

# Past and Present Paths

*- Experiencing history where it happened -*

Project description  
Diploma program

Helga Steen-Johnsen

# Past and Present Paths

*Experiencing history where it happened*

An exploration of the role of architecture in preserving and promoting Norwegian cultural heritage sites away from the centralized museums.

## WHY ?

The main museums are usually located in urban centers. But there are also numerous places outside cities that have a strong historical significance. These are often not taken into consideration when developing places to showcase cultural heritage. This leads to people not visiting them. In my readings I came over the term "*historical node*" in Grete Lillehammers text<sup>1</sup>, and I find it fitting for these places that have historical importance, but remain overlooked as historical destinations.

In Oslo, Norway, there is a very popular Viking-age museum that is currently being expanded. Although this is a positive development, almost everything you can see in this museum has been in other parts of Norway. I have looked at sites where these artifacts were found, and considered ways of making them more accessible and exciting, so that they also become popular destinations, that supplement the main museum.

## WHERE ?

From all these historical nodes, I have chosen to work with the site of Kaupang, which is one of Norway's first settlements. Kaupang is in the municipality of Larvik, which is located by the coast, two hours south-west of Oslo, known for its extensive farmland and forest areas, as well as its long history.

Kaupang is the site of an old viking village that archeologists believe was founded around late 800's A.D. After historians discovered that Kaupang must be the location mentioned in historical texts from the same time, they began to map out the area in 1867. Since the site was discovered, there has been multiple excavations, both of the viking village and the gravemound areas with over 115 registered mounds. The first was in 1950 to early 1970's, and the latest was from 1999 to 2002. Despite two rounds of excavations, only a small percent of the area has been excavated. Neither the Viking village nor the gravemounds are visible on the surface today because of road and housing development and natural decay.

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<sup>1</sup> Lillehammer, Grete (2007). "The Past in the Present. Landscape Perception, Archaeological Heritage and Marginal Farmland in Jæren, Southwestern Norway"

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Today there is a group of volunteers running a small museum in a single family home from the 70's at Kaupang. They dress up as vikings and take visitors on tours around the landscape. Since the site is in the outskirts of the city of Larvik, the museum is surrounded well-tended fields and farms. There are some remaining traces of viking activity in the landscape, but these are not easy to find without guidance.

## WHAT ?

Despite the activities going on at Kaupang, it still has many of the elements of a historical node. Although the history of the place is interesting and an important part of our history, it is not visited as often as it should. It is also closed for the winter seasons and is therefore not accessible year around. I believe there is a potential in developing this site so that it will become more attractive to visitors.

With this project I explore the role of architecture in developing the site of Kaupang into a cultural destination that supplements the main museum in Oslo.

## HOW ?

Although this site has a small museum already, I hope to facilitate a better way for the visitors to experience this place. I want to do this by adding a wandering route that will lead you on a historical journey in the landscape with stops along the way to reflect, learn, explore and rest. It will also be possible to build onto this road during later excavations so the visitors can be inspired by the work, and experience Kaupang being discovered further. Along this route there will also be a new museum that will be a center for the area. Here there will be opportunities

to exhibit the artifacts found during previous and future excavations. By having a space to exhibit and a wandering route in the landscape there will be a closer connection between the artifacts and where they were found and the visitors will have the opportunity to experience history where it happened and while it happens.



# DIPLOMA PROGRAM

Spring term 2021

Helga Steen-Johnsen

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Ferdinand Steen-Johnsen

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# HISTORICAL NODE

The idea of these nonplaces, the non-spectacular areas without any form of historical landmark, fascinates me. I came over the term “the historical node” Lillehammer’s text. And maybe this is a better way of looking at it? I mean that the term “a nonplace” sounds a bit negative, although this is not necessarily the intention. However, by looking at these places as historical nodes we give the site a little more respect and maybe interest. But for the everyday man/woman/kids or even tourists, how can we encourage them to travel to these places? Is it really enough to say that “something exciting happened here, a thousand years ago?” Hirsch and Hanlon certainly think so when they say:

*“The purest form of potentiality is emptiness itself, and it is interesting that sacred sites and places are sometimes physically empty or largely uninhabited, and situated at some distance from the populations for which they hold significance.”*  
(Hirsch and Hanlon 1995)

However, I am not sure I agree completely with that statement, according to my readings while writing this essay, people will benefit from some type of sensory element for it to be memorable. And from my own experience, I learn more from either having a plaque, a guide or some other element telling me about a place than just being there, completely without any other info, except maybe my smart phone and Wikipedia. Therefore, I agree with Hirsch and Hanlon that a place being empty can be significant and good enough, nonetheless some places



could benefit from having something happening however small, for us to better learn, and thus take care of our own cultural heritage.

