

# The Perishable Past

## On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Archaeology for Life

Jes Wienberg

“This is the final truth about me: I lie.”  
(Thorkild Hansen 1989)

The aim of the article is to make clear *whether* and in that case *why* archaeology is important. Often this is seen as a self-evident fact which needs no motivation. My point of departure is a concrete example, namely, the medieval church of Mårup in Denmark which will soon fall into the sea: Why is it so crucial to save or document this church and many other traces of the past? Isn't the so-called cultural heritage condemned to destruction and oblivion? Rhetorical catchwords, cultural values, justifications and explanations within cultural heritage management, archaeology, history and social anthropology are presented and critically discussed together with indirect motivations borrowed from the literature about the abuse of the past.

*Jes Wienberg, Institute of Archaeology, Lund University, Sandgatan 1, SE-223 50 Lund, Sweden.*

### THE CHURCH ON THE CLIFF

Let the church fall! Let the old church fall into the sea. The church on the cliff is only one of many superfluous deserted churches. Impossible to preserve on the spot, difficult to move, out of use as a church, architecturally insignificant, historically of little interest and economically an embarrassment. Let it fall, just as the sea has taken numerous other churches through time. Why not just let it disappear from the cliff?

After all, it is only a question of time. The sea slope is already a few steps from the cemetery. Soon the sea will eat away the dike of the cemetery, the wind-swept shrubs, the fences of the burial places, the names and dates on the gravestones, and finally the many burials. And within a decade the sea will reach the church itself, undermine the foun-

ation so the building will break apart. At last, during an autumn storm, the waves will pull the church out over the edge of the cliff. The beach will be coloured white and yellow from plaster, mortar and brick. The leaden roofing will fly in the wind, while the rafters snap like matches. After the storm, when the sea is calm again, the traces will be wiped out like a child's drawing in the wet sand. Gone and soon forgotten.

The example is real! The church of Mårup (fig. 1) lies on the Jutlandic west coast of Denmark and is a protected monument. The Romanesque brick church is a tourist attraction with its own supporting society, *Maarup Kirkes Venner*. The deserted church now lies far from other buildings, but only a few metres from the coast line. The tower was torn down long ago. The walls have been rebuilt, the

doors and windows replaced, and the furniture has been removed or restored after vandalism and decay. In the cemetery are buried local inhabitants and the crew from the shipwreck of the frigate *The Crescent*. And every year the sea approaches with 1-2 meters, during the latest decade even faster. The cliff collapses with seeping rainwater, and the storms take their share. Judging from the cracks a portion of the cemetery will soon disappear, perhaps even before this article is published.<sup>1</sup>

Mårup is more than just another deserted church, a tourist attraction among many others. The church is a dramatic example of the present which is transformed into the past, of time undergoing change, of a cultural heritage threatened by decay and destruction. Instead of Mårup the example could be the nearby bunkers of the Atlantic Wall, the Berlin Wall, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the sphinx in Giza, or Angkor Wat. The example could be paintings, inscriptions, books, photographs, movies, music, voices or bodies – any trace of mankind which is threatened by decay or destruction because of age, death, oblivion, erosion, digging, ploughing, damming, crumbling, putrefaction, urban renewal, earthquake, fire or war.

As archaeologists, historians, antiquarians, archivists, librarians or conservators we try to counteract the threats, to save the exposed by upkeep, restoration, preservation and documentation in eternal Sisyphean labour. But why not just let the traces crumble and disappear? Without excavation, without memory, without attempts to preserve! After all, hasn't the past become a burden?

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1) Regarding Mårup, the text is based on several visits on the spot and on material (reports, correspondence, drawings, photos and clippings) in the archive of the National Museum in Copenhagen. See also the web page at: <http://home8.inet.tele.dk/21maarup>

