## Contents / Sommaire / Inhalt

Editors & Editorial board .................................................. 5
Contributors ................................................................. 7

### Articles / Aufsätze

Lotta M. Omma, Lars E. Holmgren & Lars H. Jacobsson, Being a Young Sami in Sweden. Living Conditions, Identity and Life Satisfaction ........................................... 9

Jan Ragnar Hagland, Literacy and Trade in Late Medieval Norway ................................................................. 29

Annegret Heitmann, „[A]lles öde und kahl, und somit echt isländisch.“ Ein Reisebericht aus dem Jahr 1846 oder die Anfänge des Island-Tourismus ......................... 39

Stephen Pax Leonard, Ethnolinguistic Identities and Language Revitalisation in a Small Society. The Case of the Faroe Islands ........................................ 57

### Miscellanea: Notes / Notizen

Researching the North at Aberdeen (Neil Price) ................................................................. 75

### Reviews/Comptes rendus/Besprechungen


### Instructions to Authors .................................................. 100
Researching the North at Aberdeen

In 1996 the University of Aberdeen in north-east Scotland entered its sixth century of existence, having been founded in 1495. The fifth-oldest university in the English-speaking world, Aberdeen was keen to build on its established reputation as a leading research institution and enter a new phase of renewal through substantial fundraising and investment. The result of these initiatives, termed the Sixth Century Campaign, has transformed the university through the creation of over 60 new professorships, the establishment of new departments and research centres and the attraction of external grant support in unprecedented amounts (see www.abdn.ac.uk for an overview of the university, its history and the campaign).

The centrepiece of this renaissance was a conscious decision to brand the institution as the ‘Global University of the North,’ promoting its work as a world-leading centre for research into the high latitudes, expressed across the full disciplinary spectrum from humanities to the hard sciences. As the holder of one of the new Chairs, and inaugural head of a new Department—Archaeology—I have been closely involved with the development of Northern Studies at the University of Aberdeen, and the editors have commissioned this short piece by way of introduction to a research centre that may be of interest to the Journal’s readership.

The ‘Global University of the North’

The University itself has always had direct northern links, being founded amid the early turbulence of the Scottish Renaissance and the religious conflicts of the age. Aberdeen, and Scotland, lie at the hub of a vast region that extends across the northernmost third of the globe. Rejecting an overly strict definition by latitude, Aberdeen’s ‘North’ encompasses northern Britain, Scandinavia and Baltic Europe, northern Eurasia and high-latitude North America—linked by the varied communities of the North Atlantic and North Pacific. In research terms, the North is a big room to which Scotland forms one of the main doorways. The North is no periphery but instead a greater world of encounters and interactions.

Academics conducting northern research are now to be found across all three Colleges of the University, in subject areas such as Plant and Soil Science, Zoology, Geography and Environment, Law, History, Celtic Studies, Education, Business and Economics amongst others. The Institution also looks to Northern vernacular traditions in music, art, literature, poetry and performance, a focus that also extends to the university collections in these areas. While northern research plays a major role in all these departments, in two above all it is at the forefront of operations.

Archaeology and Anthropology

Archaeology and Anthropology are sibling disciplines; indeed they are often understood as branches of the same discipline, especially in North America. In the UK, however, they have tended to go their separate ways, and where they do exist
in the same institution, they are commonly in different buildings and/or faculties. At Aberdeen we are trying to reverse this trend by creating synergies at all levels from undergraduate and postgraduate teaching to doctoral and postdoctoral research that could be achieved in no other institution.

Research confluences include interests in material culture, architecture and technology, perceptions of the environment and landscape studies, work with indigenous peoples, and above all, the study of the North: the development of both Anthropology and Archaeology at the university has been underpinned, from the outset, by the objective to make Aberdeen the principal centre for Northern research in these disciplines. Today, they in many ways lead the University’s Northern profile and we have the UK’s largest concentration of anthropologists and archaeologists working in the high latitudes. Internationally, our teams are similarly distinctive with a global impact, and in both fields our research is recognised as world-leading. Aberdeen anthropologists and archaeologists are conducting active research in northern environments as diverse as Siberia, Iceland, Alaska, the Russian Far East, Hokkaido, Scandinavia and the Pacific Northwest Coast, amongst many other localities.

