

AXEL BOLVIG

Dangers and Threats to the Medieval Cultural Heritage in Denmark

It is food for thought that the protestant Nordic countries in many ways have preserved more churches and art from the catholic Middle Ages than the countries that have not turned their back to Catholicism.

Why and how did these buildings, artifacts and pieces of art survive till do day?

Have they never been exposed to destruction?

Why were catholic images not replaced with lutheran images at least?

What are we doing to preserve these remains from a distant past dominated by a belief that long ago was abandoned?

Why should we preserve the outdated and oldfashioned churches?

In Denmark about 90% of the village churches have been erected in the romanesque period 1050-1250. Many of them were built as replacements of older wooden churches. In the romanesque period the Danes showed no mercy on their forefather's wooden architecture.

The erection of stone churches took place in a spirit that renounced the remnants of the past.

The result of the destruction is the existence of a nationwide scattering of medieval stone churches.

So are the conditions of the historical development. History is built on the ruins of the preceding past. Let me bring an hypotetic but typical example from the wallpaintings. A church is standing 1150 with its newly built walls. This is stage number one. The painter makes a sketch full of information. Stage no two. Immediatly he elaborates it to the final romanesque image. Stage no three which is image number two on the spot. After some decades the painting is dirty and the wardens get it cleaned (no four), some vague details are repainted by a local artist (no five). A century or two later it is whitewashed and another "modern" gotique painting is painted on the wall (no six). Some time after the Reformation this painting is whitewashed (no seven) and remains hidden until this century where the church is being restored (no eight). Every change on the wall is creating a new historical situation full of information of the time of the change. Each change is the result of the destroy or the removal or the hiding of the preceding historical situation.

The restoration is in fact the same procedure in the opposite direction. It is the decision of the involved historians and restorers to decide which historical appearance shall be presented to us, to decide where to stop their destruction.

You find the same and even more drastic situation concerning the buildings. The wooden churches were replaced by stone churches. During the centuries these churches got new vaults instead of the flat roof, new and bigger windows, the interior changes continually etc. To day we often remove a cement plaster from last century representing that period's ideal of

architecture. *But most often a restoration just means a consolidation of an actual condition of the building.*

History is a continuous proces and so is our cultural heritage.

It is more understandable that my ancestors demolished the pagan temples and gods of the Slavs on the other side of the Baltic in 12th century.

But once the stone churches were erected in a way they were protected against demolition. Most of them are still to be seen all over country.

If a few churches were pulled down it was caused by depopulation or migration which in certain areas made some churches superfluous.

A typical Danish development mark the architectural situation. [**Gerlev exterior**] In stead of replacing oldfashioned small romanesque village churches in the late Middle Ages we rebuilt and expanded them in a way so that the typical village church of romanesque origin still look like a gothic church.

After the Reformation nothing happened to the churches. The protestant leaders wouldn't and couldn't replace them with a set of modern well functioning buildings.

If they of economic reasons tried to give up some churches the parishioners always protested - with succes.

The tendency of conservation by rebuilding in stead of replacement is hot topic in todays discussion of architectural environment. The imposing but oldfashioned Museum of Art in Copenhagen is beeing expanded in an impossible way in stead of tearing it down in order to built a new and more up-to-date showroom. We have great problems with the Royal Theatre because of the listing of a part of it.

Preservation of buildings is a hot topic to many historians but it is also the killing of a historic monument.

As an example I mention the Cathedral of Roskilde. [**Roskilde domk ext**] The chancel and naves are romanesque. They are surrounded by chapels from every architectural period including this century. This is in reality a confused mixture of styles and a vandalism on the original well proportioned basilica.

But the building is living, it is living history, it has created new aesthetics, it has been selected one of the world's finest buildings worthy of preservation. If it had been listed say after the romanesque periode it wouldn't exist today.

A centuries old tradition of converting the buildings has made Denmark the country in Europe that proportionally have preserved most medieval churches.

That is why I personally - opposite many of my colleagues - fear the listing and preservation of our old buildings.

