# What's going on between history and archaeology?

## Reflections on reciprocal relationship between two disciplines in historical archaeology in Finland

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Although historical archaeology is established as a specialized field within archaeology in Finland, the relationship between history and archaeology is still questing for a reciprocal alliance. In the first part of the 20th century, historical archaeology was practised mainly by historians and ethnographers who conducted archaeological excavations and combined archaeological findings with historical evidence in their writings and research. Since the 1980s, historical archaeology has experienced a remarkable change and attracted an increasing number of archaeologists with the focus on medieval and post-medieval sites and history. For them combining history with archaeology is self-evident and some of these archaeologists have qualified themselves as historians too. However, historians have not been engaged in historical archaeology and still remain in their studies quite firmly within historical source material. Collaboration between historians and archaeologists does exist to a limited extent and at the individual level, but can we really talk about interdisciplinary co-operation between these two disciplines? Is there any need for such? The article reflects the prevailing situation between these two disciplines in Finland and discusses the reasons for the dominant division and possibilities for a better relationship.

### Short introduction to the history of historical archaeology in Finland

In Finland, the history of historical archaeology is nearly as old as the history of archaeology dating back to the end of the 19th century. The repairs of the medieval castles and churches promoted the research of these monuments, which was mainly practiced by art historians and historians. Archaeological excavations on historical sites and urban milieus were often carried out by the researchers whose background and education were in



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history, ethnography and art history. Becoming fully aware of the fact, that the historical documents from the medieval times in Finland are very limited both in number and contents, archaeology was considered as a necessary means to get more information about the beginnings of the historical times. (E.g. Koivunen 2003, p. 40, 70; Taavitsainen 1999, p. 6.)

It was very natural to combine archaeological findings with historical documents and research for those who practiced the research of the Middle Ages. From the end of the 19th century until the 1980s the researchers of medieval history supplemented the historical evidence and hypothesis of the course of events with archaeological findings, which accessorized the story of the past making it more concrete. Distinguished historians and researchers combined these two subjects in their studies mainly related to the medieval history. These researchers practiced interdisciplinary research on an individual level when they transferred the knowledge from one discipline to another by crossing the boundaries between the two disciplines. (E.g. Gardberg, 1971; Kuujo, 1981; Ruuth 1909.)

However, archaeologists were mainly considered as specialists of prehistorical times, whose expertise was focused on excavating and interpreting things without written history. Situation changed from the 1960s onwards when archaeologists began to conduct excavations on urban sites. However, until the 1980s, the historical archaeology was equalled mainly with the medieval archaeology. (Drake 1984, p. 4.) In the 1990s, historical archaeology expanded to cover post-medieval and early modern periods with several excavations in urban and rural sites in different parts of the country. (Seppänen 2012, p. 37–45.) Universities offering education in archaeology responded to the practical need for specialists and the interest of the students and it became possible to specialize in historical archaeology in Finland.

## Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in theory and in practice

The engagement between history and archaeology has resulted in practises of different kind. Most often these two disciplines are interlinked in studies composed by single researchers. A review to a selection of studies and publications combining historical and archaeological approaches in Finland does not always make it easy to distinguish the difference between interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary collaboration between different researchers. Multidisciplinarity is the weakest form of co-operation, which draws on knowledge from both disciplines but stays strictly within their boundaries. In this case, different



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researchers might have a common research problem and even work together at some point during a project, but they approach this problem with different questions, sources, methods and theories. This kind of co-operation can be characterized as problem-oriented teamwork where the studies are carried out by more than one researcher separately. The studies are presented in a common publication or report with separate articles or in completely different journals. (Choi & Pak, 2006; Mikkeli & Pakkasvirta 2007, p. 63–65.)

In Finland, this kind of collaboration began within historical archaeology in the early 1980s. Although, there had been collaboration between scientists and archaeologists in pre-historical studies, the first project within historical archaeology, which included collaboration between different researchers, was the Mätäjärvi-project in Turku in 1982. The excavations and the research project resulted in a collection of articles, which included archaeologists, scientists and a historian, who reflected the history of the area based on historical sources and cartographical material. The approach to the research of the site was multidisciplinary since the boundaries between different disciplines were clear and each study approached the site with different sources, methods and perspectives. (Kostet & Pihlman 1989.) Since then, there have been projects of similar kind based on excavations and studies on certain sites, which have produced publications containing various articles with different approaches to the same topic or site. (E.g. Brusila et al. 2003; Virtanen et al. 2003.)