A particular emphasis of the University’s scholars—unique in the UK—is their relationship with indigenous communities: current work is being undertaken with several Native American and First Nations groups, the Sami of Fennoscandia, the Ainu of Japan and a number of Siberian peoples. In Archaeology our flagship project here is the departmental field school in Alaska, based at the coastal site of Quinhagak to study over 25 miles of shoreline settlement along the Bering Sea. The project is run together with the local community of Yup’ik Eskimos, working closely with Native American elders, hunters, fishermen and village decision-makers. The settlements under excavation are up to 1,000 years old with waterlogged soils preserving organics and other normally perishable remains, resulting in a collection of artefacts and building remains unique in Alaska. The finds have attracted global attention in the archaeological community, and the project embodies everything that our Northern agenda is about. In addition to our Alaskan work, we also run field schools in Iceland and Scotland, on which our students learn the fundamentals of archaeological practice. Two more collaborative excavations are now being set up in Japan and British Columbia, both involving the local indigenous communities.

In my own discipline, our international work is anchored through formal collaborations with universities, museums and other relevant institutions in the Aberdeen Network for Northern Archaeology (ANNA), with particularly extensive links in Sapporo (Hokkaido University) and Vancouver (Simon Fraser University) alongside a range of Nordic centres.

Our specific research embraces four key themes:

- **Human interactions with northern environments**—how did individuals and communities adapt to, understand and transform the landscapes they moved and acted in?
- **Material culture, technology and vernacular architecture**—how and why did new kinds of objects, technologies and built structures emerge from, and spread into, the societies of the northern world?
• The northern mind—how do past and present societies in the north perceive and understand the world, how do they define themselves in it, and how do they express their beliefs and identities?

• Interactions between northern populations—how far did diasporas, colonisations and inter-community contacts define the long-term culture history of the northern world?

Within these we also pursue particular cultural specialisms, including amongst many others:

• the archaeology of the Vikings
• the Northern Neolithic
• the ethno-archaeology of hunter–gatherers

Archaeological links also extend into other Departments, such as Geography and Environment, where the Palaeoecology Research Group focuses on prehistoric and historical changes in land use, especially in the North Atlantic region. In conjunction with our sister disciplines at the University, Aberdeen’s archaeological contribution to Northern studies and research is expansive, ambitious and unique.

Centre for Scandinavian Studies
The University of Aberdeen also now has the largest concentration of experts on early Scandinavia in the UK. A Centre for Scandinavian Studies was established in 2007, with a view to bringing together this expertise to coordinate research projects, provide research facilities and supervision, teach undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and promote Scandinavian Studies generally. The Centre’s research profile currently includes Old Norse and Old Swedish language and literature, Scandinavian toponymy and runology, medieval history, landscape history and legal history. Its interests resonate very closely, in a synergy unique to Aberdeen, with those of Archaeology and Anthropology, and with colleagues in a number of the other subject areas mentioned above.

A Museum of the North
A truly effective synergy between archaeology and anthropology can only be grown with the support and involvement of a flourishing museum. Not only do such collections provide essential resources for teaching in both disciplines, they are also critical for research involving the collection and conservation of material things, and for studies that would bring together researchers and students with those beyond the academy. While a museum of course gives a public face to this research, and is crucial to enhancing its impact, particularly in a northern context, this can also involve outreach to craftpersons, artists and other practitioners working within indigenous traditions. The University of Aberdeen is exceptionally fortunate in having a Museum (formerly known as the Museum of Anthropology and latterly as the Marischal Museum) with one of the largest and most comprehensive archaeological and ethnological collections of any such institution in the UK.
Northern Futures
At present (March 2011), the University is entering a further phase of renewal with the adoption of a new Strategic Plan for the future. Four interdisciplinary research themes have been chosen to frame the institution’s forward objectives, of which one is the North—surely a unique situation in the scholarly world, where high-latitude studies represent a full quarter of a major university’s research orientation. A number of exciting developments, institutional clusters and initiatives are now at a stage of advanced planning, and researchers interested in our Northern agendas are encouraged to regularly review the University websites. For more information on any aspect of our research and teaching, all the disciplines mentioned here welcome enquiries.

Acknowledgements and Useful Links
The Northern synergies at Aberdeen are a joint effort, and particular credit should go to Professors Tim Ingold (Anthropology), Kevin Edwards (Geography & Environment) and Stefan Brink (Scandinavian Studies), alongside Neil Curtis of Marischal Museum. The Northern focus at the University was initiated by Principal (the Scottish term for Vice-Chancellor or Rektor) Professor Sir Duncan Rice and is being continued by his successor Professor Ian Diamond.

For more information about the key Northern sections of the University, see:

Archaeology: www.abdn.ac.uk/archaeology;
Anthropology: www.abdn.ac.uk/anthropology;
Scandinavian Studies: www.abdn.ac.uk/cfss;
Marischal Museum: www.abdn.ac.uk/historic/museum.

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