

Changing Images of Archaeology
South Scandinavian Archaeology 1818 to 1978

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Introduction

In this paper I shall give a brief historiographic outline of what I have called the 'changing image' in South Scandinavian Archaeology.¹ The process of change suggested is reflected in the subject's oscillation through time between seeing itself as either scientific or historic. The purpose of discussing those changes is to illustrate the effect of a polemical orientation within the subject on the archaeology produced.

In recent years we have seen a recognition of the idea that Archaeology is conditioned by contemporary society. The acceptance of this idea, and the understanding of the connection between knowledge production and society which it implies, has, however, only reached the form of passive understanding. By this I mean that we have not as yet reached an understanding of the social dependency of Archaeology which allows us to control or manipulate our own knowledge generation, and through this consciously to decide the nature and purpose of our subject.

Our present level of understanding is more in the nature of passive recognition of this dependency, and this is not accompanied by insight into the mechanisms involved in the relationship, nor of the consequences it has for different levels of archaeological work. The understanding of the importance of the social and historical context has had very limited influence in spite of the general acceptance of this social conditioning. At this stage I therefore think it is important to advance the discussion of this aspect of Archaeology. This is not merely in order to legitimize historiography as a specific branch of the discipline, but rather in order to make the history of our own disciplinary past a constructive knowledge. This is of importance for all levels of archaeological research, and it should not be seen as an esoteric issue exclusive to academic discourse.

Indirectly, the history of the discipline is already involved at different levels since we work within an inherent conceptional framework. The lack of critical awareness of this, as well as of a methodology for conducting and including historiographic analysis has, however, tended to relegate the historic perspective to research fringes. We do not at present have any framework for incorporating the past history of our subject as an asset in research strategies. Meanwhile, it is obvious that the history of the discipline would allow us to understand and evaluate the basic premisses on which our current work is founded. We should also acknowledge that, whether the historical perspective is incorporated in research or not, it is always

present since we work within a historically established framework.

In order to establish an understanding of the nature of our work it is, therefore, important to discuss how historiographic knowledge can become of practical importance: how it can become a tool in current work.

Research concerning the historiographic aspect of archaeological theories has usually focussed on the relationship between society and the academic discipline. The development of a discipline, however, is not merely a result of its relationship to contemporary society. If this interaction alone were responsible for the development of a subject all subjects would have similar histories. This, however, is obviously not the case; the nature of knowledge production is far more complicated and involves more factors than the social context. The focus on social context alone cannot, therefore, establish a necessary understanding of how our subject developed and accordingly illuminate the nature and properties of the conceptual framework within which we work.

The limitations of existing histories of Scandinavian archaeology have been their focus on the contemporary social context. Although extremely interesting, and unquestionably the single most important aspect, this is not sufficient since the conditioning of knowledge is far more complicated.

Writing the history of the discipline detached from an understanding of its internal logic and its specific subject matter does not establish the history of its knowledge production. This focus has, rather, tended to produce entertaining descriptions of the individuals involved in the discipline. Furthermore, as this has been the format of most archaeological histories, the result is that the social context tends to be reduced to the life-history of individuals involved, and the concept of social conditioning of knowledge has in turn become vulgarised. Even in the extreme examples, such as the often exemplified Kossinna², the social context is simplified to descriptions of the work of an individual. The specific ideological context which allowed and enabled archaeology to be used in a particular way is thereby equated with the specific archaeology produced by Kossinna as an individual. By using this kind of social perspective Kossinna's work has been perceived as essentially different from the work of contemporary archaeologists owing to its political implications. His work has, therefore, come to be understood as a unique archaeology from which we can easily separate ourselves. Kossinna's archaeology does, however, share at a certain level the same characteristics as all other archaeologies. The differences must, therefore, primarily lie in the specific ideology employing the archaeological knowledge rather than in the kind of archaeology involved or in the nature of its generation.