When interdisciplinary research is practised by more than one person the researchers representing at least two disciplines try to pool their approaches and modify them so that they are better suited to the common goal. In this relation, researchers compare individual findings and transfer knowledge from one discipline to another. The subject at hand may appear differently when examined through the disciplines of history and archaeology, but it is approached as a common problem with shared information, methods and theories. In publications, reports and disseminations of different kind, the results and contributions of two disciplines are, however, to be distinguished. Although the boundaries are crossed from both directions they are still acknowledged. The aim of this kind on interdisciplinary research is to create something new by combining different kind of source material and methods and thinking across different disciplines. (E.g. Choi & Pak, 2006; Mikkeli & Pakkasvirta 2007, p. 65.)

Archaeological research projects including several researchers working on the same topic are mainly funded by the Academy of Finland or by different kind of foundations.



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Most often the research group is composed of a few archaeologists. Sometimes the research includes co-operation with scientists who are making different kinds of analyses of the archaeological material. Even though the research is related to historical periods, the collaboration between archaeologists and historians has been quite limited so far.

It seems that the co-operation between archaeologists and historians is realized most often on a multidisciplinary level, but interdisciplinarity is rather achieved on individual levels. Most often interdisciplinary elements are detectable in certain articles but the collection of articles represents the multidisciplinary approach of the project. Earlier, interdisciplinarity (including history and archaeology) was practised by historians focusing on medieval history, but today it is practised by archaeologists studying historical times on a wider scale. Although, archaeologists have used historical information, approaches and studies, the emphasis, however, lies clearly and firmly on archaeological material, methods and theories. History is either supplementing the archaeological study, giving the frames for the study or used as a starting point for presenting the new information provided by archaeology. The importance of historical information equals the needs of the research and capability of an archaeologist to use it. Historical archaeology seems to be as much a method combining different source materials, methods and approaches as a study of a certain time period. (See e.g. Orser 1996, p. 23–28.) On the basis of publications and studies of different kind, it seems to be self-evident to archaeologists who work on historical periods to use historical sources and studies provided by historians. However, historians working on the same subject, theme, site or time period have used archaeology, archaeological information and studies on a non-existent or a very limited level. What is the reason for this unbalanced use and one-way flow of information?

## Research - prevailing practices and conceptions

The relationship between archaeology and history in medieval and post-medieval studies seems to be quite unbalanced in Finland. There are many reasons for the dearth of collaboration and why the archaeological sources and studies have not broken into the discipline of history. When I was preparing this contribution, I was able to approach the staff members in the department of history and archaeology at Turku University. The following discussion about the prevailing situation between archaeology and history is based on both my own views and the responses of five people, who expressed their interest in closer collaboration between history and archaeology. I am fully aware of



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the fact that this small sample does not represent the opinions of the whole field of these two disciplines, but all interviewees have worked on subjects which could have benefitted from the reciprocal information exchange and share an interest in increasing co-operation between history and archaeology.

The group consisted of three historians and two archaeologists, of whom three were professors, one lecturer and one assistant working on his PhD-thesis. My own background lies on both disciplines having graduated from both subjects. The general opinion of the group is that the level of collaboration between the two disciplines and people practicing these professions is too limited at the moment. Motivation for collaboration and common research possibilities do, however, exist – so where is the problem?

One of the reasons for the limited level of collaboration is the focus of research, its questions and perspectives. In Finland, the historical archaeology is stressed on periods and topics with very few historical sources and research possibilities for historians. Consequently, the starting point for archaeologists is already attitudinal: The less there are historical sources and material, the more meaningful and justified the archaeological research will be. In other words, archaeological research is entitled when historians run out of means for new information. This justified the need for archaeological excavations and material in the late 19th and early 20th century, and this reason has not lost its importance in the 21st century either. Both historians and archaeologists emphasize the importance of collaboration especially in medieval studies. As a medievalist of some kind, I agree, but at the same time I oppose the idea that archaeologists should resign themselves to this role and concentrate mostly on the periods and topics with very little historical information.