- Excerpt from my social science essay, *Cultural heritage and the value of historical sites*



A topographic map of the Kaupang archaeological site. The map shows the coastline of the fjord, with red dots indicating the locations of various structures and features. A dashed line outlines the main area of the site, and a solid line shows the location of the main street. The word "KAUPANG" is written in large, orange, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the map.

# KAUPANG

[kæu`pan]

from the Norse word *Kaupangr*

meaning 'market', 'emporium' or 'trading place'. The word is a combination "Kaup" means trading and "Angr" means fjord or harbour.



Artist: Flemming Bau

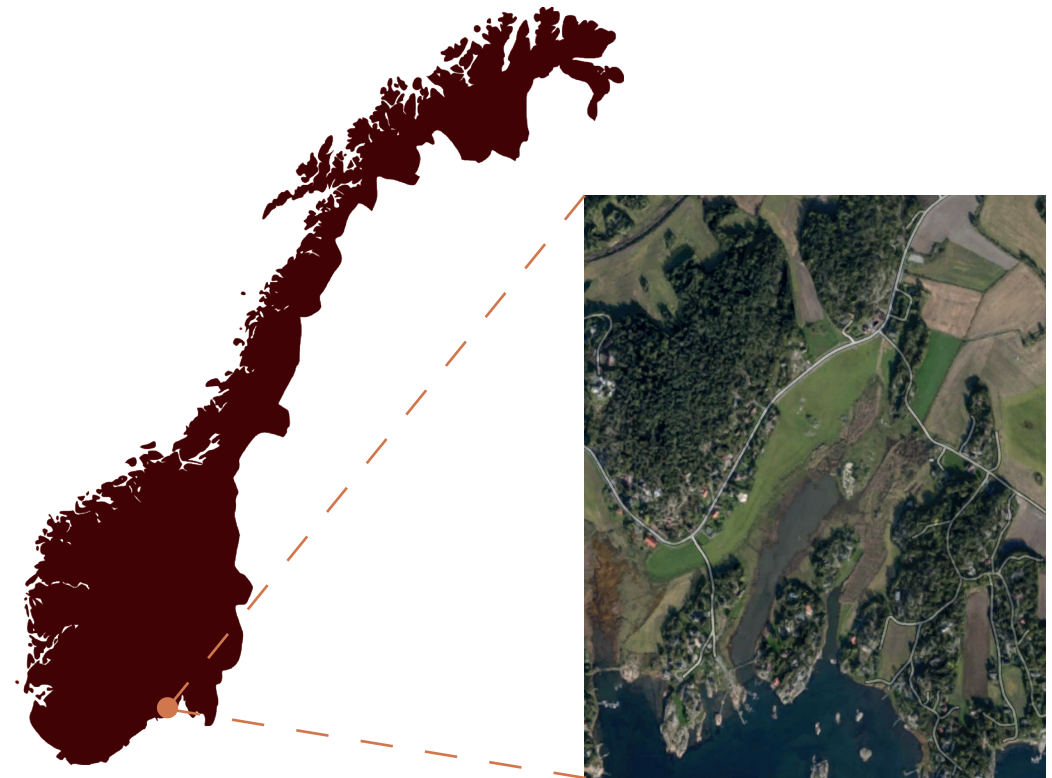
### WHERE ?

Kaupang was an important trading town during the viking age. It was founded around year 800, but the activity started dwindeling down and the activity was reduced to around 970's. It is not proven why the city was abandoned, but historians believe that it might be because of a combination of lack of space to expand, and also becuae at the end, a new center started growing (Tønsberg). The town concisted of numerous houses and historians believe that there lived up to 200 people there at the same time.

In the 800's the waterline was around 4 meters higher, so the area that today is big fields were the harbor area for the vikings. The water was important for the vikings both because of their exploring, but also as an important travel route and supply of food.