The same attitude we will find in the Danish history of medieval artifacts and images. Not even the Reformation in 1536 did much harm to the catholic remnants. We experienced no iconoclasm worth mentioning. The statues, the alterpieces and the wallpaintings remained untouched in God's houses.

In my oppinion this is due to several causes.

- At the time of the Reformation the miraculous and indulgence-granting power of the images had faded away.

- The images had started a change in contents from active intervention and use to the passive pleasure of an eventual spectator, which in many ways corresponds to our modern understanding of the function of art.
- **[Jordeliv]**The style and the contents of late medieval religious images had developed into a very secular direction which caused a low religious priority. **[Ana Selvtredje]**Many of the people depicted look and behave as ordinary man and woman. The depiction of the Holy Family was the beginning of family portraits that we see on the epitaphs from the 17th century.
- The churches, their furniture and equipment were to a great extent provided by secular people in return for indulgence, masses and other services. After the Reformation the church could not provide its spiritual contribution and consequently the donors regarded much of the equipment as belonging to their private property. Why should they wish to destroy what belonged to them? We have evidence that a protestant bishop tried to get an image removed but the warden refused to do it referring to the donors ownership. This privatisation of different parts of the churches and of much equipment - of architecture and art - saved them from the new bishops attempts to get them removed or even destroyed.
- After the Reformation the attitude towards the churches was so indifferent that only few wished to spend money on them. We had to live with the churches that often were in a bad condition. But they survived.

To sum up:

1. the change of function
2. the change of contents
3. a positive or indifferent attitude among local people
4. the privatisation of art and architecture
5. and the lack of interest among the reformers

these five items have saved many invaluable productions of the Middle Ages.

It is a widespread explanation that during the centuries after the Reformation lack of money saved our village churches from being replaced by new ones. I do not agree. If they wanted new churches or new decorations the parishioners or the landowners would have done it - of course - precisely as they did it during the founding period. Very often on the contrary we witness that during depression people are willing to initiate the production of art and architecture. During depression we always find rich people. And it must be said that a painted decoration or a new altarpiece were not that expensive. On the contrary maybe it is economy and taxation that have mattered most to the preservation of the medieval churches and their decoration. I refer to the tithe. During 12th and 13th century the tithe was imposed on the Danes. It was divided in three parts: to the priest, to the bishop and to the fabric which means to the upkeep and the decoration of the churches. Protests against this our first - but certainly not the latest - taxation were only directed towards the bishops' part.

This means that one third of the tithe which is more than three percent of the national production was used for upkeep and decoration of the churches. In today's national budgets it is a staggering amount. In French or English

national budgets I guess that it is approximately equivalent to one Channel-tunnel a year.

Never since have any country used so much money on the upkeep of the cultural heritage from the past.

During the last century there have been a kind of consensus among the Danes that our churches and their equipment must be preserved. Even if only very few attend the services on Sundays, and even if most people have no relation to the churches, very few protest against the costs in upkeep. Nobody wants to look at the churches from a cost-benefit or an ideological angle. If a church might need an extension the debate is focused on the aesthetics and not much on the costs. God does not exist in the mind of my compatriots but his houses are rooted in their souls.

On the contrary the debates are very fierce if the state or local authorities want to build e.g. a museum of modern art.

The Danish attitude to the cultural heritage is very positive. Archeological excavations, conservation of artifacts, preservation of wall-paintings etc. - all are considered as natural duties although archeologists and historians never think that they get satisfactory funding.

But historians represent a menace to the cultural heritage. It is obvious that the archeologists ruin their source material when excavating. But by this destruction they get new information that can be interpreted and presented. The conservation of artifacts is a protection against destruction but it tends to be a means in itself. In his book "The great Museum" Donald Horne some years ago described our national pride The Viking Ship Museum as a museum of conservation. In a way it was a precise statement. Now this has changed. The museum also makes reconstructions of viking ships - the reconstructions looking more like the original ships than the preserved remains of the excavated ships. Through reconstructions we get closer to an understanding of history, to the past, than we do through the preserved remains from the past. It is an interesting subject too to discuss which way of preserving the wall-paintings is the best. During last century and the first half of this century it was a normal procedure to repaint what might have faded away. Now it is considered an interference in the original painting.