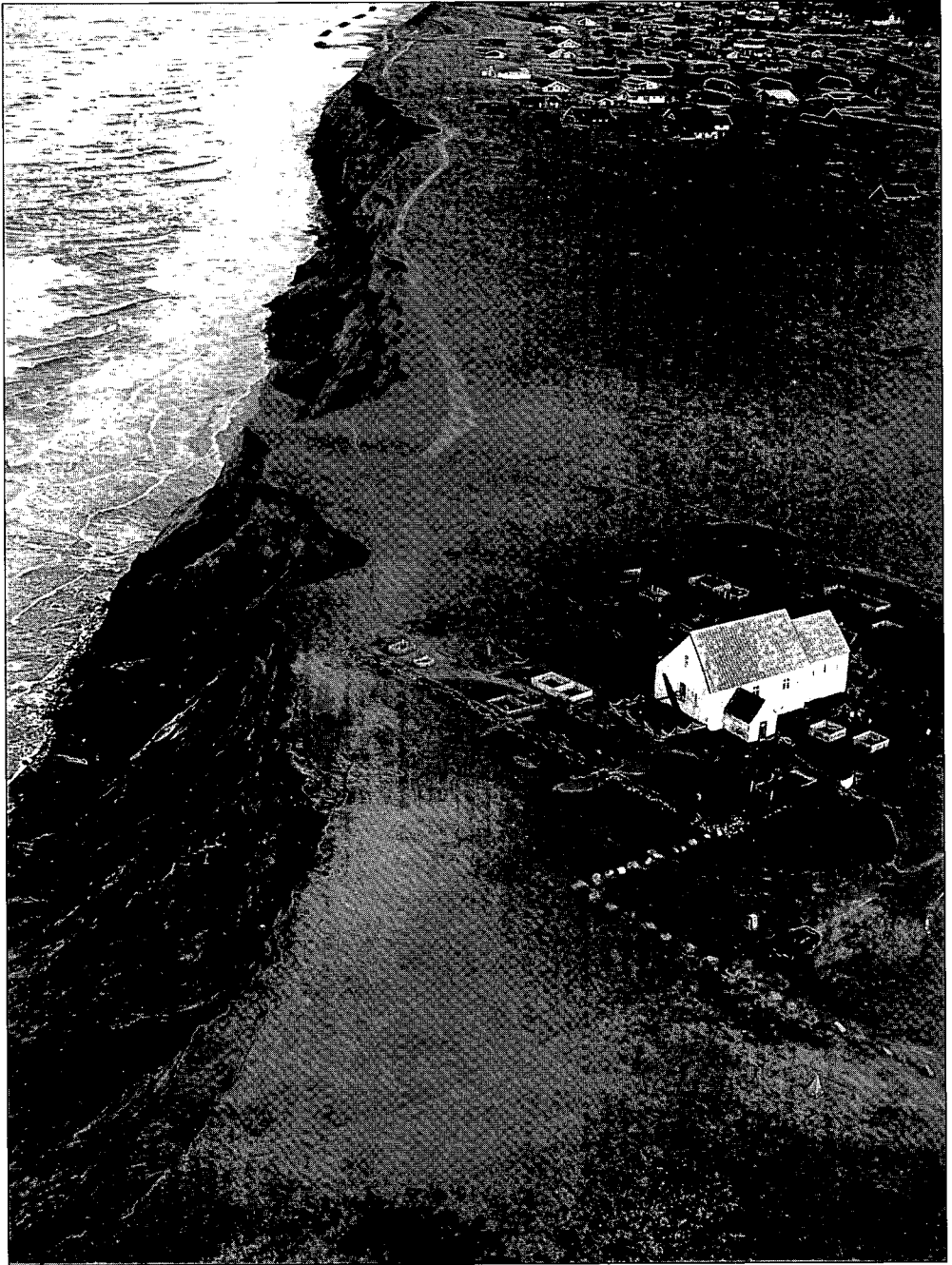
## CHRONIC NOSTALGIA

We suffer from too much history! This warning is given by a young professor of classical philology in Basel. The warning goes against the leading attitudes of the time and the deeds of its author. The reaction against an exaggerated historicism and against a history that does not serve life is formulated while Troy is being excavated and the Cathedral of Köln finally completed, and while Antiquity and the Middle Ages compete as ideals. The warning is found in the outdated reflection *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, the year is 1874, and the author's name is Friedrich Nietzsche. He is then still many books, restless miles and years from insanity and fame.

Nietzsche's book was to originally have had the title "The Historical Disease". He namely found that the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffered from history and the aims of objectivity within the historical science. History ought to serve and promote life, but it had become a burden and disadvantage. The art and culture of Antiquity constituted with their ideals a yoke of the past. The age of Nietzsche was surfeited and should be curated with a diet of oblivion and art, because the satiety was hostile and dangerous: It weakened personality, fancied self-righteousness, hindered maturity, promoted imitation, and developed both cynicism and egoism through self-irony (Nietzsche 1874).

But the warning seems to have been sounded in vain. The historical disease has become a great deal worse since the diagnosis of Nietzsche. Where he observed a wasting fever and infection, we see a century later an extensive epidemic; because more than ever before, the retrospect of the past ravages us with needless knowledge. The question is whether we today suffer from a *chronic nostalgia*, an incurable and painful remembrance of things past. We seem to lack the will and ability to forget. The symptoms are overwhelming:

"The fact that something has become old,



*Fig. 1. Mårup in April 1998. The church was given up and protected in 1928. In the churchyard are buried local people as well as shipwrecked victims from the English frigate "The Crescent" in 1808. (Photo Hunderup Luftfoto in Hjørring.)*

now results in the demand that it should become immortal" (Nietzsche 1874: chap. 3). This statement has become old itself, but the observation could have been made today. Because everywhere wishes or demands are expressed for collection, registration, preservation, investigation and promotion of traces from the past. The categories considered worthy of preservation are increasing. Nothing material or immaterial, visible or invisible, is overlooked. Preservation now not only includes single monuments such as Mårup, but also to the landscape and environment, both over and under the water line.

A particularly distinguished group is sites, which are entered on the list of World Heritage, that is, sites worth protecting for eternity on behalf of all humanity. The list now encompasses more than 500 around the world, including 18 in Scandinavia (Anker & Snitt 1997).

But the list of World Heritage sites is only the tip of the iceberg. Much more is preserved or is considered to be worth preserving. And the preservation is extending to things closer in time. Preserve the churches, old as well as new. Preserve thatched roofs, functionalistic houses, factories, substations, paved roads, stone walls, milestones, clearance cairns, pit-traps and place-names. Preserve the old trees of *Lundagård*, *Nimis* in Ladonia, *Stora stenen* in Nyberget and worldwide web pages on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Preserve books, newspapers, posters, photographs, movies and records. Preserve service stations, cinemas, minigolf courses, neon signs, cafés and people's parks (Bengtsson *et al.* 1994). They are all threatened by change, decline and oblivion.

And where monuments of the past already have declined or disappeared, a radical restoration or reconstruction might replace the loss: Rebuild the stave church of Fantoft at Bergen, the Globe in London, the royal

palace in Berlin, the city of Warsaw, the Salvation Cathedral of Moscow, the bridge in Mostar and the Parthenon temple in Athens!

Millions and millions of things, books, letters, drawings, paintings, photographs, movies and records are protected in museums, libraries and archives. The institutions are overflowing with objects, which need space and conservation. Behind the exhibitions are overloaded storage rooms. After having been registered the objects are never allowed to leave the sphere of the museum with its defined opening hours, subdued lighting, alarms, protective glass and watchful custodians.

Moreover, many specialised museums are founded on local or individual initiative, in cases where the established institutions have apparently not fulfilled the need. Perhaps the numerous museums indicate an inflation in the concept itself, but undeniably also a wish to increase the museification.

And we make pilgrimages not only to museums with authentic objects, but also to the many historical or archaeological experimental centres, Stone Age settlements, Iron Age villages, Viking centres and medieval markets, where the past is re-enacted, though everything is an illusion. The Medieval Week of Visby with its shops, parades, plays and tournaments is just one of many examples of the growing cultural tourism, where children and adults dress up and re-enact the past, while others observe (Jonsson 1990; Petersson 1999).

To this we can add archaeology, which is just one of many methods of studying the past. Sponsored by both a broad public interest and a relatively strong legislation, archaeology has expanded. Archaeology has spread from Europe to all four corners of the earth. And the number, size and precision of the archaeological excavations have increased, so the costs are counted in millions.