Another important area by the Viking town were the graveyards. From 1867 to 1950 Nicolay Nicolaisen registered 115 gravemounds at the northern part of Kaupang. However, it is believed that there would have been even more when the town was active. The graves were of sifferent sizes both in diameter and in heigt. the biggest ones at the northern graveyard were 25 m in diameter and up to 3 m tall.

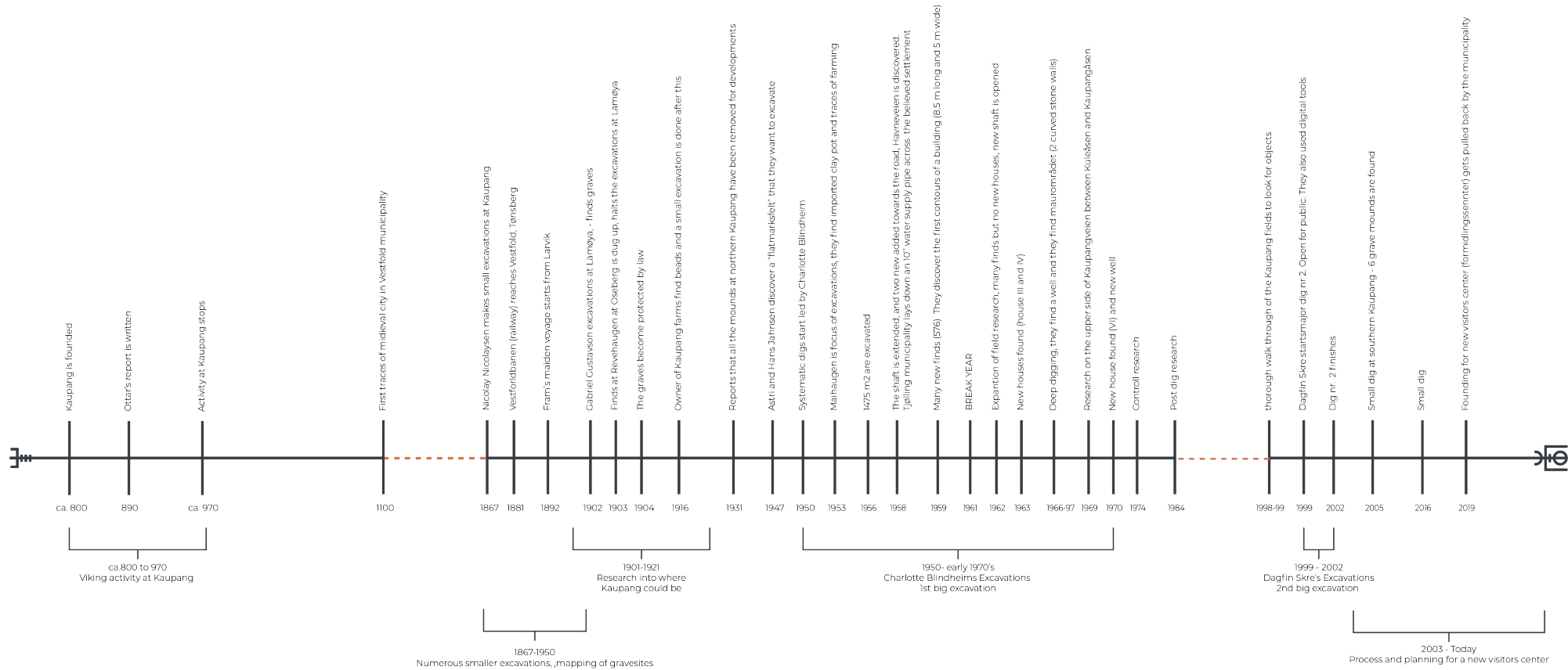
Since Kaupang was discovered there has been two major digs on the site, one in the 50's and the latest in 1999-2002.



Today, the only visible traces from the viking age are some graves at bikjolberget. Other than that, both the city and the gravemounds are invisible on the surface. This is both because of natural decay, but a part of their destruction is from road development and from building of farms and residential houses. This is a big problem, not only for Kaupang, but other historical nodes as well.