Among some historians there seems to prevail an idea, that some subjects are already thoroughly studied on the basis of the source material available and the subject has nothing more to offer for the historians of today. This is in line with the previous notion. If archaeologists find some new material and revitalize the case with the new information, the stage is open for them, but there is no need for historians to return to the stage any more and participate into an active dialogue on this topic.

There is another kind of illusion of closed cases and complete studies. This is related to the early modern and modern periods with plenty of written source material, which have been studied by historians in the past decades. Some researchers – including both archaeologists and historians – are inclined to think that archaeology has nothing more to offer for these studies. According to



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them, the excavations can possibly bring to light new objects for museum collections and exhibitions, but they cannot bring substantial new information on the subject anymore.

Personally, I was confronted with this kind of attitude quite recently, when I was excavating a village in the southern part of Finland, in the city of Lahti. My premise was to try to find the earliest traces of the village, the medieval village, and I was supposed to concentrate on those layers and constructions with my limited time and resources. Instead, we found a well-preserved village from the late 19th century, whose history – I was told – was already well recorded by historians many decades ago. We did not wipe out the remains and finds of the 19th century village but did excavate it with the same methods and level of documentation as we did the features from older periods. This aroused some attention and criticism – both from historians as well as archaeologists. I was asked why to waste energy and resources for the village from the 19th century, whose history has been recorded by historians already? What is the value of archaeological material from the 19th century? Is it really worth half a million euro? I am still working on my answers, which I would like to present in a very concrete way with research and results incorporating different approaches to the site, excavations and material.

During the past decades, the focus of historical research has also changed in many ways. Historians have approached social sciences in theoretical aspects as well as in the selection of topics. Among many historians it has been popular to study social relations, behaviour and other abstractions, like mentalities and emotions. *Longue durée* studies – which are quite suitable for archaeological inspection – have changed into micro-history and short-term history. However, juxtaposition between these approaches is unnecessary since *longue durée* orders the relation of different temporalities and events within the totality of social time establishing causal relations between them. Focus of historical studies has also shifted to more recent decades and contemporary phenomena, which are not considered belonging to archaeological research in Finland at the moment. Interestingly, archaeology as a concept has been adopted into these studies and there are research-topics like the media archaeology and the archaeology of happiness etc.

For many historians, archaeology is still a study that focuses on finds from the older periods. Some historians seem to think that since archaeology is studying the past materiality, its focus is on the empirical research and use of scientific methods while theories are irrelevant. Many historians are unaware of the wide spectrum of archaeological research of today, which extends to



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various fields, periods and topics including the same theoretical ideas and approaches that are used in anthropology, social studies, history, ethnology and other cognate disciplines. New studies are created in many areas like in marine archaeology, warfare archaeology, industrial archaeology, urban archaeology, environmental archaeology, garden archaeology and contemporary archaeology. (E.g. Majewski & Gaimster 2009.) At the same time new studies and approaches open up a new dialogue with the old studies and sources and spread of ideas within a broader space of time. There are plenty of new contact surfaces with other disciplines, too. Collaboration requires will and a common aim, but it won't be possible unless people are informed and aware of ongoing research and collaboration possibilities.

## Institutional borders and limited resources

In Finland, one can study history in seven universities, but archaeology can only be studied in three universities: in Oulu, Turku and Helsinki. As one of my interviewees pointed out, this means that there are universities and historians who do not have any contact with archaeology. Consequently, the understanding about the archaeological field and research may remain very narrow among many historians. However, I would emphasize the significance of interest and awareness of archaeological research instead of the structure of organizations. For example, I have been invited more often to give lectures in the Tampere University in the department of history than in Turku University, although the focus of my recent studies has been in the history and urban archaeology of Turku and one cannot study archaeology in the university of Tampere.

