
BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Excavating Nations: Archaeology, Museums, and the German-Danish Borderlands*

Excavating Nations: Archaeology, Museums, and the German-Danish Borderlands, by J. Laurence Hare, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, xvi+260 pages, 2015, ISBN: 9781442648432

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Scattered across the southern half of the Jutland Peninsula, where the Danish county of Sonderjylland meets the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, thousands of sites testify to the region's rich prehistoric legacy. A few are well known: the Danevirke, for example, a series of medieval walls stretching across Schleswig to the Treene River, or the lost Viking village of Haithabu. Many more are enclosed by hedges and roads or concealed in peat bogs and marshes. Yet though 'the remains of antiquity in this region suggest themselves only gingerly', J. Laurence Hare considers 'their power over modern Europeans . . . unmistakable. For generations, the ancient sites and artefacts of this region enchanted both Germans and Danes', evoking 'a mythical past while offering potent symbols for the present' (p. 3).

Excavating Nations evaluates the relationships between archaeology and nationalism in the German-Danish borderlands from the early nineteenth century to the present. Hare situates his study within the broader literature on the history of archaeology and nationalism, noting both similarities and differences. Studies of borderlands, he argues, are important for what they share: unlike analyses of archaeological traditions which take the nation as their essential unit of analysis, borderlands studies 'bring to the fore the complex interactions among various forms of identity within nation-states' and reveal borderlands as 'sites of negotiation and conflict that ultimately shape the broader consciousness' (p. 11). He adds, optimistically, that they can even offer messages of hope in times of conflict, describing a recent joint visit to Schleswig-Holstein's State Archaeological Museum by Danish and German heads of state as affirming 'the possibility of peace for border conflicts around the globe' (p. 189). In other respects, however, the German-Danish borderlands are unique, most notably because they 'witnessed protracted attempts to delineate boundaries with no entrenched ethnic, religious, or racial criteria separating the groups' (pp. 5–6).

As a result, 'both sides were torn between seeking . . . a distinctive kernel of German or Danish identity within a shared heritage and appealing . . . to a broader "Germanic" or "Nordic" community' (p. 6).

Hare's study is organised chronologically. Chapter 1 introduces the German- and Danish-speaking antiquarians who founded the first collecting institutions and established the first collegial networks. Spurred on by the realisation that ancient artefacts and sites were under serious threat from agricultural reforms and urban development, they successfully overcame political tensions between Copenhagen and the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein to found a Society for the Collection and Preservation of National Antiquities and a Museum for National Antiquities in Kiel. Chapter 2 traces the gradual professionalization of archaeology over the period between the First German-Danish War (1848–1851) and the Austro-Prussian seizure of Schleswig-Holstein in 1864. While acknowledging the ongoing influence of philologists such as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in shaping debates around the origins of Germanic and Nordic peoples, Hare focuses particularly on the emergence of a new generation of scholars dedicated to the practice of fieldwork.

Chapters 3 and 4 address developments between the end of the Second German-Danish War in 1864 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The process of reconciliation in the borderlands over this period culminated in the successful excavation of the lost Viking Age town of Haithabu, a cooperative endeavour between German and Danish archaeologists. At the same time, however, archaeology became increasingly entangled with resurgent nationalist movements in both Germany and Denmark, partly as a result of its turn towards physical anthropology and its incorporation of *völkisch* ideology and racialized thought.

Chapter 5 addresses the decline of the Kiel Museum during the interwar period and the resulting shift into the public sphere of 'the initiative for interpreting the distant past' (p. 116). In 1920, supporters and opponents of post-WWI territorial revision in Schleswig-Holstein co-opted ancient motifs and archaeological evidence to persuade

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voters to their respective causes. A decade later, German popular writers reinvented Haithabu as a 'Germanic Troy', a monument to a lost era of racial unity. Such developments prepared the ground for the 'unprecedented politicization of prehistoric archaeology' under the Nazi regime described in Chapter 6 (p. 138). German archaeologists benefited from increased funding for research, but saw their academic independence shrink and their motivations challenged by international colleagues. However, as outlined in Chapter 7, they did not uncritically support Nazi goals: during the Second World War, German and Danish prehistorians 'foster[ed] old bonds to protect regional interests' and 'sought to preserve academic ties even if that meant opposing war objectives' (p. 167).

Hare's stated focus throughout is the 'cross-border network of scholars, both antiquarian enthusiasts and professional archaeologists, who collaborated to discover and interpret the past and made antiquity available to the present for appropriation' (pp. 4–5). His examinations of these scholars and the various factors shaping their interpretations of the past – background, education, personal and institutional connections and rivalries, political and social pressures – are certainly detailed; at times, indeed, I found myself losing track of the distinctions between Paul Reinecke and Hans Reinerth, Karl Müllenhoff and Sophus Müller. An appendix containing brief biographies of key players would have been a welcome addition to this otherwise well-structured volume. Personally, I found that Hare's arguments were communicated most effectively by

his descriptions of significant archaeological finds from the region, rather than the scholars who studied them. As these artefacts are variously discovered, displayed, stolen, destroyed, recreated, memorialised, co-opted for political purposes, rescued from falling bombs, or loaned between museums as a gesture of goodwill, their evocative names – the Golden Horns of Gallehus, the Nydam Boat, the Haithabu rune stones – resurface throughout the monograph, communicating something of their fascination for earlier generations of scholars.

More generally, *Excavating Nations* is well researched, very readable, and largely free from irritating errors of spelling or punctuation (the persistent misspelling of 'La Tène' as 'La Tené' is an unfortunate exception). It convincingly demonstrates the degree to which archaeology in the German-Danish borderlands was, and remains, a socially-embedded activity, and is an excellent example of the 'detailed historical scholarship . . . seek[ing] to understand past science in its own context' encouraged by Oscar Moro Abadía (2010, 229), among others. Recommended.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Reference

Moro Abadía, O 2010 Beyond externalism. Exploring new directions in the history of archaeology. *Archaeological Dialogues*, 17(2): 215–236. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1380203810000280>

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