

National identity in Denmark

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I

Danish national identity may be as old as the oldest preserved mention of the name of the kingdom and its inhabitants. Danes are referred to by a Gothic historian in 551 A.D. Dania appears as the Latin name of the country from around 700. A Danish king called Godfred held his own in a meeting with Charlemagne in 810. Sixteen years later a Frankish court poet (Ermoldus Nigellus) describes the Danes in a Latin poem as swift characters, keen users of arms, handsome, tall, noble-looking, and practically living on the ocean in their boats. At that time, after the assault on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793, the Danes had made themselves known abroad, and had even before that conducted successful raids on Catholic Europe. In the 960's, the large Jelling stone, a monument with a runic inscription – as a rare exception carved in horizontal lines – gives the name Denmark in the vernacular as *tanmaurk*. But the message of the inscription – that King Harold conquered all of Denmark and Norway and christianized the Danes – does not unfortunately reveal exactly what the term Denmark comprises, nor does any other contemporary source.

II

National identity is most often discussed or proclaimed when it is under threat. In the 1130's and through to the 50's, pretenders to the Danish throne fought in civil wars. A one-king monarchy was re-established in 1157. The victorious royal dynasty was interested in forgetting this immediate past. Therefore Saxo, a national historian living in the decades before and after 1200, was commissioned by two consecutive Danish archbishops and one king to record the deeds of the Danes (*Gesta Danorum*, though this title is hardly Saxo's own). He came up with a

comprehensive chronicle in ambitious Silver-Age Latin, a work which was copied throughout the Middle Ages, usually in abbreviated versions, until it was printed in Paris in 1514 and earned surprised and admiring attention from Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Now Saxo did not deign to explain the origin of the Danes, as had been the tradition in other medieval histories that he knew of: he started with a topographical chapter about Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Lapland, as if his country had always existed. Organizing his account as a lengthy gallop through the long series of Danish kings, Saxo emphasized the superiority of the Danes in their dealings with neighbouring nations such as the Saxons (Germans) and in particular the Swedes. In his Norwegian royal Chronicle (*Heimskringla*) from the 1220's, Snorri Sturluson, who wrote in the Norse language, adopted a similar partial angle in his vivid account of the naval battle of Svold (1000). On board his famous ship *The Long Serpent*, Snorri's hero, the Norwegian king Olav Tryggvason, confronts the joint fleet of his Scandinavian enemies, saying that the Danes lack courage and the Swedes would be better off staying at home in their pagan temples, but that his countrymen opposing him would very likely put up a stubborn resistance, "for they are Norwegians like ourselves".

At all events, in his chapters on Stærkodder the giant and on various Danish princesses, all of them pagan, Saxo introduces the ideal Danish hero and heroine. The *man* is every inch a warrior, touchy regarding his honour, faithful and reliable, but vindictive towards his enemies, generally tough and sturdy. He hates German culture, luxurious living – including delicately prepared food, elegant clothes, jewellery and music by foreign pipers – to him raw meat is the natural diet of Nordic warriors. Contrarily, a *woman* has to be so chaste that she will not even glance at a man, let alone speak to him. Thus, Saxo comments, in the good old days, girls did not provoke evil thoughts, the decency of their mind being depicted in their modest faces. It remains uncertain whether this characterization reflects the popular conception of Danish identity or is a more universal idea, according to which one partly defines oneself as truly civilized as opposed to one's barbarian surroundings, partly idolizes an oldfashioned, so to speak Spartan or Puritan, lifestyle. Saxo's models in ancient Roman historiography might easily be credited for the formula. His images have hardly any consequences for the subsequent Danish medieval history and literature. The so-called medieval ballads (in Danish "folkeviser") do occasionally present some of these traits in their protagonists. However, they cannot be dated with

much accuracy, and practically none of them is recorded before 1550, by which time Saxo had been published in two editions and widely quoted in print.

III

The Lutheran reformation, brought to completion in Denmark in 1536 after a brief but violent civil war, was preceded by the introduction of the art of printing (1482) and by an influx of European humanism. Politically, this coincided with the final dissolution of the United Scandinavian Kingdom, as Sweden in 1523 chose to become an independent monarchy, reigned over by a native king, Gustav Vasa. This was the start of almost 400 years of continuous diminution of the Danish state.

