

Contested Cultural Heritage – Contested Space. Discourses on the Museum Landscape in the Danish-German Border Region

Florian Gresshake
University of Kassel
florian.gresshake@uni-kassel.de

Since the middle of the 19th century the Danish-German border region has been deeply influenced by shifting political spaces due to shifting borders in 1864 and 1920. But these incidents did not cause a change of the cultural-geographical spaces at the same time. On the contrary, it resulted in the development of different overlapping and competing regional and national memorial landscapes. The material cultural heritage in form of e.g. museums and their exhibitions became an important part of a national struggle for the border space.

This article focuses on the museum landscape of Sønderjylland/Schleswig and the discourses on cultural heritage which are connected to it. The interpretations of regional museum exhibitions on both sides of the border – and therefore the issue of cultural heritage in public space as well – are of central significance for the region’s history since the middle of the 19th century. It can be observed that the exhibitions dealing with regional history have been exploited for different political purposes again and again. Focused on the museum landscape of the region the article shows that there is a close relation between the concepts of “border”, “space” and “material cultural heritage”. I argue that this approach enables us to draw conclusions of the importance of supposedly peripheral regions for national and collective identities. Following historian Peter Sahlins who pleaded for analyzing borders from the perspective of the frontier and not the national centre, I emphasize that in particular the German-Danish border region and the struggle over it holds an important significance beyond regional dimensions and contributes to the forming of identity for the entire nation.

INTRODUCTION

”Danish opponents of a ‘Euro-region’ in the borderland to Germany are afraid of the dominance of the strong neighbour“,¹ the Berliner Zeitung headlined in May 1997 regarding the controversial discussion on the founding of the so-called Euroregion Sønderjylland/Schleswig. The article illustrates one of the problems of the process of European unification with a statement of a Danish pastor. Her words that the ”Danish culture should not end in an open-air museum“² emphasize the fear to lose the own heritage due to an international cultural policy. The 1997 controversy is only one sign for the German-Danish history, which is often experienced as a complicated one. There are further examples, like the high number of monuments in Denmark dealing with the problematic German-Danish neighbourhood, testifying the exceptional position of this relationship. The idea of “Germany as Denmark’s problem”³ is an important element of the collective Danish memory.⁴ Since 1864, when the formerly Danish region Schleswig became part of the Prussian Empire after the decisive battle of Düppel, a struggle for the symbolic and political dominance in the region started. The material cultural heritage was a central instrument in this national struggle, in particular the monuments and museums dealing with the regional history.⁵

BORDERS - SPACE - CULTURAL HERITAGE

In the recent past there are four events of great importance for the understanding of the region’s history. First the First Schleswig War (1848-1851), then the Second Schleswig War in 1864, the third is the referendum on the national affiliation of Schleswig in connection with the Treaty of Versailles in 1920 and last the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations in 1955. These occasions were, respectively are important turning points in the national Danish and the regional Schleswig-Holstein historiography. In particular the Second Schleswig War, ending for Denmark in losing the Duchy of Schleswig, which had been ruled by the Danish royalty in personal union, to Prussia has been evaluated very differently in the two countries: In Denmark it became a collective trauma, while in the German Reich it became a mythic step in the German strife for unification. After the end of World War One another shifting of the border followed. A referendum, which was intended by the Treaty of Versailles, resulted in the divide of Schleswig: The northern part – Sønderjylland – was transferred to Denmark, the southern part – Schleswig – remained as a part of Germany. The shifting of borders did not only create two big national minorities both north and south of the border, it also became necessary to adjust the economical and social structures in the region.

¹ ”Schleswig“ hat hier keinen guten Klang. In: Berliner Zeitung, 25.10.1997.

² Ibid.

³ Fink, Troels. Deutschland als Problem Dänemarks. Die geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen der dänischen Außenpolitik. Flensburg 1968.