Detect, document, preserve, investigate and show increasingly more and increasingly

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2) Most examples are taken from my collection of newspaper clippings.

better results. The tendency is both quantitative and qualitative. The development over the past few centuries has gone from the royal curiosity cabinet and the national museum to the popular exhibition, from a few peculiar memorials to total landscapes or environments, and from a distant past to the present. The development has gone from the part to the whole, from the exotic distant to the everyday near, from the exclusive to the commonplace. And the aim to preserve or investigate is almost universal.

We can see, preserve or document more of the past than ever before. The methodological and technical development has been no less than fantastic: Aerial photography, metal detectors, georadar, pollen analysis, carbon 14, dendrochronology, bore cores from the inland ice, digitalization and DNA-analysis. And with the Hubble-telescope in an orbit around the earth we can now see so far out in space and thereby back in time that we reach the birth of the universe. We observe galaxies that sent out their light more than 12 billions light years ago.

The ability improves every day, at the same time as the will seems greater than ever. But isn't it absurd to want to preserve or document the past for the future? After all, this aspiration can only be a short postponement of the inevitable, a fight against perishability which is bound to fail. The stone of Sisyphus will never lie still on top of the mountain.

#### PRESERVATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The history of preservation is about the fight against decay and ignorance. It deals with the development from the first tender attempts to preserve, when Emperor Majorianus issued a prohibition in the year 457 against using old monuments as stone quarries, through the efforts of the popes to protect buildings during the Renaissance, to registers of monuments, areas of national interest and the World Heritage of our time. It is the history of, which

countries that were first in creating inventories, protection, and legislation. The history tells that more and more is conceived of as worth preserving, and tells about the key actors, institutions and practice. The development can be followed in the changing conceptions of what is worthy of preservation, from antiquities through monuments to cultural environment and cultural heritage.

But why preserve a deserted church like Mårup at all? Specific motivations are seldom given. Instead the preservation is maintained indirectly with reference to the authority of the law, slogans or values. Thus the protection might be ensured with the help of plans, laws or international conventions. The self-evident character of the preservation is maintained using rhetorical words and formulations: The past is our heritage! The past for the future! Roots! Memory! Tradition! Production of knowledge! And finally protection is argued for on their basis of "cultural values" such as documentation value or experience value.

In the past decades the concept of cultural heritage has been established to maintain the preservation. What earlier generations have created constitutes a heritage, which should be protected and looked after on both an international and national level. The cultural heritage is a collective name for the monuments, buildings, landscapes, things and thoughts worthy of preservation. Thus the cultural heritage might be both material and immaterial (Hedvall 1987; Sörbom 1988; Anshelm 1993; Friberg 1993).

The existence and demarcation of a literary heritage has caused a lively American debate. Are there, as the critic Harold Bloom insists, "canonical" texts which everybody should read, for example those by William Shakespeare (Bloom 1994)? Or does "canon" simply express that white male western values have been elevated to a general rule? In the antiquarian arena, the popularity of the World Heritage list shows that many apparently believe, that a common and eternal cultural heritage both can and ought to be identified.

Only exceptionally are questions raised about the principles of what is worth preserving. That the monuments and milieus of the Crown, the nobility and the bourgeoisie have been given priority is no secret. But has the cultural heritage also been gender distorted, so that traces of women are not considered worthy of preservation (Magnus & Morger 1994)? And should also the traces of human evil, of the totalitarian, ugly and controversial be protected (Löfgren 1997)? However, in the face of new demands the tendency has been not so much to change the order of priorities, but to accept and add further categories to the canon. The cultural heritage has constantly increased.

Probably the cultural heritage is an appropriate catchword with a positive and strong sound during a time when the public debate is dominated by economic values. The concept counteracts the specialization and thereby the split within both research and management. But an ambiguous catchword can not replace the arguments of a motivation.

In spite of the increased importance of the cultural heritage it has not been possible to preserve everything. Every time something is preserved, something else disappears. So the criteria for the selection have come into focus. Researchers have become aware of the hitherto neglected "cultural values", such as popular traditions, which might help in the preservation (Burström *et al.* 1996), while the antiquarian authorities since the 1970s have devoted a lot of attention to defining and systematizing the criteria for preservation, which can be used in the management of the cultural heritage.

A suitable point of departure for the discussion on cultural values is an article by the art historian Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, from 1903. Here Riegl emphasized three values of remembrance, namely value of age, historical value, and "desired" value of remembrance, as well as two values of the present, namely use value and art value. The

article was written as part of the reorganization of Austria's protection program for monuments. However, whereas the intention was to find objective criteria for the selection, the conclusion was that the values are relative and could come into mutual conflict. Every period and culture formulates its own values (Riegl 1929:144ff; cf. Myklebust 1981).

In the footsteps of Riegl, many have defined an increasing number of criteria in sophisticated value systems. Thus Dag Myklebust enumerated at least 13 values in the article "Value thinking": age value, anecdote value, historical value, present day value, use value, artistic value, news value, identity value, symbolic value, didactic value, occurrence value, environment value and sales value (Myklebust 1981). Svante Beckman has sorted the values of the cultural heritage into four main categories consisting of moral, knowledge, instrumental and pleasure values (Beckman 1993). A recent survey of the practice of the cultural heritage authorities has used no less than 49 value criteria divided according to science, education and experience (Carlie 1997: 210, 316ff). Thus the value of the past is exposed to a constant fragmentation.

Squeezed by the leading paradigm of the present, namely the economic growth, the qualities of the past are quantified. Two tendencies can be observed: either an attempt to define (objective) value criteria which can be used in the management of the cultural heritage (Nordin & Unnerbäck 1995); or an attempt to convert the cultural historical values into a (subjective) market price (Almevik & Fridén 1996). In both cases the purpose is the same: that the cultural heritage should be effectively measured and weighed in relation to other resources, interests of nature, and so-called interests of society such as bridges, roads, railways and industry. But the aim is implied and self-evident. It is not a question of whether the past is valuable, but the correct currency and amount of the past.