In this way the subjectivity and potential objectivity of the subject are interwoven, and the potential for manipulation of our own disciplinary past are obvious. We should, therefore, be aware of the

different levels of conditioning of the archaeology produced. In this context it should be stressed that Archaeology develops both as a result of its relationship to the tangible remains of a prehistoric past and within an historically developed conceptual and interpretative framework.

Social conditioning has, as noted above, been simplified in histories of Archaeology by being equated with the influence of individuals; on the other hand, the mechanisms involved in conditioning and, more specifically, the ways in which this become internalised in the subject have been neglected. This means that many of the potentials derived from understanding the history of our subject have been ignored.

This ignorance about our own past can be exemplified in the subject's oscillation between different extremes. Usually, the acceptance or rejection of theories and hypothesis only relates to the immediately previous standpoints. This means that former discussions of the same problems are ignored and the result is that we often see rephrasings of old viewpoints. The lack of historiographic knowledge means that such rephrasings are unaccompanied by understanding of why the idea was previously rejected. The reintroduction of an earlier hypothesis is, therefore, usually not based on a reassessment of its validity on the basis of new experiences and in relationship to its previous limitations, but seems rather to be caused by ignorance of previous experiences. Thus the limitations of previous ideas will also be contained in the new statements, while the valid cores of different and possible opposing ideas are not extracted. The result is a tendency to fruitless repetition. This is, for example, reflected in the discussions of explanatory models such as diffusion versus evolution, or in advocated logical approaches, like induction versus deduction. Issues like these have been discussed repeatedly through the history of Archaeology and each new phase or school of ideas tend to ignore the experiences gained by previous ones. This lack of historical perspective in research means that, if one tries to evaluate the different schools of thought reflected in the history of archaeology, and the general nature of the archaeology conducted, a striking sense of repetition of ideas and an essential lack of innovations since the turn of the century is evoked.

In order to understand the importance of the historical perspective it should be stressed that the subject matter of archaeology is in a sense independent of time; it is only the work of the archaeologists which changes. This develops as a result of many different factors. One of these is the above mentioned social context, which is continuously evolving. Another factor is the subject matter, which is stable. The continuous interaction between subject and subject matter makes it possible to suggest that all considerations concerning a particular archaeological problem contain something of relevance. This is because they all, independently of the changes in their context, relate to and reflect some aspect of the subject matter. Moreover, what may be of greater importance is the fact that the basic limitations of former ideas (i.e. built in assumptions) often get carried over to the

present ones because their bases were not critically reassessed. Awareness of the historical perspective and an active use of previous discussions could, therefore, help to incorporate not only our own reactions and arguments but also past ones in current considerations. Through these activities the perspective of our work would be greatly expanded.

To establish this kind of historiographic knowledge we must understand the nature of our subject and its specific characteristics. This does not mean that the importance of social conditioning should be minimised, but rather that it should be more fully understood by directing attention towards how it works in its specifics and within a discipline.

These considerations make it obvious that a discipline, apart from its dependence on the social context, also has an internal logic which causes it to develop its own conceptual framework through a dialectic with its data.³ This aspect of the production of archaeological knowledge has hardly been recognised and it is not discussed in any detail. I shall, therefore, try to bring attention to a different aspect of the development of archaeological thought than the social context. This is, furthermore, an aspect which I think has been ignored and which could be seen as an example of a different level of conditioning. The aspect in question is the means through which social influences are internalised in archaeology. The lack of understanding of this practical aspect of social conditioning of knowledge has helped to make it possible that an essentially critical reflection (as it provokes awareness of our subjectivity), has become incorporated in our subject as an uncritical and unprovocative assumption.