## TIMELINE



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

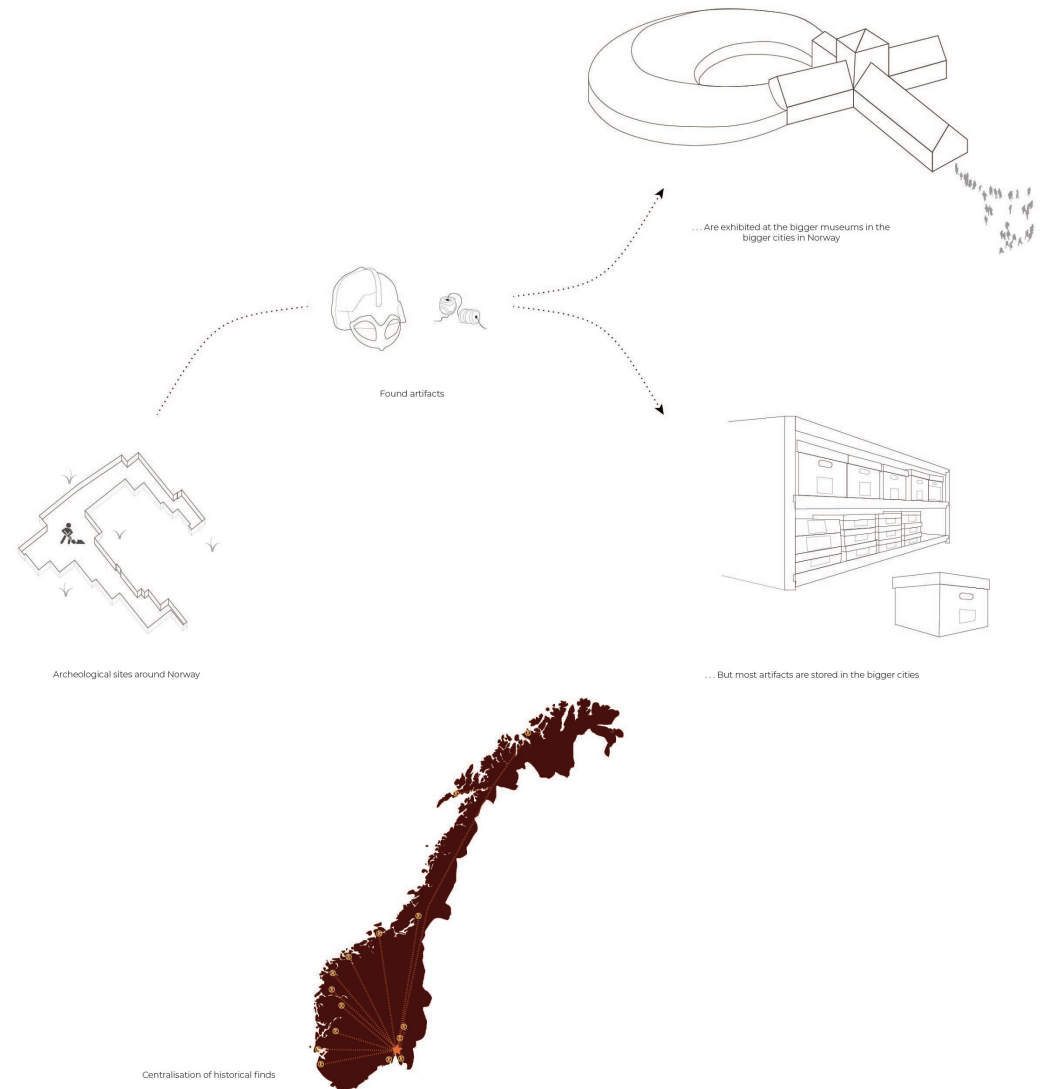
### WHAT ?

This project has been an exploration of a historical node and how architecture can play a part in showcasing and protecting our cultural heritage.

In Oslo there is a viking museum that is currently going through an expansion. This is positive, and I am not critical towards this, but I wanted to explore the possibilities that historical nodes bring. This project looks at one of these sites, but there are many others scattered around our country and if they were activated, you could end up with a beautiful route that would both tell you about Norway's history, and make you see more of our country than just the city centers.