From now on and up until 1720, the Danes along with the Norwegians (who stayed in the Union until 1814) at intervals made war on the Swedes, their objectives varying from a restoration of the triple kingdom, over preservation of Danish superiority in the Baltic, to the reconquest of the provinces east of the Øresund that had been ceded to Sweden 1658-60. In both Denmark and Sweden the rulers took a keen interest in finding and defining national identity, an issue that encouraged both open and indirect competition between the two Nordic states. Humanistic scholars specializing in various fields were enrolled in the defence of the honour of their country.

As mentioned above, Saxo's chronicle had been published in 1514 in a truly magnificent edition. The editor was the then-Catholic scholar and later secretary of the Danish King Christiern II (1513-23), Christiern Pedersen (c. 1478-1554). It was only with difficulty that Pedersen had unearthed a fairly complete manuscript for the printing and afterwards it disappeared, leaving his 1514 Paris publication as the only authority for Saxo's full text. In the mist of native oral legends, Saxo had attempted to discover a venerable Danish national past, comparable to that of the Roman empire. The greatest ancient Danish king, one so-called Peace-Frothi, thus was reigning according to Saxo over most of Northern Europe at the time when Augustus was Roman emperor and Christ was born. The book left an imposing impression of the history of the Danish kingdom on its international audience. The edition was reprinted twice, in 1534 (Basel) and 1576 (Frankfurt a.M.). The Swedes had no source of comparable age or literary quality.

To what extent all these efforts were noticed by the common subjects of the Danish kings we do not know but there were in fact a few popular moves too. Incidentally, the first book printed in Denmark in Danish was a commercial enterprise, namely the late-medieval *Rhyming Chronicle* (1495), a long series of royal self-presentations expressed in the first person in fluent doggerel, relying heavily for its material on Saxo. It was reprinted at least eight times up until the end of the Kalmar War (1613), which was the last successful Danish military engagement with the Swedes.

In 1534, the above-mentioned Christiern Pedersen gave his countrymen a popular national hero unknown to Saxo, Holger Danske, in translations of two medieval chapbooks on Charlemagne and Ogier le Danois. Holger had originally been mentioned in the French epic *Chanson de Roland* (1060) and he later appeared in other medieval poems. Holger the Dane survives to this very day as a national symbol, a Danish Frederick Barbarossa, emerging in times of national need from his sleep in a hidden dwelling.

The revived Holger Danske entered Denmark just when the origin of the Danish flag (*Dannebrog*) had been rediscovered by a Grey Friar, Peder Olsen (Petrus Olai). Basing his work upon older, today lost sources, Olsen had in 1527 recorded the legend of how the red flag with the white cross had fallen from the skies, or rather from Heaven, to ensure Danish – and Christian – victory in the battle of Lyndanisse in Estonia on June 15th 1219. Alluding to papers left behind by Olsen at his death around 1570, Anders Sørensen Vedel, the most prominent historian of the period, took the opportunity to insert a brief account of this incident in the preface to his translation of Saxo in 1575. This Danish version of Saxo had been commissioned by two consecutive chancellors and it is written in a rather free and lively, lightly archaic diction.

In the middle of the 16th century, a regular feud between Danish and Swedish historians broke out as to which of the two Scandinavian kingdoms was the older. On each side arguments were diligently produced in accordance with contemporary historical methodology, i.e. with the aid of free, at times really imaginative, combinations of sources and not seldom through very speculative reasoning, bordering on pure fiction. The goal was to take the origin of each nation as far back as possible to the creation of the world as recounted in the Bible. The race for superiority in this field was rather futile but finally it was won by the Swedish scholar and scientist Olof Rudbeck, who in a four-volume work 1679-

1702 identified Sweden as the lost continent of Atlantis in Plato, the cradle of mankind, nominating the Swedish language as the mother of all tongues and considering Greek and Roman mythology to be distorted versions of lost Swedish proto-myths.

At the same time in Denmark, Saxo experienced a revival, as an excellently revised text appeared in 1644-45, with learned notes in Latin. For the first time in Europe, a medieval author had been edited as accurately and meticulously as the acknowledged classical authors. The editor, Professor Stephanus Stephanius (1599-1650), had a mastery of both classical and medieval Latin authors and for his commentary had also secured assistance from Icelanders in order to be able to give parallels from their native tradition. Not by chance, three quarters of his annotations concern Saxo's treatment of the pagan period. A Dano-Swedish fight for the ownership of the pagan past had by now been going on for some decades. One battle-field was runology.