As an illustration of one of the aspects of Archaeology which has been ignored in historiographic research and which is important for the internalisation of the social influences, I shall briefly describe what I have called the "changing images" of archaeology. This can be seen as participating in the process of internalisation on a very simple level. Without too much effort it can be used to demonstrate the importance of such aspects. My account of this should not be seen as an in-depth analysis of the changing images but as an illustration of what might constitute other levels of historiographic research pursuing understanding of the practical determination of our work and their consequences. By focussing on this aspect, which it must be emphasised is a single part in a much more complicated process, it is possible to consider to what degree changes in theoretical framework, realisation of new problems, and the establishment of new modes of explanations were affected by changes in archaeology's disciplinary self-evaluation.

Images in Scandinavian Archaeology

The richness of the Scandinavian material and the "burden of tradition" makes the history of Scandinavian archaeology ideal for this

type of investigation. Present work in the area -- theoretical and practical -- cannot be separated from past archaeological activities and considerations. In this respect we can only free ourselves from our past by actually understanding it.

When investigating the models applied to the transition from Bronze Age to Iron Age in Scandinavia from 1818 to 1978⁴ a distinct notion of an ideal of the subject as well as changes within this ideal through time, can be detected (Sørensen 1980:22ff).

In this context 'ideal' means the image archaeologists have about how Archaeology ought to be done and of the true nature of the subject. This clearly did not always correspond with Archaeology as it was actually conducted, but it did, nonetheless, have a tremendous influence on the concepts and methods employed. By focussing on this expression of an ideal, reflected directly in programmatic statements about the goals and nature of the subject, and less directly in the analysis and interpretation of archaeological data, it was possible to construct a framework reflecting the common ideal of the nature of Archaeology at any one time within Southern Scandinavia.⁵ Figure 1 reflects this framework; it represents archaeology's self-evaluation relative to the two alternatives of History and Natural Science.

A brief discussion of the nature of the ideal, as it is reflected in the literature and systematised in Figure 1, will make this term clearer and show the importance of this aspect of the archaeology conducted through this period.

At its birth in 1818, Danish archaeology was seen as providing the material evidence for a past which was well known through its description in the sagas. The subject, therefore, developed as a branch of History, and its purpose was to classify objects in order to bring them into accordance with events described in the literature. To "explain" was not a goal of archaeology since explanations either pre-existed in the literature or were built into the contemporary romantic approach to past cultures.

By the 1840's we see the formal definition of Archaeology as an independent academic discipline. This process was consciously (e.g. by Worsaae) accompanied by a growing criticism of history and historical methodology and, through that of the placement of archaeology amongst the historical disciplines. An image of Archaeology as natural science was being created. This meant growing emphasis on the material evidence as the true source of information about the past, and the formalisation of the inductive method as the ideal scientific method of investigation. Hypothesis were set up to be tested (e.g. the 'kitchen-midden commission') and explanations without material basis rejected. This emphasis on the material evidence as the source as opposed to the literature resulted in new problems being realised. As an example, the rejection of the invasions, which were mentioned in the sagas, as the explanation for the material differences between the 'ages', created a

need for different types of explanations. New concepts were accordingly being developed or incorporated and diffusion came into vogue as new ways of explaining observations were introduced. The image of archaeology as a natural science, when established, was further favoured by the influence of Darwinism and early evolutionary theories.

This ideal of the nature of the subject reached its peak in the later half of the 19th century, and it had its most influential expression in Montelius's development of the typological method (exemplified in (Montelius 1885)). The nature of the archaeological material and thereby the nature of the work of archaeologists was seen as equal to that of the Natural Sciences (Montelius 1899). Use of the inductive method was emphasised and work was governed by a sense of objective truth. 'Proofs' were established, tests conducted and statistical methods and concepts were being introduced. Human beings and their cultural products were perceived as being governed by natural laws. The archaeological material, therefore, would reflect these laws, and the systematic analysis of the material would reveal the laws governing human evolution.