I wanted to use Kaupang as an example on how we could activate such places, but that does not mean that I think it would be suitable to have a museum on each historical node. What this project has taught me more than anything is how important it is to look at each place individually, look at the existing situation, but also the invisible traces of history left and work with those to develop the site.

There are some places in Norway that have made local viking centers. But the theme of many of these seems to be to create a replica viking village. But with this project, I question if this is the best way to showcase our cultural heritage. This was also the focus in my social science essay



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### WHY ?

The reason why I wanted to work with this project is because I remember visiting Kaupang in 2002 during the last excavation. I was in third grade and I still remember being fascinated with what they were doing. They had set up a wooden platform where you could look at the archeologist working, and their findings. Because of this visit, I considered becoming an archeologist when I grew up.

I have visited Kaupang twice during this diploma period. And it was not as I remembered at all. The platform was removed, the artifacts was moved to Oslo for storage. What is left is green fields without any traces of either the viking activity or the archeologist. What is new is that Kaupang has a museum. But it is in a one storey, typehouse from the 70's. This building is so discrete that it is difficult to see from the main road. There is nothing that tells the visitors that this is the place they are supposed to go except for a wooden sign, that you can only read when you are coming from the south. The building it self is also not in the best shape, and in my opinion this building does nothing to give the visitors an good an memorable visit.

However, the heart of Kaupang today is the volunteer group that takes care of the museum, brings people on walks and hold viking themed events. In my opinion, both the site, the volunteer group and the visitors deserve a better place to teach, learn about and experience Kaupang.



HISTORISK: Slik så Kaupang-området ut fra luften i 2002. Dersom det planlagte formidlingsenteret blir virkelighet vil ikke området være seende slik ut når senteret står ferdig. (Arkivfoto: Per Nyhus)



Kaupang in 2002



Kaupang today

I was happy to discover in my research that there is an ongoing process of creating a visitors center at Kaupang, however the process was at a stand still for quite some time, and nothing has come out of this process yet. It is good to see that the municipality and the locals are positive to develop the site to something better.

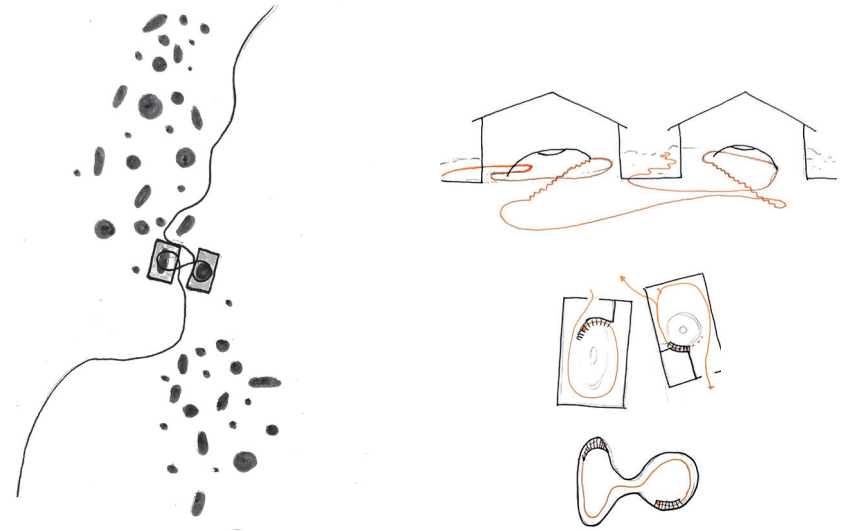
### HOW ?

To activate Kaupang I have looked at the most important elements from the Viking age which are:

- 1) The old waterline from 800's
- 2) The gravemounds
- 3) The viking village itself

With these elements as a background, I decided to use the old waterline as the starting point for developing a wandering route in the landscape. This wandering route will lead you on a historical journey in the landscape with stops along the way to reflect, learn, explore and rest. It will also be possible to build onto this road during later excavations so the visitors can be inspired by the work, and experience Kaupang being discovered further. The road will also be an element that will be open and free to use as a nice walk no matter the time of day. The route will also work as a visual aid to understand the old waterline and the placement of the viking village.