⁴ Adriansen, Inge. Erinnerungsorte der Deutsch-Dänischen Geschichte. In: Lundt, Bea (ed.). Geschichtsbewußtsein und Geschichtsmymthen nördlich der Elbe (Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur; 27). Köln/Weimar/Wien 2004. p. 391–411, here p. 408f.; Jessen-Klingenberg, Manfred. Schleswig-Holsteins Geschichtsschreibung und das Nationalitätenproblem in Schleswig von 1864 bis 1940. In: Id. Standpunkte zur neueren Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins. ed. by Reimer Hansen und Jörn-Peter Leppien. p. 217–242, here p. 217.

⁵ The term ”heritage“ refers to a cultural and political concept. It stands for the exclusion of the supposed ”others“ and the invention of an own collective identity throughout the materialized witnesses of the past. So there is a close link to theories such as Eric Hobsbawms ”invention of tradition“. At first sight the idea of a common heritage seems to be an including and uncomplicated one. But at the second sight it becomes clear that there also some problems, which for example in particular manifest in formerly contested areas like the Danish-German borderland. Bendix, Regina/Hemme, Dorothee/Tauschek, Markus. Vorwort. In: Id. (ed.). Prädikat ”Heritage“. Wertschöpfungen aus kulturellen Ressourcen. Berlin 2007. p. 9.

The first shifting of territorial boundaries in 1864 did not cause a change of the cultural-geographical spaces at the same time. On the contrary, it resulted in the development of different overlapping and competing memorial landscapes and claims to power in the region.⁶ After 1864 there were several Danish, but especially German and Schleswig-Holstein initiatives aiming for a homogenization of the Schleswig space in a political, linguistical and cultural way. A significant instrument in the national struggle for power over the region was the policy of history trying to construct and propagate a German respective Danish historical tradition in the region and at the same time to create a memorial landscape by means of the occupation of public space with material testimonies.⁷ Within this policy of demarcation of the contested border the politicization of material cultural heritage played a central role. The anthropologists Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson emphasize in their studies *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers*⁸ and *Borders. Frontiers of Identity, Nation and the State*⁹ three significant characteristics of border areas and their social function: 1. They are places and symbols of power. 2. They are cultural landscapes with varying meaning for society and within that they hold meaningful potential. 3. They are places of material, regional and local identity.¹⁰ Following Malcolm Anderson as “mythomoteur” they have a function for the entire nation: “In certain circumstances the frontier acquired a mythic significance in building nations and political identities, becoming the mythomoteur of a whole society.”¹¹ In particular the Schleswig region plays a central role in the forming of a national Danish identity: For example it was the only region in the Danish Empire with its own historiography.¹² In the struggle with the German neighbour a Danish regional history of Schleswig should historically legitimize the Danish claim for it. It is in the nature of modern societies to clearly define borders, therefore a demarcation in physical form is necessary.¹³ This “visual imagination” usually takes place by symbols like flags, maps and boundary stones. In particular the last example is a “fundamental, permanent possibility for the state to manifest its presence [...]” and to stress the “reality” of the drawings of borders.¹⁴ But also the material cultural heritage – and in my case museums today – are built and exploited symbols of a political entity. They are cultural boundary stones aiming for a physical and symbolic

⁶ Cf. Struck, Bernhard. Vom offenen Raum zum nationalen Territorium. Wahrnehmung, Erfindung und Historizität von Grenzen in der deutschen Reiseliteratur über Polen und Frankreich um 1800. In: François, Etienne/Seifarth, Jörg/Struck, Bernhard (Hg.). *Die Grenze als Raum, Erfahrung und Konstruktion. Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt/New York 2007. p. 77–104, here p. 78.

⁷ Cf. Flaig, Herbert. *The Historian as Pedagogue of the Nation.* In: *History*; 59 (1974). P. 18–32, here p. 19.

⁸ Wilson, Thomas M./Donnan Hastings (ed.). *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers.* Cambridge 1998.

⁹ Donnan, Hastings/Wilson, Thomas M. (ed.). *Borders. Frontiers of Identity, Nation and the State.* Cambridge 1999.

¹⁰ Wilson/Hastings, 1998; Hastings/Wilson 1999.

¹¹ Anderson, Malcolm. *Frontiers. Territory and State Formation in the Modern World.* Cambridge 1997. p. 4.