At the beginning of the 20th century the ideal of natural science was heavily criticised, partly as a result of the growing disillusion with the possibilities of recovering general laws governing human behaviour. At the same time source criticism was being developed and systematically applied within History. In this context the attraction of an image of an historical science focussing on the individual seems obvious. The attempts towards establishing general laws were dismissed; the reification of human beings and their cultural behaviour was rejected; and Archaeology was increasingly seen as a historical discipline, which was concerned with a past peopled with 'human beings of flesh and blood'. With the application of historical source criticism, which emphasised the written sources as the 'true' sources, the possibility of a systematic understanding of the past was considered to be severely constrained. The decision-making of prehistoric men and women was accordingly increasingly approached through empathy. As an alternative, the possibility of 'understanding' the past was rejected, and work instead focussed on different levels of classification. The result was a general separation of data and explanation which was in contradistinction to the previous period of close association between the two. This, of course, had severe consequences for the emphasis on practical work and for the nature of the explanations suggested.

The image of Archaeology as a historical discipline was then again gradually challenged after the Second World War. Growing optimism about the possibilities of understanding and explaining the past replaced the previous restricted view of the potentials in archaeology, and a wide range of new techniques were introduced. Meanwhile, the theoretical superstructure of the subject was no longer being formulated within a national context. Changes within the inter-disciplinary self-evaluation of the subject had increasingly been mirroring the general changes within Anglo-American theoretical archaeology. For the period up to the

early 1970's this meant a return to the image of Archaeology as a subject after the nature of the 'hard sciences'. This was paralleled by a change in scientific method from inductive to deductive with the subsequent promulgation of the hypothetical-deductive method.

The period from the late '50's/early '60's to the mid '70's was a very resourceful and inspired one in Scandinavian archaeology (see also Kristiansen, this volume), with the re-establishment of theoretical goals and great optimism about the possibility of recovering generalities about culture and cultural development. In this period we once again see explanation coming into focus as opposed to understanding.⁶

Following the general critique of natural science as an ideal, and of the hypothetical-deductive method, this orientation towards natural science has lately been replaced by an emphasis on the goal of Archaeology as providing a Humanistic contribution towards the understanding of society (e.g. Levinsen & Sørensen 1979). The current approach might be described as attempting to place the subject within the social sciences; while the philosophical framework presently adopted rejects the notion of 'ideal science' and of formalised criteria for scientific/academic work. Knowledge is emphasised as being a process as opposed to a product. We can also detect a growing awareness of the subjectivity of interpretation and of the relativity of classifications in some of the current debates (e.g. Moberg 1981). These concepts and their corresponding self-evaluations are sure to be of major importance in forthcoming discussions.

Concluding Remarks

This very brief account has attempted to show how the images we have had about the ideal nature of our work have resulted in the archaeological data being approached and interpreted in different ways. The history further shows the limited alternatives in the ways we have seen our discipline and of the nature of the methods advocated. The fact that archaeologists through time repeatedly have argued for the relevance of one of two ideals, namely natural science or history, and one of two methods, inductive or deductive (other polarisations could be mentioned, see (Sørensen 1982)), might, when seen in a historical perspective, suggest that the truth may lie in neither of those but rather in both.

I think that this brief account of a specific aspect of the 'internal' history of South Scandinavian archaeology can be used to suggest that the development of archaeological thought is more complicated than hitherto expressed, and includes more factors than the social context; furthermore, that this branch of knowledge has an importance which is relevant to more than an academic elite. It is, therefore, suggested that understanding the specific nature of the development of our subject would be a constructive extension of the

existing acceptance of the general relationship between social context and knowledge. It should, moreover, be stressed that the past of the discipline will continue to determine its present unless it is understood and, through that, becomes part of the present perspective as 'active knowledge'.

