

# COMMENT ON “A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING SWEDISH ARCHAEOLOGY” FROM A DANISH POINT OF VIEW

Mette Bjerrum Jensen

## ARCHAEOLOGY’S ROLE IN THE CHANGE IN DANISH CULTURAL POLITICS SINCE 2001

In their keynote article, Anders Gustafsson and Håkan Karlsson (AG & HK) compare the situation in Sweden with the past ten years of Danish cultural politics. I would like to comment on this from my own point of view.<sup>1</sup> In 1999 a crisis occurred in Danish archaeology. Due to a massive increase in construction work, there was a lack of means for state-financed excavations. Danish archaeologists tried to get attention from the media and politicians by describing how finds and knowledge of pottery and postholes would be lost without excavations (Jørgensen & Pind 2001). This was not very successful (Jensen 2009a:52ff). But then an archaeologist said: “We must realize that a part of the Danes’ cultural heritage is lost if we do not perform the essential excavations” (my translation).<sup>2</sup> Statements like these made it to the headlines, and a new approach not only to Danish archaeology but also to Danish cul-

---

<sup>1</sup> My comment builds on analyses and agumentation in my PhD thesis, see Jensen 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the museum curator and archaeologist Orla Madsen in: Knippel 1999.

tural politics was founded, one that argued that by giving low priority to archaeology Danes would lose some of their inherited belongings.

This trend coincided with a parliamentary change in Denmark. From an archaeologist's point of view, at least two new agendas had vital importance for the discourse of the profession in the years to come. In 2002, the new right-wing government with the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) as supporting party abolished the national advisory assemblies, including the Archaeological Board (Det Arkæologisk Nævn). The government's argument stated that left-wing experts had hitherto had too much influence, so now it was time for politicians to set the agenda (Olesen *et al.* 2002). I find it alarming that the Sweden Democrats (SD) consider the present Swedish cultural politics elitist and destructive, as AG & HK mention, and that SD's statement in cultural politics is to "focus on [...] the maintenance and the animation of the cultural heritage" (SD 2011, my translation). Here we find a clear parallel to the political agenda in Denmark since the start of the new millennium.

Gradually many boards were reestablished, but the new Archaeological Advisory Assembly (Det Arkæologiske Råd) had much less influence on the professional decisions. At the same time, a new Heritage Agency of Denmark (Kulturarvsstyrelsen) replaced the Keeper of the Archaeological Records (Rigsantikvaren). Like a hand in glove this fitted into the new conservative line in the Ministry of Culture. The word "heritage" itself was quite rare until 1999 and was mostly used in connection with world archaeology and world heritage. From 1999 onwards, however, "heritage" became a frequently used term (Jensen 2009a), not least due to the Ministry of Culture and the Heritage Agency of Denmark who replaced terms like "culture environments" with "culture heritage" (Jensen 2009a:118). While the favourite cause of the Ministry of Culture was a Cultural Canon (Kulturkanon), as AG & HK mention, the agency's first task was to point out 1000 Cultural Heritage Areas of National Value (Kulturarvsarealer).

The Cultural Heritage Areas were selected by archaeologists at the local Danish museums. In my PhD thesis (Jensen 2009a:117ff) I analysed the data from these sites. In line with the situation in Swedish archaeological research funding as shown by AG & HK, my analysis shows that Danish archaeologists are also generally traditionalists. Among the Cultural Heritage Areas of National Value, finds from the metal ages outnumber seven to one those from the Stone Age, although the two eras are evenly represented in the national find database (Fund og Fortidsminder). Among the selected sites from the metal ages, 87 % are related to kingdoms, state formation, national defence, infrastructure and

the Church (Jensen 2009a:129). This fact makes it hard to problematize politicians who find value in the idea of unchanging national states, as even we archaeologists point out these finds as most significant.

## Implications of the new conservative line on archaeology and cultural history

The right-wing government in Denmark has since 2001 disparaged liberal and social cultural movements<sup>3</sup> and instead performed what I describe as a conservative cultural policy. This change has had effect on the archaeological and cultural historical fields as well. Within archaeology two major projects have been supported in the last few years: the King's Fortresses (Kongens Borge<sup>4</sup>), which investigates remains of Trelleborg type, and the Jelling Project (Jelling Projektet<sup>5</sup>) in which further excavations, communication projects, and educational projects focus on prehistoric Jelling, a locality that plays a leading role in the formation of Danish identity (Jensen 2009b). Projects like these are grandiose and basically interesting, and perhaps therefore very few Danish archaeologists have questioned the fact that mainly projects supporting the idea of the formation of the nation state have been met economically. Interestingly, however, the majority of the earlier excavations in Jelling coincide with the years when the nation state of Denmark was being created or challenged (Jensen 2009a:205f). Though hard to see when it happens in one's own time, it is thus reasonable to connect the national archaeological campaigns with a tendency to defend the Danish national identity, a tendency that can also be seen in Danish politics. At the same time the Danish People's Party have had luck supporting several cultural history projects through the Finance Act: a strongly criticized Cold War project (*Information* 2006); projects concerning Kaj Munk (DR 2009) who serves as a Danish national symbol for the spiritual struggle against Nazism; protection of the Jelling monuments; and getting the Danish act from c. 1280 "Jyske Lov" back from Sweden (*Politiken* 2008; Kulturministeriet 2011). In neither of these cases have archaeologists publicly questioned the fact that selected cultural projects are being written into