The leading scholar on the Danish side was Ole Worm, professor of medicine and a general practitioner in Copenhagen, with a burning humanistic interest and wealth to back it up. In a theoretical introduction in Latin, *Runer seu Danica litteratura antiquissima* (Runes or the Oldest Danish Letters), 1636, he called the runes an exclusively Danish phenomenon and argued, true to his patriotic purpose, that they originated in the Hebrew alphabet and were at least six centuries older than Charlemagne. In 1643 Worm published his chief work, *Danicorum Monumentorum Libri Sex*, an attempt to survey and interpret all the then-known 144 Danish runic monuments (a supplement was added in 1651).

Though much more unfolded itself later, the renaissance of pagan Scandinavia, inspired by a patriotic desire to glorify the forefathers, begins here. Editions of Eddic poems in two or three languages – Icelandic, Latin, Danish – appeared in Copenhagen from 1665. At the same time, philologists introduced modern, regularly alternating metres in Danish poetry, constantly praising the age, power and potential of the vernacular. But there were no popular symbols of national identity yet. The king – whatever his looks, capacity and actual deeds – inevitably became the focusing point of patriotism.

The lack of good poetry in the mother-tongue and the lack of educational institutions where it might be taught prohibited a popular spread of culture. One fruitful revival, however, concerned lyrics in Danish. Anders Sørensen Vedel was commissioned in 1586 by the Danish

queen to collect old Danish ballads in a manuscript for her, but instead, in 1591, he presented her with a truly pioneering printed collection, *It Hundrede vduaalde Danske Viser* (A Selection of One Hundred Danish Songs). Since about 1550 in Denmark, courtiers, noblemen and noblewomen had gathered together and copied these presumably medieval songs, but Vedel's book established them as an acknowledged literary genre of the day and was very likely the inspiration for more collecting as well as probably for the creation of new ballads or updated variants. Vedel's own interest in the ballads was primarily historical, although in a fine introduction he also showed his understanding of their functional, aesthetical and linguistic value. The book was reprinted at least nine times and from 1695 came out anew in a version augmented with another hundred songs, edited by Peder Syv. Though they in origin may hail from medieval France, the mood of their style was recaptured through imitation of metre and vocabulary time and again in the 19th century by poets who considered them to be part of the genuine national heritage, something truly Danish. Even if they as poetry have a homely ring, however, they do not stress Danishness and hardly offer any national symbols.

It seems typical that when the greatest poet of the 17th century, Thomas Kingo, in the 1670's wanted to praise Danish courage in the Scania campaigns, he assured his readers that the poorly equipped Danish peasant soldiers did not fall short of their ancestors, the venerable Cimbrians, who once shook the Roman empire, and the Goths, who conquered land in Spain and France. The richness of the legacy from the Viking-Age had not yet been realized, although the promising young scholar Thomas Bartholin in a 700-page book from 1689 written in Latin managed to quote many unprinted and untranslated pieces of Old Icelandic poetry. He had been aided in this respect by his Icelandic friend Árni Magnússon but unfortunately Bartholin's death in 1690 postponed further progress. Oddly enough, the legacy was later taken care of by foreigners in the French language, for example the Frenchman Montesquieu in 1748 and the Swiss P.-H. Mallet in 1755-56 pointed out the influence of the Nordic climate and of Nordic pagan religion respectively on the achievements of the Vikings and thus helped Danish pre-romanticists and romanticists to retrieve this lost Golden Age of Great Power glory. From now on, poets and historians started to study the not yet edited or translated sources in the original Norse language.

IV

In early Danish romanticism 1802-06, after the battle of the Roads of Copenhagen against Lord Nelson, modern writers and critics resolutely replaced neoclassical Roman culture and history by native Viking-Age mythology and legends. But soon the Danish kingdom, as the only remaining ally of Napoleon's France, fell victim to a series of national catastrophes. The British bombarded Copenhagen and carried off the Dano-Norwegian fleet in 1807. In 1813 the Danish monetary system had to be reorganized, which in plain terms meant state bankruptcy, and in the peace treaty of Kiel 1814 Denmark lost Norway to Sweden. A war 1848-50 against Schleswig-Holstein nationalists supported by the German Federation was won by the Danes, but a second war in 1864 against Prussia on the issue of the incorporation of the Duchy of Schleswig into the Danish monarchy was lost badly, so that all of Schleswig – inclusive of close on 200,000 Danish inhabitants – became a German province. After a plebiscite, the Danish-speaking northern part of Schleswig joined the Danish kingdom in 1920. The border created on that occasion seems to be such a fortunate instance of its kind in Europe that not even Hitler wanted to change its course, when the Third Reich was strong enough to do as it liked. Since the 1955 Bonn and Copenhagen declarations on the rights of Danish and German minorities in the now-divided duchy, peaceful cooperation between the former arch enemies has replaced persecution and suppression.