Notes

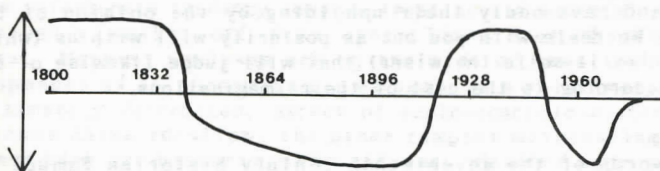
1. This paper was, in its original form, presented at The Fourth Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference (TAG) in Durham 1982. I would like to thank Valerie Pinsky, who organised the session "Critical Perspectives on the Past", for inviting me to participate. I would also like to thank Prof. C.-A. Moberg, Göteborg and C. Keller, Oslo for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and C. Evans for helpful advice on the present version.
2. G. Kossinna (1858-1931): German archaeologist, whose work was especially centered on the problems of race and ethnicity. His work gained great importance in Nazi Germany, and it is often used in histories of Archaeology as an exceptional example of political archaeology (e.g. Daniel 1962:121ff).
3. The importance of the interaction with data has been thoroughly ignored in histories of archaeology. Data, however, has to a considerable degree interacted with theories and the ways in which they have changed, modified and at time rejected ideas are extremely interesting. A very good example of this, from the area in question, is the incompatibility of the notion of evolutionary progress in the late 19th century with the 'discovery' of the poverty of the Pre Roman Iron Age (Sørensen 1980:123, 133ff).
4. The material referred to comes from my Cand.Phil. dissertation at Aarhus university, Denmark, which was supervised by Dr. J. Poulsen and Lector P. Mortensen. The purpose of this work was to analyse all previous explanations of the transition from Bronze to Iron in Scandinavia. The choice of literature was therefore primarily aimed at reflecting this problem. For this work I would like to acknowledge numerous discussions with I. Bodilsen and K.E.T. Levinsen, both of Aarhus University.
5. A few individuals do not fit this general picture (e.g. Müller in the period of the Montelius-Müller debate). The illustration, however, reflects the generally accepted norms.
6. The distinction between explanation and understanding is an extremely interesting feature in the history of archaeology which, however, has not been discussed in any details. This paper only mentions the distinction in order to call attention to the phenomena.

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HISTORY



NAT. SCI.

Figure 1: Graph representing archaeological self-evaluation relative to HISTORY and NATURAL SCIENCE. (after Sørensen 1981).

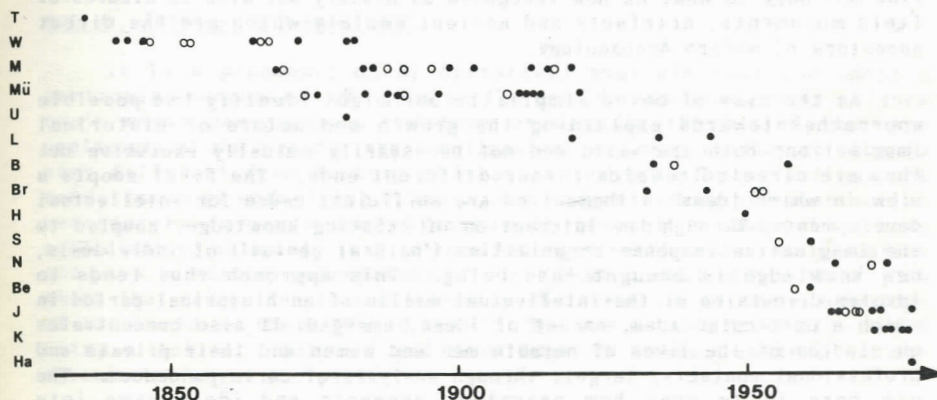


Figure 2:

- T = C.J. Thomsen
- W = J.J.A. Worsaae
- M = O. Montelius
- Mü = S. Müller
- U = I. Undset
- L = S. Lindqvist
- B = J. Brønsted
- Br = H.C. Broholm
- H = E. Hinsch
- S = B. Stjernquist
- N = E. Nylen
- Be = C.J. Becker
- J = J. Jensen
- K = K. Kristiansen
- Ha = S. Stumann Hansen

- = primary literature concerning the transition
- = secondary literature concerning the transition