---

<sup>3</sup> In Denmark, a liberal and social movement referred to as "kulturradikalismen" has had influence on cultural ideas and culture politics since the mid 1950's until the government change in 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The projekt Kongens Borge is funded by Dronning Margrethe II's Arkæologiske Fond and Augustinus Fonden. The investigations took place between 2007 and 2009, and the report will be finished in 2011. <http://Kongensborge.dk>.

<sup>5</sup> The Jelling Project is carried out by the Danish National Museum, funded by Bikuben fond. <http://jelling.natmus.dk/>.

the Finance Act on the request of a party that uses these national symbols for their own promotion.

Consider this dilemma: The government's Finance Act makes it possible for you to save a prehistoric monument. Does it make a difference that the monument is not only of historical value but also the crux of Danish identity? Does it matter that the fund is a result of the cultural policy of a right-wing nationalist party? Or what about this dilemma: Your institution is offered a subsidy for running a museum. Not just any museum, but an exhibition about a person who serves as a national symbol, like Kaj Munk. Basically it is a good story that is popular amongst the public, though it does have a nationalistic undertone. Do you accept the offer? And does it matter in this case that the financial basis is due to a right-wing nationalist party? Would you hesitate if the funds were raised by a centre party instead? Are we to justify the political trends that control our professional engagements? When do we as archaeologists or historians have an ethical obligation to refuse financial support to certain subjects or to refuse to prioritize finds of national interest – and when do we just do our duty as (partly) state employed? The above are real dilemmas that Danish museum and university employees have encountered over the past ten years. However, as the Danish People's Party is not considered an extremist party in Denmark, no one has yet refused the extra funds from the Finance Act. There are perhaps no right or wrong answers to these issues as long as we live in the midst of an epoch. Nonetheless these are dilemmas that we must hold on to for the purpose of discussion.

Danish human science graduates in general have buried their heads in the sand hoping that the political agenda will change by the next election. In the meantime the xenophobic tendencies have grown stronger concurrently with a weakening of the influence of the human sciences due to government policy. In the diary of the German Protestant but Jewish-born professor Victor Klemperer (2000) in the years 1933–1945, it is possible to follow the change from a democratic society with strong emphasis on human sciences to a dictatorship based on mistrust, informants and restrictions in citizens' rights. The Nazi regime stands as an example of exclusion because of its extreme consequences, and hopefully the example is still strong enough to secure a humanistic policy in spite of the growing right-wing parties in Europe. If we want a closed, right-wing-controlled, exclusive society, however, Germany of the 1930s has shown us how it is done: Find the arguments for excluding academics who speak against the government. Then gradually close the humanistic faculties. Let a supporting party announce the most radical exclusive policies that hang in the balance of exceeding human decency and hu-

man rights, and those relating to the closing of borders to other nationalities. Finally, create a national identity based on a history that justifies why these citizens have the right to a more decent life than those in the rest of the world. Many of these phenomena are occurring in Danish politics right now<sup>6</sup> and ought to be discussed by those archaeologists who will not contribute to the latter.

## CAN ARCHAEOLOGISTS AVOID POLITICS?

AG & HK are concerned that Swedish archaeology will be used by the Sweden Democrats party's culture policy, regardless of the fact that most Swedish archaeologists avoid participating in the ongoing political negotiations. In Denmark at least, and perhaps in Sweden too, most archaeologists are trained within a tradition that considers the profession of archaeology a craft. As such it is hard to see ourselves and our profession as part of ongoing political debates. The problem is that without reflecting on it, we quickly adjust to the current political agenda, as the examples from the Danish archaeological discourse around the millennium show. Concurrently, most of us find it easy to accept the idea of archaeological finds being of value to the nation state, as we are educated within the national context. In Denmark, upcoming archaeologists study the prehistory of Denmark (Danmarks Oldtid), while in Sweden they probably study the history of Sweden (Sveriges historia). Later on, we read articles referring the finds to a national frame (Aronsson 2008). In public schools children are taught that "6000 years ago people in Denmark started to cultivate fields ..." (Dehn & Poulsen 2011:16, my translation), but not that it was almost 6000 years before the nation state of Denmark appeared. It is therefore most essential that the universities train their scholars to reflect on these matters – a skill with low priority in Denmark.