It is an interesting question whether the new Øresund bridge from Copenhagen to its old twin city, Malmö, today Sweden's third largest city, will mean a return of the lost East Danish provinces to Denmark. Not formally of course, but in actuality. Many inhabitants of Scania have for years been looking to Copenhagen as their capital rather than the very distant Stockholm, and the language they speak still sounds much like the old East Danish dialect somewhat swedimized. There are signs of a growing feeling of regional patriotism – not a desire to become Danish again, but a desire to be allowed to study and cultivate the history of Scania. Ever since 1660, the Swedes have tried to suppress the fact that Scania for about eight centuries had formed part of the Danish kingdom.

However, early in the 19th century, the Danes had to redefine their national identity radically. They swiftly rose to the occasion. In 1779, Johannes Ewald had written the historical song "King Christian stood by the lofty mast" which was to become – and still is – the Danish roy-

al anthem. Here the poet called the ocean the true path of the Danes to glory and victory, exemplifying his point through poetical re-creation of scenes from fortunate naval encounters with the Swedes – one of the heroes he treated was Norwegian-born Tordenskiold. Without Norway and the fleet, without a political part to play on the European scene except that of a sympathetic and pitiable victim, the Danes after 1814 resigned themselves to praising native achievements in culture. Up until the death of the conservative absolute king, Frederik VI, in 1839, it was rather risky to participate in any political debate, so poetry and fiction were quite decisive in the formation of public opinion.

First taken up, as early as 1815, was a cult of the vernacular. In fact, hardly any other nation in Europe possesses so much lyrical poetry about the beauty of the mother-tongue as natural, sweet, nice, honest – poems that are still cherished and sung by Danes. In prose, prominent and famous writers such as Søren Kierkegaard and N. F. S. Grundtvig wrote philosophically about the qualities of the Danish language.

Another aspect stressed in poetry was the harmonious and idyllic East Danish landscape of Zealand and adjacent islands, with undulating fields and meadows and attractive old forests, whose beech-trees were mirrored in the calm surface of a small secluded lake or of the Baltic. Painters were soon depicting these landscapes and their pictures are still selling at high prices.

This conception of a peaceful nature generated or paralleled the feeling that Denmark was best portrayed as a woman – a thought which would have been incomprehensible before 1800, when the Danish fleet ruled the Baltic waves. Denmark was now seen as a protective mother figure or a pretty young girl, maybe the love goddess of Norse mythology, maybe even a “shield maiden” (a Scandinavian Amazon), but if so, one striking you more with her beauty than with her sword, the red-white flag being her most obvious attribute.

From 1805 to his death in 1872, Grundtvig was a prolific student of the Danish mind, especially in his historical chronicles and in several booklets on the establishment of a National Folk High-School for the uneducated part of the population. He contributed much to the idea of Danish identity, also linking the femininity of Denmark to the meek and patient believers of the Bible, for example the widow of Nain. Bereft of military, i.e. masculine, power, Denmark had to be content with being the modern country of *Kiærlighed* (a Danish word meaning at the same time charity and love). From November 1844, Grundtvig’s interpretation was taught at local folk high-schools that today form a network of

about one hundred. It is rather unique that the works of a Christian and romantic poet should survive so solidly in such a vigorous institution. In addition, *The Folk High-School Songbook*, which was originally published in 1894, is used as a national songbook by the Danes far outside the Grundtvigian schools and circles, so far in 17 printings. Further, in both numbers and quality Grundtvig dominates the authorized hymnbook of the Danish Lutheran People's Church. Grundtvig's prime educational tool was mutual interaction between teachers and students through the living, i.e. the spoken, word. He served ten years as a member of the young Danish parliament (1848-58), and in general may safely be credited with an essential part in the prevailing mood of Danish political culture today, where an exchange of opinions usually ends in a compromise, leaving nobody to lose face entirely. Grundtvig coined the phrase: grant your neighbour (and possible opponent) the same degree of freedom that you would ask for yourself. Of course, in the real life of the 1990's, things do not always work out this smoothly, but in spite of unemployment and cultural clashes there still seems to be an underlying atmosphere of consensus.