As the route reaches the gravemound area in the northern part, the path will



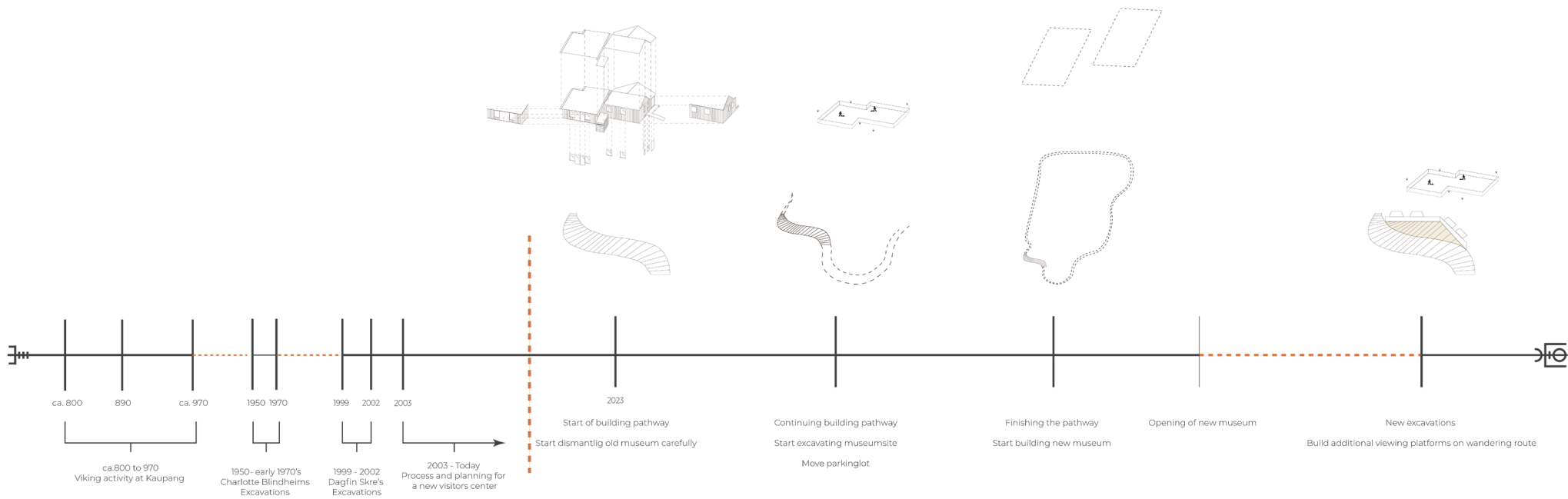
wind its way around the mounds as well as lifting from the ground so the visitors will have another way of visualizing what the landscape must have been like with the 115 gravemounds.

As a center for this route there will be a new museum on the same site that the museum is today. The museum will therefore be placed in between the site of the viking village and the gravemounds to the north. With a beautiful view towards the ocean and the winding path. The new museum will have a design that fits into the situation today, and not take away the attention from the historic landscape. The gravemounds will also be a central part of the museum's design. The museum is important because it can host the artifacts from Kaupang, that otherwise would be stored in Oslo.

By having a space to exhibit as a part of the wandering route, there will be a closer connection between the artifacts and where they were found. The visitors will have the opportunity to experience history where it happened and while it happens.



FUTURE TIMELINE



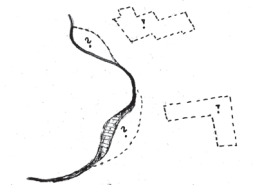
PATHWAY

1-2



... To Observe

3-4



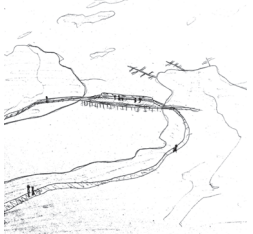
... To Learn

8



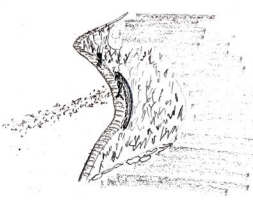
... To Rest

6



... To dream

10



... To Grow

11



... To Visualize



# CV



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## Education

Bergen Arkitekthøgskole

2015 - 2021

Spring

Complex Context

Aalto University

2019-2020

Spring

Identity of Space

Autumn

Reuse / Gardenia

Designinstituttet

2012 - 2013

Høgskolen i Innlandet

2013-2014

Film og fjernsynsvitenskap