The result is that we have a hard time arguing for our profession when meeting the media. Using the arguments about the loss of national identity or heritage then becomes the easy way out. This means, however, that for parties like the Danish People's Party and the Sweden Democrats Party it is easy to use archaeological cases in their argumentation

---

<sup>6</sup> By initiative of the Danish People's Party, the Danish government has recently intensified the custom controls at the Danish borders. This was commented on by the professor of political science Marlene Wind. Her comment triggered a response from the leading politicians in the Danish People's Party, who stated that Marlene Wind "is dead" as an expert (DR 2011a) and demanded a codex for what experts are allowed to say in the media (DR 2011b).

for a conservative culture policy that excludes “new” residents from the cultural community. In fact, most parties in Denmark find reason to constantly rebuild the fundamentals of the nation state, as it is their political framework.

AG & HK list a number of suggestions for Swedish archaeology to find a common ground in the battle against xenophobia. I would like to comment on this. First and foremost I find it a fine initiative. Since the institution of the Keeper of the Archaeological Records was closed down in Denmark, no one has been in the position to speak for the cause of archaeology, as the Heritage Agency of Denmark cannot act against the Ministry of Culture. I believe, though, that the guidelines for controlling the political abuse of archaeology must be quite specific. That is, they must be more precise in what AG & HK call “Present[ing] the societal value of archaeology”: When we argue for archaeology, we can stress the fact that we investigate the basic terms of human societies and human existence. We can also argue that many people find substance in knowing about prehistoric lives, being able to compare their own lives with those of thousands of generations. We must argue that confidence in the world can be gained through knowledge of a wide range of ways of living and in knowing that cultural change is not a rare phenomenon that one must act against but instead a fact of life. We can enlighten the public that unchanging cultures and cultural heritages are rarer than the shifting ones. We can start by acting against the biased use of national frames for the archaeological science and the history school books. Then we can try to define the value of the archaeological sites and prehistoric contexts that have no sign of kings and no symbols of power, national defence systems or the Church.

Mette Bjerrum Jensen  
Museet for Varde By og Omegn  
Lundvej 4, 6800 Varde, Denmark

## REFERENCES

- Aronsson, P. 2008. Historia och platskonstruktion – historikernas roll på den globala kulturmarknaden. In: Sprauten, K (Ed.). *Sted, tilhørighet og historisk forskning lokalhistoriens form og funksjon i det 21. århundre*. Oslo: Norsk lokalhistorisk institutt.
- Dehn, E. & Poulsen, J. A. 2011. *Historie 3–4*. København: Gyldendal.
- DR. 2009. Regeringen og DF enige om ny finanslov. *Danmarks Radio*. <http://dr.dk> (2009-11-12).
- DR. 2011a. Pia K.: Marlene Wind er færdig. *Danmarks Radio*. <http://dr.dk> (2011-06-13).

- DR. 2011b. Rektor afviser professorklage fra DF. *Danmarks Radio*. <http://dr.dk> (2011-06-22).
- Information. 2006. Den kolde krig: Kritik af ny koldkrigsforskning. *Information*. 2006-01-27.
- Jensen, M. B. 2009a. *Kulturarven og myten om den historiske identitet. En diskursanalyse af arkæologiens rolle i det senmoderne samfund*. Ph.d. afhandling forsvaret ved Aarhus Universitet, 4. september 2009.
- Jensen, M. B. 2009b. Royal Jelling: Danish National Heritage Reinvented. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*. Vol. 24.1. Pp. 77-95.
- Jørgensen, A. N. & Pind, J. (Eds). 2001. *Før landskabets erindring slukkes. Status og fremtid for dansk arkæologi*. København: Rigsantikvaren og Det Arkæologiske Nævn.
- Klemperer, V. 2000. *Jeg vil aflægge vidnesbyrd til det sidste. 2 bind*. København: Gyldendal.
- Knippel, L. O. 1999. Oldtidsfund i fare for at blive ødelagt. *Jyllands-Posten*. 29-07-1999.
- Kongensborger.dk. Hjemmeside for projektet Kongens Borge – nye arkæologiske undersøgelser. 2007-2011.
- Kulturministeriet. 2011. Pressemeddelelse: Jyske Lov vender hjem fra Sverige. *Kulturministeriet*. 2011-03-30.
- Olesen, O. B., Blüdnikow, B. & Delbing, C. 2002. Fogh: Ekspert var for røde. *Berlingske Tidende* 05.09.2002.
- Politiken. 2008. DF vil tage Jyske Lov fra svenskerne. *Politiken*. 2008-11-10.
- SD. 2011. *Vår politik A till Ö*. <http://sverigedemokraterna.se>. 2011-07-04.