A cult of the national flag also arose in the mid-19th century. In 1834, the king had determined that private persons were not to be allowed to hoist the flag, but during the war of 1848-50 the flag was used by everybody, and the authorities could do nothing to repress this national enthusiasm, so in 1854 the common use was legalized. Foreigners from non-Scandinavian countries today observe with some incredulity how often the Danes fondly include the Dannebrog flag in their everyday life, even decorating the Christmas tree with garlands of small red and white flags.

At the same time, national symbols were humanized. The first European monument for an unknown soldier was unveiled in Fredericia in 1858. It is not a grave but a statue of a typical young peasant conscript, very much alive and rejoicing in victory and with a beech-tree branch raised high in his right hand. The two most popular poems about the Three Years' War were respectively a rousing march, "The Brave Soldier", the text of which only dealt with the possible bloodshed of the Danes, whereas the German foe was merely ridiculed, and a modest epic about a schoolboy serving as a hornblower in the army – a statue of him was unveiled in 1899 right on the City Hall Square of Copenhagen. Military persons of higher rank are not popular in Denmark. Modern Danes are not literal conquerors – they want to be left alone, preferring happiness to greatness, only hitting back in case of really serious provo-

cations. When twelve Danish writers in 1991 were asked to write a chapter about their favourite national hero, they all significantly preferred heroes of culture, arts and technology.

The 19th-century symbols are still with us. One innovation in the 20th century may be an added touch of affectionate irony and humour when approaching national issues – something that seems difficult for non-Danes to scent and understand. The beloved “Mother’s tongue” may, for example, be changed – without doubt phonetically more correctly – to “muddy tongue” (in Danish *Modersmål* and *muddersmål*), but no harm is intended, the expression is definitely used tongue-in-cheek, mainly with the intention of characterizing the growing gap between written and spoken Danish in the younger generations.

From 1864 to c. 1964, Denmark was unique among European states in having no national minorities – apart from the usually stay-at-home inhabitants of the old North Atlantic possessions, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, whose languages did not affect the Danish linguistic climate. In Denmark proper, all citizens were Danish by birth and education and spoke the same vernacular. Maybe it was a fortunate situation – but it was in fact uncharacteristic in comparison with all previous periods of Danish history and should be regarded as the exception rather than the norm. Since the 1960’s, immigrants, guestworkers and refugees have clouded the picture. Some feel that Danish culture and language are threatened, others may point out that never before in our history have so many people at the same time been using the Danish language. Anyway, cultural dilution – if it is a fact – is a product of various inevitable factors and not just immigration alone, e.g. the development of internationally oriented communities and the explosion in electronic communications.

In 1992, Denmark won the European soccer championship, a triumphal feat that has been followed by others. Suddenly, the Danes were not the perennial losers anymore. It seemed like a dream come true, a bit hard to accept. Gradually during the 1990’s, Danes were becoming accustomed to not necessarily being insignificant in the European political context. The Danish economy seems basically sound and the Danish currency is the strongest in Scandinavia – odd to think of, since for decades it was a natural law that the Swedish krone always was one third more valuable than the Danish one.

Also, Danish armed forces are participating in UN-enterprises (the Gulf and Balkan wars) and doing rather well. A sign of this is a painting from 1998, representing Danish UN-troops in Bosnia. It had been exe-

cuted by the American artist Thomas Kluge as a farewell greeting from the previous US ambassador to Denmark. Four young soldiers with very determined, cool and at the same time fearful expressions during “a short break” (the title of the work) are surveying an exotic mountain landscape. After many visits to the Museum of Danish National History at Frederiksborg Castle, the ambassador had come to the conclusion that the Danes ought to dispel their century-old defeatism and be proud of their army. Actually, a remarkable change of temperature in Danish public opinion about Denmark’s role in international conflicts can be felt. Even political parties with traditionally very set ideas about the issue are loosening up. A new national identity may be on its way. It remains to be seen.