However, the frequency of the watchwords

and the increasing number of cultural values indicate that the past must be more threatened than ever. The leitmotif of the history is in fact threats, which justify protection or investigation. If the threat is inevitable, and preservation *in situ* thus not possible, then an archaeological documentation might be an acceptable alternative. Archaeology saves the cultural heritage from destruction and at the same time increases knowledge. Through the archaeological practice the authentic traces of the past are transformed into texts and images, which do not hinder the development. Because it is precisely the progress or “modernization” which is singled out as the main threat. Modernization causes, or even forces upon us, a need to worship, protect or explore the cultural heritage (Anshelm 1993; Isar 1996). Thus the origin of the museums might have a connexion with the destruction of monuments and the economic development (Kristiansen 1996). And through the legislation a more or less direct correlation is now secured between the expansion of building and the infrastructure on the one hand, and the scope of archaeology on the other.

#### THE ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

By far the majority of the finances, work force and mind power of archaeology is spent on digging, documenting and analysing source material, and on developing new technical methods and also discussing theoretical perspectives, that is, matters concerning what and how. Kilometres of text deal with what archaeologists have found, how we ought to carry out the excavation, and how the subject ought to be defined and developed. But why excavate traces of lost life? Why worry about the past and Mårup at all? These are neglected questions.

The formulation of the question “why” is perhaps heretical, because it breaks with a loyal consensus on the self-evident importance of the past. It indicates that various answers are possible, and even that the answer

might be negative. The formulation could be a sign of crisis. But the question is inevitable. Also archaeology has to introduce critical self-reflection by doubting what is apparently self-evident.

To find an answer to the question, I have asked my colleagues and have searched, looked through and read the archaeological literature. Most of the literature is about who, what and how. It describes new finds and excavations. The literature explains the history of archaeology itself with its actors, perspectives, methods and communication – how it has been, is, and especially ought to have been. Justifications appear on a single page here and there scattered in textbooks and debate articles – usually in a foreword or an introduction. But only one text has the question of the advantage of archaeology as its main theme, and it is printed in a non-archaeological periodical, *Lychnos*.

Carl-Axel Moberg, a former professor of archaeology at Gothenburg University, is, as far as I know, the only person who has discussed the advantage of archaeology in the perspective of the history of ideas. The article *Den nyttiga fornforskningen* was written in 1947, but was first published in 1984 and then with a minor addendum which led the investigation up to the present.<sup>3</sup>

Moberg went through justifications for the antiquarian research using Danish and in particular Swedish examples. He found 13 different justifications or viewpoints: 1) The glory of the country (Sweden in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries); 2) Primogeniture, i.e. right with reference to age (already 1434); 3) The virtue of Antiquity (around 1800); 4) Patriotic archaeology, i.e. for the pride of the people and nation (nationalism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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3) According to Hans Andersson, Moberg tried in vain to publish the article in 1947, but the comparison of the nationalist justifications in Sweden and Germany at that time was too controversial.

and unchanged far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century); 5) Arsenal for national pride and expansion (National Socialists in Germany before and during the Second World War); 6) Guide of the revolution (Soviet Union); 7) International reconciliation (hope in the 20<sup>th</sup> century); 8) Intellectual stimulant, i.e. fostering and instructing (since the Enlightenment); 9) Research as a phenomenon, i.e. the question of use is regarded as irrelevant (20<sup>th</sup> century); 10) Uninteresting, which results in mechanical reproductions of typical catchwords of the time; 11) Advantage for science alone (New Archaeology since the 1960s); 12) Use in nationality policy (Soviet Union, China and Israel after the Second World War); 13) Entertainment, i.e. occupation in an increased leisure time (Denmark in the 1970s?) (Moberg 1984, cf. also 1978).

Moberg did not systematize or criticise the various justifications, with the exception that he presented them in chronological order, and remarked that nationalism with its reference to mother country in practice must have been the most important motive. He found that the abuse of archaeology before and during the Second World War led to a backlash, namely a focus on description instead of interpretation. And finally, that the interest in the advantage of the antiquarian research after decades of silence had once again become important (after 1968), but the focus was now on the actual meaning and use, not its programmatic justifications.

Distinct views on the aim or advantage of archaeology occur scattered throughout the Nordic literature: Thus in *Arkeologien som naturvetenskap* Gad Rausing wrote that, "Our aim must be the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth", and that "To understand the present and build for the future one must know the past" (Rausing 1971:18). In the festschrift *Forntid för framtid* Gustaf Trotzig states that archaeology creates employment (Trotzig 1972). Klaus Ebbesen wrote in *Kontaktstencil* that, "Archaeology is a science which has its justification solely

in the sense that a relatively large group of people (in Denmark e.g. the readers of *Skalk*) wish to see and read about its results in their spare time" (Ebbesen 1972:119). Leif Gren claims in the periodical *Populär Arkeologi* that archaeology fills a requirement of society by creating ideas about the past which can be used ideologically (Gren 1984:26). Stig Welinder wrote in *Det arkeologiska perspektivet*, "that without the methods of archaeology to study archaeological source material we would know nothing at all about more than 99 % of the timespan during which humans have lived on Earth", and also that, "Debate on society and environment needs living reference knowledge about many different kinds of people and environments, both the people of the those of archaeology, both the modern landscape and the older cultural landscape" (Welinder 1986:101 quotation cf. also 1993:40ff). Göran Burenhult believed in *Länkar till vår forntid*, that archaeology can create a greater understanding of the role of man in the ecological system and in that way help stop the abuse of natural resources, the environmental damage, and also solve the problems of supply and overpopulation (Burenhult 1988:10). In the periodical *Tor*, Svante Norr believes that archaeology contributes to "escapism and entertainment", but ought to be "cultural criticism", that is contribute to a critical understanding of what it is to be a human being (Norr 1993:103f). Finally, in *Fra ting til tekst* Bjørnar Olsen believes "that a subject like archaeology can contribute to an increased cultural understanding and possibly also help to reduce the fear of foreigners and the dawning nationalism" (Olsen 1997:278f).

In the same way, motivations appear in the non-Nordic literature. Instead of enumerating the countless examples, I shall promote two books which present a broad spectrum of answers:

In *Invitation to Archaeology* Philip Rahtz presented reasons why people conduct archaeology: 1) Intellectual curiosity;



2) Expand data-bases for anthropology or ethnology; 3) Predict and change the future; 4) Public education; 5) Promotion of tourism; 6) Establishment of a common past; 7) Definition of ethnic identity; 8) Justification of male or female dominance; 9) Test of hypotheses; 10) Support of myth; 11) Validation of religious truth; 12) Building-up of the ego or public image of an individual or institution; 13) Search for treasure or loot (Rahtz 1985:15ff).

