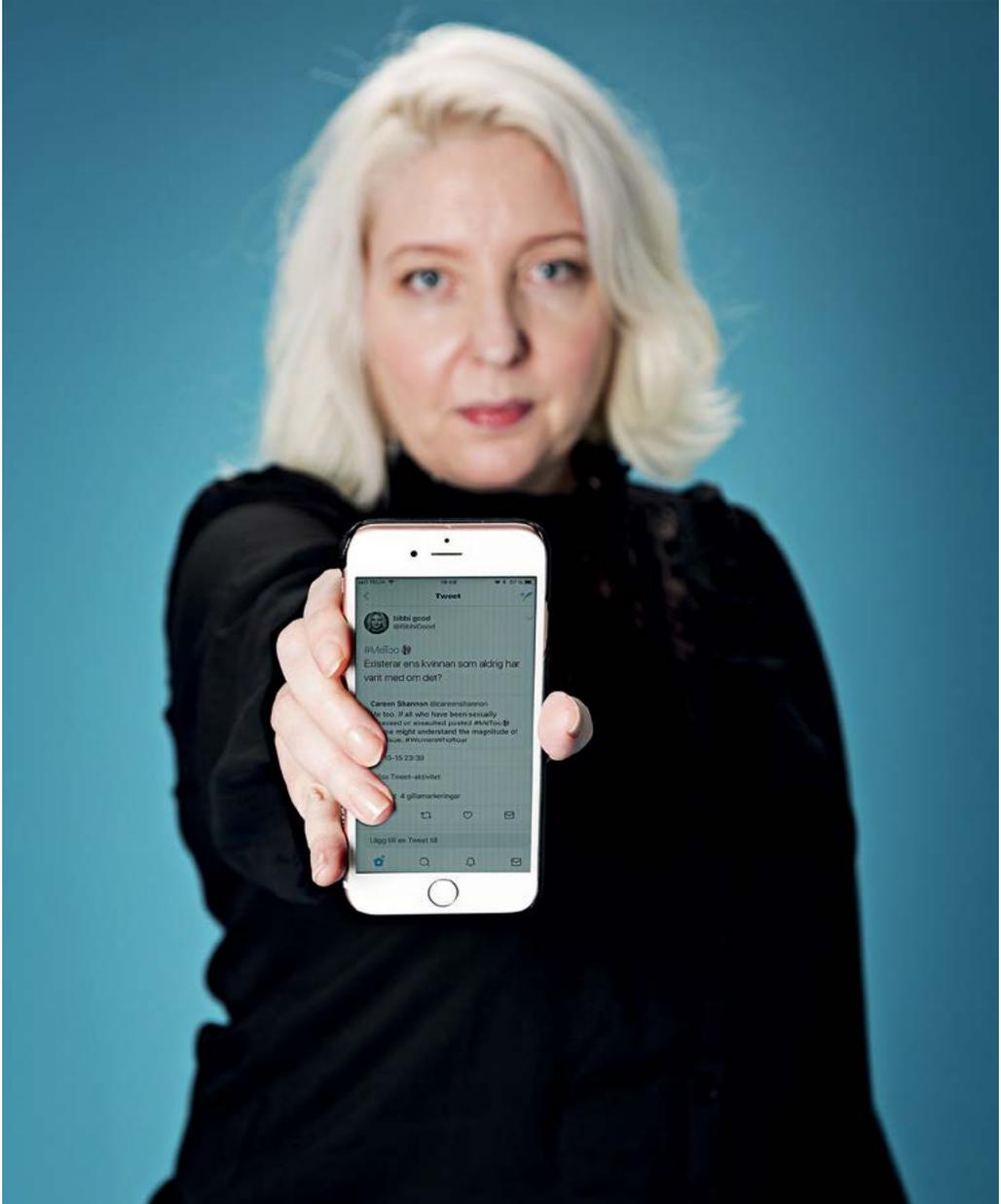


Fig. 1. "Does the woman even exist, who has never experienced that?" Bibbi Good in Arvidsjaur sent the first Swedish #metoo post. Her phone is now a part of the collections of the National Museum of Science and Technology. Photo Anna Gerdén.