The actual attitude to restoration is reverse. Nothing is added. But is this a satisfactory solution to those who use the churches? What we define as original, is the condition of the painting in the year of preservation. and not the year of its creation.

The Irish bishop George Berkeley said in the 18th century: "The proof of the Pudding is in the eating". You have to eat the pudding in order to know how it tastes. After that you have no pudding but a sense of the taste that you can analyse and describe.

When listing, uncovering and restoring our cultural heritage and when using it as a source material in our research we at the same time eat it. We do not blow up the remains as the enemy does in wartime. We do not destroy it as the archeologists do. We influence or change it in our eating.

Another menace to the cultural heritage I find in today's cult of the unique. The artifacts of The Middle Ages are considered unique. The production of them has stopped long ago. Consequently they become the object of desire, they rise in economic value that has nothing to do with their original function, they represent the pride of the museum or the bank account of the purchaser. A medieval piece of art has undergone a development from "Kultwert" over "Ausstellungswert" to "Sammelleidenschaftwert". It is a manifold source - the development of which we ought not stop for the interests of a specific historical period. Instead we shall record it in its different stages of development.

This summer university is taking place in the ugly shade of the recent destruction in Bosnia and the more distant shade of World War II. In this perspective the Danish problems seem small, but they are general. Destruction of national monuments arouses anger and despair. First of all because of *irrational* and *national* feelings. The destruction of Coventry and Lübeck and more recently Dubrownyk was a consequence of the importance of an emotional attitude to historic monuments and objects. This attitude is sometimes very strong and deep. This attitude will always penetrate professional historians too. But being professional historians sometimes we must step aside and look at our profession.

In our research we use all kinds of source material. But it is rather seldom that we can afford and have time to go to the original sources.

We have made enormous amounts of printed editions of written material - competent editions with refined annotations. Very often these editions are scientifically the best sources to consult (of course dependent of the object of your research).

After the invention of the photograph as a rule we use photos when working with non-written source material.

Photos of monuments, artifacts and images. Two-dimensional configurations satisfy many questions to three-dimensional monuments and images of much larger proportions.

I know that the basis of all these editions is the original material. And naturally I think that we shall do all we can to preserve this material. But talking of the non-written material we then face the problem, that by listing the monuments we stop or change their historical development. We provide them with a death warrant. This is maybe a good thing for our generation, but it is a dangerous development. As mentioned before what would have happened if the cathedral of Roskilde had been listed in the year 1300? We would not have had a national monument today.

her om at restaurering har skadet mere end krige og revolutioner

In my opinion we too much have a one-dimensional attitude to the cultural heritage when looking at it only as source material from a certain period. Every restoration and conservation is a kind of interpretation and presentation too. It means that the remnants of e.g. the Middle Ages never directly

represents the Middle Ages but our interpretations of some medieval products.

Consequently we must focus our energy on publishing as much of the medieval material as possible admitting that we always present our interpretations. There is no exact difference between source material and the presentation of it.

Of course I am advocating my own hobbyhorse which is a database with the Danish wallpaintings. But I think that establishing databases with our medieval material will be a great support to our cultural heritage.

Together with some of my students and colleagues we are creating this image database. In a way this is a procedure that many museums are doing with their collections of artifacts.

By this we all create a kind of new source material of The Middle Ages.

Our base is unique because the wallpaintings are located in the churches all over Denmark. By this you disperse the geographical barriers. By this you can compare images transversely of time and space.

By creating databases with the source material - and our cultural heritage is part of this material - we do two things:

We do not save this heritage but by digitizing photos of it we create and save the photographic documentation and interpretation of it.

In a way we create new possibilities of using widespread remains of the past.

By using digitalization you often are able to go into details of an image that you can never do in the so-called reality. By digitalization you can reconstruct lost or damaged remnants of the past - here I mention the digital reconstruction of the Cluny monastery.

I think that we by this add a delicious taste to our cultural inherited pudding. A taste that will remain even if the heritage will be destroyed.