In *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, the black book, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley presented justifications for archaeology, preservation and images of the past in a complicated figure, which is meant to illustrate mutual connexions. The motivations were collected from the English language literature of the 1960s-80s: 1) Social duty to preserve; 2) Economic, aesthetic or symbolic values; 3) Involvement in a larger different world; 4) Needs; 5) Provide continuity and stability; 6) Common identity for country or humans; 7) Learn from the past; 8) Want to know, what happened; 9) Entertainment; 10) The process itself is educational; 11) Reveals the historical contextuality of rationality; 12) Understand the present; 13) Relevant to a scientific society; 14) Control the present (Shanks & Tilley 1987:25ff).

However, parallel to all the justifications run critical viewpoints, which as a rule are suppressed in the literature. A well-known but old example of critique of archaeology was written by the author August Strindberg. In the short story *De lycksaliges ö* from 1890 there is a satire on the Historical Museum in Stockholm, where archaeology with its typological method is characterized as a "buttonology" (Strindberg 1890:116ff; cf. Welinder 1994:297ff, 320ff).

Every justification hides a critical question. I myself have many times heard sceptical remarks from the edge of the excavation trench. I have both heard and read the critique in Denmark in the 1970s, when two populist parties dominated the political scene; in

Norway in the 1980s, when the demand for excavation could have the consequence that central town plots remained undeveloped; and now lately in Sweden in the 1990s, when the building of bridges, motorways and railroads has become more expensive and delayed because of excavation: Of what use can it be? A paid hobby! A waste of the tax-payers' money! Hampers the development! Too expensive! Too time-consuming!

Confronted with all these critical comments we can briefly flee from the excavations to history for more general answers, since archaeology might be conceived of as part of a greater historical project.

#### HISTORY, MYTH AND IDENTITY

My own first encounter with the question of the advantage of history occurred during school days, when I read an essay by the Danish author and historian Palle Lauring. In *Hvad skal vi med Historien?* Lauring treated questions about use and subjectivity and also the relationship between fiction and historical writing. He ascertained that history has always been used for different needs, and that it has always reflected its age. The function of history, according to Lauring, is to bring about understanding. Without historical thinking, without historical knowledge rooted in a past reality, we can not understand the people, life and mentality of the present. And Lauring concluded that humans can not live without consciousness of the past (Lauring 1969).

There has long been a tradition for reflection over the development of history and also over the history, perspectives, methods and use of the historical science. The topic has been discussed by historians, but also by philosophers and others under the heading "philosophy of history". Many have tried to answer the question of the advantage of history, and many have discussed the answers of others. Thus Lauring is only one among many who has insisted on a viewpoint of historicism, that is, that the reality of the

present can only be understood on the basis of its history, and that we should avoid judging the past.

The philosophy of history tells a typical story of progress. Historians have gradually acquired a clearer glimpse into the past. The beginning is as a rule marked by the Greek Herodotus, who represents the change from myth to history writing. Hereafter follows a row of (male) thinkers, each characterized by a certain view of history. One scientific breakthrough is the establishment of the source-critical method, which meant that the last myths could be removed. And en route we can read about the various motives for studying history. Here follow some scattered examples from a sea of texts:

The historian Herodotus, who portrayed the war between the Greeks and the Persians, began his work with a motivation: "What Herodotus the Halicarnassian has learnt by inquiry is here set forth: in order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvellous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners and especially the reason why they warred against each other may not lack renown" (Herodotus: I, 3).

Much later Friedrich Nietzsche stated in *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben* that the advantages of history can be tripartite in the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. The monumental brings human examples; the antiquarian cultivates the past; and the critical brings force to break with the past (Nietzsche 1874: chap. 2-3).

In *The Historian's Craft* the historian Marc Bloch started by repeating a question: "Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?" Bloch was executed by the Gestapo, so the book, which was meant to be the answer, was never completed. In spite of that the answer is apparent. The intention is to understand the present through the past, and to understand the past through the present (Bloch 1954:3 quotation cf. also Carr 1961:

101f).

The historian David Thomson argued in *The Aims of History* that the aim is the historical attitude. History enriches life by giving intellectual experience, mental training, and by stimulating the imagination (Thomson 1969:11, 99ff).

The historian of ideas Sven Eric Liedman rejected in *Surdeg* several past answers: That history gives us heroes is hardly a reliable explanation. That history is entertaining is silly. And that it gives us a critical attitude is not well contemplated. Instead Liedman meant that the function of history is ideological. He found four reasonable advantages: 1) To explain the present; 2) To establish great changes in society; 3) To show what a human life can be; 4) To bring knowledge about unfinished processes (Liedman 1980:93ff, 1987:172ff).

The philosopher Sören Halldén found in *Behövs det förflutna* three justifications for history: 1) Extension of experiences, which can be used in judgment; 2) Learning from the past about the variety of life, which can be used in solving problems; 3) Enrichment of life, similar to a tourist's travels. And Halldén ends the book with the words, that "the question at issue opens roads in different directions. It is a little like touching upon the question 'Why are you alive?' " (Halldén 1983:14f, 135 quotation)

The anthology *Ut med historien* compiles articles by seven historians, who had lectured on the theme "The tasks of historical teaching today" (Edgren & Österberg 1995). Among the collage of viewpoints I chose the article by Bengt Ankarloo, *Om historiens nytta*, which discusses justifications through time. He himself regards the antiquarian use, that is the naive collecting, "as chewing gum and Coca-Cola", a pastime which merely can be tolerated. The monumental and critical use alone can give energy and self-reliance. The intention of history is formulated in Augustine's concept of *distentio animi*, to extend the soul, that is to exceed here and

now (Ankarloo 1993:25 quotation).

In *History: What & Why?* the historian of ideas Beverley Southgate presented a postmodern vision. Southgate shows how the study of the past has previously been motivated with 1) interest and entertainment, 2) moral teaching, 3) religious teaching, 4) politics and ideology. However, perspectives such as Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism together with criticism of existing chronologies, valuations and cultural categories might lead to a rewriting of the past, and with that open up to a different future. In short, conceptions about the past can influence the future! (Southgate 1996: 28ff, 108ff).