In those universities, which are hosting the department of archaeology, it belongs to the Faculty of Humanities / Arts. In Helsinki, the department of archaeology belongs to Culture Studies. (Helsinki University, 2014) In Oulu, the connection between archaeology and cultural anthropology is realized with shared studies on the basic level. (Oulu University, 2014) In Turku university, the department of archaeology belongs to the school of History, Culture and Arts Studies. However, it is not combined with history studies (including Cultural History, Finnish History and European and World History) but belongs to Cultural studies together with Comparative Religion, Folkloristics, European Ethnology, Museology and Life Philosophy. The link with these studies is merely administrational. Classical archaeology belongs to School of Languages and Translation studies together with Creek and Latin Philology. (Turku University, 2014a) Having studied history, classical archaeology and



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archaeology I can express as my opinion that a more appropriate contentual connection and possibility for educational and information exchange could be made by combining these subjects together with history studies.

A couple of years ago, Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen, the professor of archaeology in Turku university, suggested that the department of archaeology should be linked up with natural sciences, since the methods and contacts of today's archaeology are more related to sciences than humanities and collaboration between archaeologists and scientists is more active than between other humanities. Being aware of the level and activity of collaboration with other humanities, this point of view is understandable. For many, the proposition to join archaeology together with natural sciences was however surprising, since the department of archaeology in Turku has had a strong emphasis on historical archaeology since the mid 1990s. The attempt to incorporate archaeology into the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science, which was justified with closer collaboration and relationship with the science, did not support the views that archaeology and history belong together. The proposition of incorporating archaeology into the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science was rejected. However, on the 18th of November 2014 a decision was made to bring the department of archaeology together with the departments of geology in Turku University and Åbo Akademi University in 2016 when all these departments can be found in the same premises. (Turku University, 2014b) Time will tell, whether this kind of re-arrangement will bring along any changes into the specialization and activities of the department of archaeology.

Interestingly, different research traditions or belonging to different faculties have not disturbed the collaboration with sciences. Personally, I am inclined to believe that artificial institutional borders can easily be overbridged. Despite our physical location, labeling or classification, we can have cross networks, cross seminars, cross projects and cross publications – if only there is motivation and people who make it happen. The only limits for the co-operation are set by our own will, creativity and resources.

Lack of resources, including time, money and people, is probably the principal reason and blockade for the co-operation between history and archaeology. The shortage of time and resources seems to be a common problem on every level and every field, and consequently decisions need to be made how to use the resources we have, how to prioritise the different possibilities for research and collaboration. The limited amount of resources causes competition on every level, even so,



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that there is competition for good students between these two disciplines. At present, the competition for resources is one of the reasons, which is discouraging co-operation. Instead of competing against each other, disciplines should rather compete together for more resources and for better financing and for more interesting and productive ways of doing research.

The shortage of time and resources causes inadequate education or a narrow basis for education since there is no possibility to study many subjects or gain knowledge about many disciplines. Students, personnel and researches seem to focus their time and energy to the issues that are on their agenda at that moment. Specialization should happen in the very early phase of studies, which enables early graduation. This is in strong contrast with the idea of wide education which historical archeology requires. The departments of archaeology in three universities (Oulu, Turku and Helsinki) are very small consisting only of one professor plus three to four other people. Today all departments declare historical archaeology as one of their specialisations among many other things. Consequently, the profiling of the departments is overlapping. A combination of limited resources and a need and an ambition to cover all fields of archaeology results in lack of extensive, specialized and organized education in historical archaeology.

The number of professors, lecturers, and researcher who are interested in co-operation and share common interests in both disciplines is small in Finland. Professors and other members of the staff should set a good example to the students, researches and younger colleagues. One possibility to increase mutual understanding, respect and information exchange is to establish programmes related to certain topic or time period connecting researchers across the borders of different disciplines.

In 2005, Turku Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (TUCEMEMS) was established in Turku University. It is a multidisciplinary centre, which aims to promote interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies of different topics ranging from the Late Antiquity to the 18th century. The Centre encourages interdisciplinary debate by organizing seminars and lectures about different topics. At present, TUCEMEMS has over 100 members from various faculties of the university, including musicologists, archaeologists, biologists, linguists and philologists, philosophers, historians, art historians, and researchers of comparative literature and religion. Research topics range from medieval sexuality and eremitism to Spinoza's philosophy and eighteenth-century bodily grievances. (Tucemems 2014) The meetings make it possible to get to know researchers working on different topics, which hopefully will diminish the prejudices



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and increases awareness of different studies and mutual understanding and respect.