Fig. 2. *The Difficult Matters travelling exhibition in Norrköping, December 1999. Photo: Mats Brunander.*

interest (e.g. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002) and also inspired the corresponding Norwegian museum project *Brudd. Om det ubehagelige, tabubelagte, marginale, usynlige, kontroversielle* (Break. About the Unpleasant, Taboo, Marginal, Invisible, Controversial) 2003–06.¹⁸

THE MUSEOLOGICAL TURN

What can then be said to be the experiences and effects of the “museological turn”, or “cultural heritage turn”, since the 1990s? What has museology contributed to the museums, the universities and the contemporary society (cf. Brenna 2009)? A first consequence is that museology has become a legitimate discipline,

among other subjects at universities and colleges – although not always among the funding bodies. A second consequence is that museum work today is a profession with its own education and qualification. A third consequence is the critical eye that museology has given anybody who has encountered it, an eye that always looks for questions about *who, what* and *why*, directed to the museums themselves. Together with indigenous and post-colonial methodologies, museology thereby offers new possibilities to examine the collections connected, for example, to the Sami, as well as other indigenous peoples and minorities, in order to decolonize them by clarifying their provenance and disclosing

126 the power relations they still represent and continuously reproduce (cf. Silvéen 2014).

With the help of critical museology and critical heritage studies, questions have also been asked what museums, by routine, have either put in the forefront or in the background. Perhaps we are finally seeing a response to the repeated critique regarding the museums' weak interest in social and contemporary issues – put forward in the 1940s as well as in the 1960s?¹⁹ On Friday 7 April 2017, a terror attack was carried out in the centre of Stockholm, and five people died. The public response was immediate: spontaneous shrines were set up with flowers, memorabilia and written condolences along with tributes to the police (cf. Santino 2006). Stockholm City Museum also reacted promptly, documenting the shrines by photographing and collecting items and by setting up a website for personal narratives. (Fig. 3.) Twenty years ago, this was not the rule, as in 1998 when sixty-three youths were killed by arson in a discotheque in Gothenburg. Almost all parts of the local community were involved – the police, social services, health care, schools, as well as politicians and media. The project *Difficult Matters* had just started, so I called the Gothenburg City Museum and asked my colleagues how they were going to contribute. The answer was that they had no plans at all, they didn't see this as a part of the museum's assignment – a decision that was soon changed.²⁰ Apparently, there have been transformations over the last few decades; today we can notice quite another way for museums to react to "difficult" situations, in Sweden as well as in other countries (e.g. Maynor 2016).

However, before and during the Stockholm City Museum's documentation of the terror attack in 2017, Sweden saw a major and polarized media debate about museums



Fig. 3. Screenshot from the web journal *The Local*, 18 April 2017.²²

and heritage, run by leading researchers, journalists and museum practitioners on both sides. Starting from a concrete critique of organizational and economic aspects of the National Museums of World Culture, the debate turned to more fundamental questions, all related to the development described in this article.²¹ One critic wished for a special "contemporary museum" where one could put all the stuff that didn't belong to a "real" – historical – museum. Another one wanted the ethnographic museums just to present their outstanding collections – not discuss how they were created. A third one criticized the museums' quest for a dialogue with their audiences and the desire to convey stories of individual people – obviously without the insight that such contributions already constitute the base of the museums' knowledge resources. A fourth one arrogantly attacked the idea of giving marginalized people back their rightful place in history as "identity politics" and "particular interests". A fifth critic argued against the Minister of Culture's wish for the museums to apply "norm criticism", namely to avoid and counteract stereotyping and

discriminatory norms regarding, for example, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

The debate was a useful reminder of what a contested subject cultural heritage is, and how deeply different opinions can be hidden underneath a joint stance against fake news and manipulated science. It was also a sign that museology still has work to do, to affect public opinion about the museums' role in society. Several contributions revealed not only a profound ignorance of how today's museums work worldwide, but also a nationalist and conservative view of culture and history, including a wish for a return to positivist – “objective” – artefact research. With the current growth of nationalist and right-wing forces, the ideological fights ahead will be even more about history and heritage. And as a result, the pressure will increase on museums – as reliable and independent knowledge institutions – to use their specific tools in defence of historical truth, human rights and fair representation.