We also encounter a post-modern perspective in the book *Historia, myt och identitet* by the social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen. The ideals of the Enlightenment are here rejected as impossible, the idea of progress as a forgery, and nationalism as intolerant. The book is filled with comments on actual examples of the use and abuse of history. And concerning the past, Hylland Eriksen finds that we ought to "admit that every story about it is lying: every story about the past implies of necessity that something is kept secret and suppressed, misreadings and misunderstandings – provided that they do not contain pure lies" (Eriksen 1996:114). But according to Hylland Eriksen we need the myth. Because the myth surpasses death in its timelessness, gives the world a moral structure, creates order out of chaos, and shows the origin of distinctions. We just ought to choose myths which do not simplify, and which impede abuse. Finally we ought to distinguish between interpretations of the past and the moral and political consequences of them (Eriksen 1996).

*Historia, myt och identitet* represents an extreme contribution to the post-modern criticism and relativization of science. However, the hypercriticism stumbles over the paradoxical starting points of the post-modernism itself. Because if relativism rules,

then the criticism and the moral are also relative. Why worry about the demolition of the mosque of Ayodhya in India, the war in the former Yugoslavia, or the Holocaust? They might be mendacious narratives, a symptom of pure mythomania. How can one distinguish between the bad and the good myths, when solid principles are lacking? Furthermore, why replace bad myths with good ones, if we can not believe in progress? And is a post-modern perspective consistent with a separation between interpretation and use? No, the self-contradictions are too many. History and myth have similarities both in function and form, but this does not mean that they are identical. The relativism might be intellectually amusing, but it remains barren. To live, think and act without any element of realism is unrealistic.

Thus post-modernism has implied a temporary return to the myths in a clash with the ideals of the Enlightenment. With the dissolution of the belief in facts, realities and objectivity, history is again transformed into myth. The narratives of history would not be more real than other stories. As the truth no longer is the intention, there has been a displacement since the 1980s from the past itself to the use and rhetoric in the story about the past. The focus has shifted from knowledge to ethics and art – from the truth to the good and the beautiful.

Regardless whether the stories are true or false, regardless whether the historians produce knowledge or myths, facts or fiction, I repeat the question of "why?". That is, why is there a need for narratives? The radical relativism of the post-modernists simply implies a rewording of the main problem.

Now numerous catchwords, cultural values and justifications concerning preservation, archaeology and history have been presented. And more and more answers have arisen. But perhaps the justifications are unimportant. Instead we should investigate not what has been said, but what has been done.

## MORAL STORIES

"The Rape of the Nile", "Arkeologi och imperialism", "Alternative Archaeologies: nationalist, colonialist, imperialist", "Brugte historier", "Who Needs the Past?", "The Politics of the Past", "The Rape of Tutankhamun", "Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology", "Nationalism and Archaeology", "Nationalism and archaeology in Europe" (Fagan 1975; Bandaranayake 1978; Trigger 1984; Hedeager & Schousboe 1989; Gathercole & Lowenthal 1990; Romer & Romer 1993; Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Atkinson *et al.* 1996; Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996).

This is a selection of titles from a genre within archaeology which has expanded during the last decade. The texts are about the use and perhaps in particular the abuse of the past. The genre is common to subjects such as archaeology, history, ethnology and social anthropology. Crucial is the image of the past which the research has promoted. The past is always studied by someone and for someone. Certain phenomena are accentuated, while others are ignored. And the perspective is never accidental. Instead of studying justifications, practice is studied, because it is in practice that the meaning of the past is laid down. "A qui profite le crime?", who profits from the crime, as the archaeologist Alain Schnapp expresses it in *La conquête du passé* (Schnapp 1993:11).

The literature of the genre has often been about how the past has been abused in nationalism, colonialism, imperialism and other "isms". Reality and literature are filled with examples: How the selection, interpretation and communication have been formed after the needs of the present. How treasures have been removed from the periphery of the colonies to central museums in the European capitals. How houses have been demolished to obliterate the cornerstones in the identity of a people, most recently in Bosnia. There are plenty of distinct examples

of abuse, such as the references of the fascists to the Roman Empire, the conduct of Nazi-Germany in Eastern Europe, the biblical archaeology in Israel, and the construction of a European identity. The list could of course be made much, much longer.

The continuous focus on the Viking Age, monuments such as Birka, Old Uppsala, Borre, Lejre, Jelling and also the royal ships proves that the past, consciously or unconsciously is used also in our part of the world in a national perspective (Keller 1978; Mahler *et al.* 1983; Nordenborg Myhre 1994; Bohman 1997; Cederlund 1997). Thus use and abuse do not just apply to the "others".

Related to the critical historiography is the latest decades' "exposure" of the rhetorical character of research and intermediation. The texts of science are understood as a genre, which can be subjected to text analysis. Therefore an actual and comprehensive debate deals with the similarities and dissimilarities between fact and fiction, and which stories are told about the past. Thus *Metahistory*, written by the historian of ideas Hayden White, has attracted great attention. Here he claims that the writing of history was formed after the literary patterns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. The romance represents anarchism, the tragedy radicalism, the comedy conservatism, and the satire liberalism. In this way the writing of history should be steered by a basic poetics connected with political categories (White 1973).

Through the use of the past quite different motives occur than the official ones. When use of the past is observed in the mirror of hindsight, then we see abuse. Behind the moral ideals an immoral reality is revealed. The past has been raped, plundered and manipulated. The past has been used for treasure hunting, escapism, pastime and profit. The past has served all needs – religion, ideology and capital. The genre of the abuse of the past thus expands the spectrum

of possible motives. Because also the immoral use is an actual use. And judging from the criticism the abuse should be quite prevalent.

But the critical study of the use and abuse of the past might also itself be assessed as an example of the use of the past for present needs – itself a narrative. So it is striking that the abuse almost always concerns the “others”, either a long time ago or far away, never the reviewer himself. What are the motives for examining the use of the past by other archaeologists and historians: To learn from the past so that repetition can be avoided, or to build oneself an identity of moral correctness? Why would there be a need these past decades to insist on the moral, if the immoral had not been a constant close reality?