## Communication, collaboration and common tables

The first prerequisite for co-operation is a common interest shared by different parties. The better the parties understand the approaches and methods of each other, the more intensive and intimate the collaboration will likely become. This requires mutual respect and understanding about the usefulness and importance of different contributions, a holistic approach to the study with a common aim. Understanding is closely related to communication. Other historians have told me many times how impossible it is to read archaeological articles – not to mention the excavation reports. Archaeological jargon, especially if the studies include any kind of presentation of scientific methods and results, seems to be from a different planet and beyond any contact surface to history. Concepts like radiocarbon analysis, dendrochronological dating, isotope and DNA analysis suffocate the interest of historians, since they get the feeling that this is beyond humanistic scope. Archaeologists have acknowledged the same problem with somewhat milder words: "Sometimes we talk about the same things with different languages". Again I would say that communication problems can be solved, since neither of these disciplines is rocket science. Communication requires only mutual respect, consideration and first of all some effort.

All my interviewees emphasized the importance and exigency of co-operation, – especially in medieval studies, which reflects the still prevailing conceptions about the role of historical archaeology. History and archaeology have different academic and research traditions, which seems to affect the opinions about these disciplines and practitioners. Personal factors label and stigmatize the relationship in many ways – in both directions, for good and bad. Competition, ignorance, prejudice and negative attitudes cause nonchalance, disrespect and envy. Personal contacts and collaboration on an individual level seems to be the best way to decrease prejudices and increase interest on both sides. Today, there are many who are interested in co-operation and we just need to find the resources and best channels for fruitful collaboration.

After a long engagement, one might end up noticing that we simply have drifted apart as it seems to have happened between history and archaeology after more than one hundred years of engagement. If we want to collaborate, we need to get rid of juxtaposition and self-assertion. We need to exchange information and educate each other, seek common interests and possibilities for a more



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balanced co-operation. We can have joint seminars and publications, cross the borders in different ways and on various forums. There are always possibilities to create research projects with common research problems employing researchers and students from various disciplines. We should not forget to employ historians to our research projects from the very beginning – starting from excavations, if only possible.

When we present what we can bring to the table of the research, there is a possibility that we might get more people to share the spread – provided by past and present, and with the promise of the future. The question is, do we need to bring to that table a new theory of our own to attract others to join us – or are we attractive enough without it? Since every setting is likely to be different, the suitable theory might emerge after the table has been set for that particular team in co-operation.

Above, I reflected the differences between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary co-operation. The most intimate form of collaboration between two or more disciplines is transdisciplinary research. In this collaboration, different researchers are exchanging information, altering discipline-specific approaches and sharing resources. In this kind of collaboration disciplines integrate into achieving a common scientific goal. Transdisciplinarity requires conceptual and methodological correspondence. It also includes a process in which specific and separate analyses are combined and discussed within a common theoretical approach. In this marriage, the boundaries between different disciplines vanish and they are not distinguishable in publications or reports any longer. Transdisciplinary research can be considered as the most advanced way of collaboration, the most holistic approach to the subject, where researchers are using different source material and employing various methods, theories and studies from different fields. (Mikkeli & Pakkasvirta 2007, pp. 66–67)

The level of collaboration does not necessarily equal the superiority of the setting or the supremacy of the results. The level of symbiosis and collaboration needs be chosen according to the research problems and naturally according to individual researches as well. Collaboration between different researchers is not always needed and it should never be based on artificial and non-scholarly reasons. The main aim of archaeology is to study the story of mankind, his(s)tory – our story. If we could ignore the disciplinary borders and establish a process for discussion and research among different actors who have a common interest and aim to understand the topic in question, we might be able to weave new kind of interesting studies in historical narrative. Crossing the bridges and borders, combining



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sources and studies, methods and theories, discussing with the past, present and future – this is how I see the role of historical archaeology or rather hybrid archaeology of today.

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