NOTES

1. I hold a Ph.D. in ethnology, and as a curator at the Nordic Museum 1989–2016 I have taken part in several of the contexts described here, e.g. as the head of the Samdok Secretariat 1989–2003, as a member of the Council for Museological Research, and as a participant in some of the projects mentioned.
2. A parallel interaction between theory and practice took place in the development of the history of built environments in the 1970s and 80s. See Holmberg 2010.
3. The various courses and programmes were named *museologi* (museology), *museikunskap* (museum knowledge), *museivetenskap* (museum studies) or *kulturarvsvetenskap* (cultural heritage studies), until today's *museer och kulturarv* (museums and cultural heritage) and *kritiska kulturarvsstudier* (critical heritage studies).
4. *Program...* 1997.
5. In 2006, the Council closed down and prepared a transformation to an Association for Museology, but this was not realized.
6. <http://www.ueforum.se>.
7. https://www.erg.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.167727.1392901705!/menu/standard/file/BA_programme_in_museums_and_cultural_heritage.pdf.
8. <https://museerochkulturarv.wordpress.com/about/om>.
9. <https://criticalheritagestudies.gu.se>. Also at Stockholm University there is today a Critical Heritage Studies Network, on a smaller scale and hosted by the Department of Ethnology, <https://www.erg.su.se/english/critical-heritage-studies-network>.
10. The Swedish Museums Association (Riksförbundet Sveriges Museer) was established in 2004 and organizes 220 museums of different sizes, some public and some private. In 1906–2007 the Swedish Museum Organization (Svenska Museiföreningen) had the same role, for both individual and (from 1977) institutional members. According to the Association, there are in total more than 1,700 museums in Sweden, including the very small ones. However, the Swedish National Heritage Board counts at least 2,500 museums. <http://www.sverigemuseer.se>; <http://www.raa.se>.
11. <http://www.sverigemuseer.se/network/doss-dokumentation-av-samtida-sverige>; <http://network.icom.museum/comcol>.
12. The latest inquiry gives an overview over the last fifty years of organizational changes, museum politics and earlier inquiries, with focus on the governmental museums: *Ny museipolitik. Betänkande av Museiutredningen* 2014/15. SOU 2015:89. <http://www.regeringen.se/4a957d/contentassets/>

- a7f58685a4964dbfb276541303516196/ny-museipolitik-sou-201589.pdf.
13. *Kulturarvspolitik. Regeringens proposition* 2016/17:116, <http://www.regeringen.se/4933fd/contentassets/127b80d33b084194a415d72b85721874/161711600web.pdf>; National Historical Museums: <http://shm.se/ny-myndighet-ska-framja-kunskapen-om-sveriges-historia>; <http://shm.se/en>.
 14. <http://www.raa.se>.
 15. *Museilag* 2017:563, https://www.lagboken.se/Lagboken/sfs/sfs/2017/500-599/d_3010166-sfs-strong2017strong_563-strongmuseilagstrong?search=museilag%202017.
 16. *I'm Alive* at the National Museum of Science and Technology; *I telefonen finns hela människan* (The Mobile Contains the Whole Human) by artist and curator Henrik Teleman.
 17. The travelling exhibition was created together with the Swedish Exhibition Agency, which also organized the tour 1999–2000.
 18. <http://www.kulturradet.no/vis-publikasjon/-/publikasjon-brudd>.
 19. Cf. Nilsson 2004:110–121; Silvé 2004:145–148.
 20. The objects from a shrine outside the building were collected, and the first seminar in the *Difficult Matters* series, about museums and disasters, was held at the museum.
 21. The Swedish National Heritage Board has made a summary of a large part of the posts from spring 2017, however, several important posts are missing, mainly from autumn 2016: <http://www.k-blogg.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Länklista-Kulturarvsdebatten-K-blogg.pdf>. See also Bernsand & Narvselius 2018, about the current as well as earlier debates, policies and conflicts regarding cultural heritage issues in Sweden during the 2000s.
 22. <https://www.thelocal.se/20170418/memories-and-images-from-stockholm-terror-attack-to-be-preserved-by-museum>.

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