I myself see a tendency for the literature to condemn hyper-evident examples of abuse and overlook the indistinct examples. If the intention is to hamper future abuse, there is a risk that the new forms of abuse are not discovered. Because it is rather harmless to continually use the deceased German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna and Nazism as measures of the immoral. And all the criticism of the use of archaeology in nationalism – doesn't it just serve a new policy which intends to reduce the national state, namely the europeization of Europe and the globalization?

The genre of the use and abuse of the past actualizes the question of whether interpretation and use can be separated, whether use can be avoided, or on the contrary if it is the intention, and where the border should be drawn between the good and the bad use of the past. And do we have the right to judge the past, to drag the dead to the court of the Inquisition without the possibility of defending themselves, to arrange Judgment Day for the dead in the absence of God? Or is it precisely the moral which is the ultimate motivation for the study of the past?

The opinion that every narrative about the past is a moral statement, is held by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. The historian gives

the victims of the past a voice. The victims deserve not to be forgotten, not to be made trivial or concealed by the historical writing of the victors (Ricoeur 1984-88: vol. 3, 187f; cf. Kemp 1987:101ff).

#### DO WE NEED THE PAST?

The past has been fragmented by the division of the field into specialities, subjects and institutions. The demarcation of a certain source material, perspective, method, period or geographical area has unquestionably been effective when it comes to increasing the amount of knowledge, but the advantages of the past for life drift away. With a rising specialization every area defines its own intermediate aim, while the whole and the intention disappear. In order to unite the ramified field again, to “think together” the past to a whole, transverse questions and concepts are needed.

The question “why?” runs transversely, but also here the field is divided and boundless. Since the deserted church of Mårup and the warning by Nietzsche we have encountered catchwords, cultural values, justifications, and also examples of use and abuse. We understand that there might be a variety of reasons to preserve, excavate or tell about the past, but the variety leads more to confusion than to understanding.

In the heritage sector, in archaeology and the philosophy of history, questions and answers are formulated which are basically identical apart from differences in the language. Regardless whether the perspective is on preservation, excavation or narrative, it is about the meaning of the past. But differences in language have the consequence that ideas within one area are not transferred to another. And many of the answers are just variations of the same content. However, by posing both simple and critical questions the number of answers might be reduced: Why is there a need for cultural heritage, cultural values, knowledge, experiences, patriotism, entertainment or identity by using the past? The

numerous answers then become only shadows of a few motives or main attitudes, which at first are hidden to us.

We do not lack motives. Rather the field is hypermotivated. The literature is swarming with words in a confusing network, everything from the concrete and individual to the abstract and general. The answers change because they depend on the time, the place, and who is writing or speaking. Are we in 1666 or 1986, in Berlin or Ängersjö, and is it the politician, the professor, the amateur or the onlooker who speaks?

The justifications are answers to a continuous wonder. Preservation, archaeology, and history have been practiced for centuries, but the justifications have varied as the arguments for science in general have changed through time (Sundin 1996). The answers express what the questioner wants to hear: in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the mother country, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment, and today "usefulness for society". "Useful" can mean anything from the increased income from tourism to counteracting racism. However, the concept of useful mostly has the character of a political mantra, which covers demands for profitability from the humanistic project. Thus the justifications are formed within a discourse. We say what we are able to and are expected to say in front of the power, the colleagues, the public, and perhaps our own conscience. And the justifications often legitimate the action after it happened.

Of all the simplifications concerning the motivations I have met, the division into four by the historian of technology Svante Beckman is the most fascinating. Inspired by an explanation in the historian Edward Gibbon's *The Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire*, Beckman finds that actions in general can be justified by being useful, a pleasure, a norm or a need (Beckman 1993, 1997). My spontaneous reaction is that the division seems so convincing, sensible and natural – what it naturally is not. The justifications are instead a typical expression of how we in the Western

Christian world look at ourselves: A life split between work and leisure, and between expectations and needs of our own. But as the preservation, excavation and narratives are here and now, the division might of course be relevant. But it is not universal.

Do we need the past? According to Hallén, that is a question which actually deals with why we live. For that reason the problem is both frightening and fascinating. In other words, do we need the present, and what shall we do with the present: Is life useful, a pleasure, a norm or a need? Do we work to be useful, because it is fun, a duty or an economical compulsion? Is life a romance, satire, comedy or tragedy? Do we want the truth, the good or the beautiful? Do we want to explain, understand or judge? Here the investigation ends in some existential alternatives without simple guidelines. And here a new investigation could seriously begin.

#### PAST AND PERISHABILITY

How can we then explain the chronic nostalgia – the growing tendency to preserve, dig and tell about the past? More and more accumulates in more and more museums, archives and libraries; more monuments are recorded, more localities appear on the World Heritage list; and larger and more expensive excavations are undertaken.

But perhaps the past is not a chronic sickness, a burden, a problem. If anything the accelerating tendency is an expression of a democratization of the past. Where a country once had a few museums, now everybody can create his own museum. Everybody can collect, exhibit and communicate. The past is no longer handed over to a small number of specialists, at one time the king and the nobility, and later the bourgeoisie and trained officials. The past belongs to all, and with that the hierarchy of values has disintegrated. The king is no more interesting than the peasant, the palace of no greater value than the hut, the dolmen no more than the minigolf course. Now all parts of the past can have

their 15 minutes of fame. The expansion of the past in the present does not need to be more sick or threatening than the rise in the number of books which followed the invention of the art of printing.

The reason for the growing preservation and documentation might also be the plain fact that the destruction of traces of the past is more intense than ever. The excavations are larger, because the development of roads, railroads and built-up areas is greater than before. Also the demands for change within a lifetime have increased. But it does not directly explain the need to look nostalgically backwards, or explain the need to save the traces from the onslaught of modernization.

The motivations for studying the past are many, but when the question is pushed to extremes, when the acceleration gets attention, then "therapy" often becomes the ultimate explanation. Thus Hylland Eriksen writes that the continuous change by modernization is legitimated by a counter-ideology of "roots" and "tradition". Homelessness leads to an ambition to build a solid home, and the hypermodernism leads to nostalgia. Further: That "In its commercial and cultural-political form the myths have above all a therapeutical function, they try to heal an 'I' which has been torn apart by the post-traditional doubt and ambiguity" (Eriksen 1996:81f, 89 quotation).

The past functions as therapy for people, who can not cope with change. The past becomes an escape to the exotic, to "a different land", from a grey everyday life; it provides entertainment to pass the time, identity for lack of better. While only a minority will be needed in the future in the world economy, the rest might be kept passive by "tittytainment", that is a mixture of nourishment from "tits" and entertainment. This strong phrase was coined by the former security councillor Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1995 (Martin & Schumann 1997:12f). The museum exhibition, the medieval market and the historical novel thus should have the same

function as the Roman arenas once had.

But it is remarkable that the patronizing words about therapy and entertainment always are applied to others, never to the writer himself. The antiquarian, archaeologist, historian, social anthropologist or philosopher does not regard his or her own interests in the past as serving only as a pastime. It is the amateurs and the public on whom this motive is forced. When history became a profession the last myths were removed, and now when the amateurs challenge the professionals the myth again makes its entry. Thus the difference between history and myth seems less to be about truth and lie, than to be about being able to distinguish between us and them.

Among a number of thinkers we find the opinion that an increasing focus on the past is a symptom of decline. The philosopher Agnes Heller wrote that Europe seems worn out after its enormous effort in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, propelled by the vision of the modern. Now Europe places "most of its strength on preserving the past and cultivating traditions. Old cities are rebuilt, old fortresses are repaired, old objects are exhibited, old books are printed again – the Europeans are tripping around in their cities as if they were museums because they *are* museums" (Heller 1988:27). Hylland Eriksen refers to the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, who said that "a civilization which tends to preserve is a civilization in decline", and further to the sociologist Frank Füredi, who writes that people in the West suffer from a preoccupation with the past, which reflects a mood of conservatism (Eriksen 1996:72, 107f; cf. Füredi 1992). This viewpoint is fully developed in the work of the anthropologist Jonathan Friedman, who sees a connexion between the crisis of modernity and the need for a backward-looking identity. The relationship between modernity and traditionalism here takes on an almost regular character as a reversed correlation (Friedman 1994a:39 fig. 2.4, 1994b).

The opinions of Nietzsche, Heller, Boulez, Füredi, Hylland Eriksen and Friedman can be fit into a long tradition of civilisation criticism. Their theories are examples of “tragic” narratives, which are just as old as the history writing of Herodotus. It is the well-known moral scheme of cyclic sequence – rise, stagnation, decline and fall, which we also find in the philosopher Oswald Spengler (cf. Nordin 1989:130ff, 173ff). And the view itself represents a certain historical perspective. Furthermore, the latest global theories are so abstract that they hardly can be falsified. On this level all personal motives, thoughts and opportunities disappear, and we all become just marionettes under a wavy curve of economy. The level itself excludes anything but abstract connexions. On this note, how many times hasn’t the West been sentenced to doom?

The problem seems to be that we can not reconcile ourselves with the perishability. Regardless whether it deals with a civilization, a deserted church or a human being, the development from life to death is conceived as something which must be lengthened as long as possible. Preserve, record and tell so that nothing is forgotten in an attempt at collective immortality (Bauman 1992). Perhaps it is not so strange, but still absurd in its meaninglessness. It is an impossible struggle against the arrow of time. It is Sisyphus, the king of Corinth, who works with the stone that will inevitably roll down again. Sisyphus is the absurd hero, who with silent pleasure works hard doing nothing, as a punishment for having once put Death in irons (Camus 1942). But if his work is just therapy, I believe that it is time that he frees himself from the stone – frees himself from the burden of the past.

#### RETURN TO THE CLIFF

This investigation started on the cliff at Mårup and it also concludes here. The deserted church of Mårup was just an excuse for “thinking together” a divided field of heritage,

archaeology and philosophy of history, since a philosophy of the cultural heritage is not yet established. Mårup was a point of departure for an investigation of a neglected field, namely the question of the meaning of the past. And the erosion at Mårup was and is both a metaphor of perishability and a concrete antiquarian problem, where opinions are in conflict.

Returning to the actual example of Mårup, we realize that there has been and still is an intense debate on the destiny of the deserted church, where experience stands against knowledge, the local against the central, and culture against nature. In 1928 the parochial church council wanted to demolish the church, while the National Museum took the responsibility for its upkeep. Today the situation is the opposite. Now the inhabitants of the neighbourhood want to preserve the church with the help of coast protection, while representatives of the National Museum and the National Forest and Nature Agency want to document it before a demolition. The local inhabitants point out the value of the church as a unique memorial over the sailors and farmers of the coast, and also its importance as a tourist attraction for 2-300000 guests each year, while ministers and officials see one historical building among many and especially the technical and economic problems.

Perhaps the coast can be protected, but it will cost a double-digit figure in millions, cost additional millions in operation each year, is durable for a couple of decades at the most, and might transfer the problem so that the destruction increases in other places, where it will threaten the summer cottages. And the coast protection is in conflict with the nature protection of the whole coastline, which is an area where the destruction and creation of dunes can occur freely.

The ca. 400 tons of church might be moved a few hundred metres further inland. This is difficult and will cost many millions, save only the building not the cemetery, and



it is a temporary solution because already in 50 years the sea might have reached also the new place.

The church can be rebuilt at a museum. Again this is expensive, and only solves the problem of the church building itself. And the interest in this has not been overwhelming, since the church is altered and therefore not characteristic enough. The Open Air Museum of Hjerl Hede in Jutland already has a reconstructed Jutlandic church, while the Open Air Museum at Copenhagen wants a Zealandic church.

Finally the archaeologist can investigate the floor, the masonry and the roof construction, and move out the furniture before the building is taken down or falls, so that the testimony of the church is preserved in the form of texts, images and chosen objects. This is the official solution, which is being carried out (August 1998) while this article is written. On the other hand the cemetery will not be dug out, for the sake of the recent burials.

But actually there is agreement about the

preservation of the deserted church of Mårup in the future. The disagreement is only about the manner of preservation, namely, whether the church shall be preserved intact, transported to a new place, or transformed after an archaeological investigation into documentation to be found in a book or at a museum. Again the methods are at the centre, not the motives.

But we might just let the church fall down into the sea without investigation, as so many other memories from the past. Is that idea so heretical?

*English revised by Laura Wrang.*

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