¹² Frandsen, Steen Bo. Schleswig: Ein Erinnerungsort für Deutsche und Dänen? In: Henningsen, Bernd/Kliemann-Geisinger, Hendriette/Troebst, Steffen (ed.). *Transnationale Erinnerungsorte: Nord- und südeuropäische Perspektiven (Die Ostseeregion: Nördliche Dimensionen – Europäische Perspektiven; 10).* Berlin 2009. p. 31–49, here p.36.

¹³ Medick, Hans. Zur politischen Sozialgeschichte der Grenzen in der Neuzeit Europas. In: *Sozialwissenschaftliche Informationen*; 20/3 (1991). p. 157–163, here p. 161.

¹⁴ Rodell, Magnus. Das Gibraltar des Nordens. Die Herstellung des schwedisch-russischen Grenzgebietes um 1900. In: Duhamelle, Christophe/Kossert, Andreas/Struck, Bernhard (ed.). *Grenzregionen. Ein europäischer Vergleich vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt/New York 2007. p. 123–152, here p. 139; Cf. Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism.* London 1995; Cf. Hobsbawm, Eric. Introduction, *Inventing Traditions.* In: Ders./Ranger, Terence (ed.). *The Invention of Tradition.* Cambridge 1983. p. 1–14.

territorial demarcation in public space. As “sites of memory of power”¹⁵ public space is a significant indicator for the constructions of the past, current constellations of power and visions of the future. Museums filter the collective memory and republish to their public: Through their exhibitions they choose what is important to be remembered and connect it to the public space. French anthropologist Thomas Serrier emphasizes in this context that border regions like Sønderjylland/Schleswig are places of historical and cultural processes of exchange. In the past and even today these areas “formed [...] experimental grounds and exercise fields for changing forms of regimes of territoriality”.¹⁶

DISCOURSE ON THE MUSEUM LANDSCAPE IN THE NATIONAL DANISH-GERMAN STRUGGLE

In 2003 Sharon Macdonald convincingly unfolds how “having a history” became a main aim in the 18th and 19th century nation building processes following the French revolution. Museum, of course, were paramount vehicles for such configurations of authority and legitimization in these processes.¹⁷ Museums as identity building instruments of modern societies became an important part of the national struggle in the competed Schleswig since the end of the 19th century. The occupation of public space in museums and exhibiting the regional history from a Danish respective German point of view can be seen as the construction of cultural boundary stones. One example for this process in the border area is the founding and history of Idstedt Memorial Hall. At a memorial ceremony in 1878 held by a Schleswig-Holstein soldier association on the former battlefield of the decisive battle between the troops of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein nearby Idstedt, it was decided to build a memorial armory to remind of the struggle for freedom against Denmark. The official opening of the armory was 1889. Until today the Idstedt Memorial Hall had several changes in meaning for the interpretation of the people in the border region.¹⁸ The history of this museum supports the thesis that imaginations of cultural heritage are not simply existing, instead they are constructed by social and political structures.¹⁹ Ever since the founding of the armory there was a strong glorifying view on the troops of Schleswig-Holstein. After the referendum in 1920 and the loss of Northern Schleswig to Denmark a revanchist component came along with this: For the German minded people in the borderland the hall was the central symbol in the struggle for the region at this time. It is the aim, so a studies in memory, to show “the Danes that Idstedt with the Idstedt Memorial Hall is a site of a constant patriotic remembering not only for Schleswig-Holstein, but also for the whole German Reich.”²⁰ Other museums, like Slot Sønderborg were directly influenced by the shifting of borders. Founded in 1908, the castle was on Danish territory after 1920. Because of that a completely new

¹⁵ Kusber, Jan. Konkurrierende Plätze in Sankt Petersburg. Zur Dauerhaftigkeit der Verortung politischer Macht im historischen Gedächtnis. In: Jaworski, Rudolf/Stachel, Peter (ed.). *Die Besetzung des öffentlichen Raumes. Politische Plätze, Denkmäler und Straßennamen im europäischen Vergleich*. Berlin 2007. p. 131–143, here p. 137.

¹⁶ Cf. Serrier, Thomas. *Geschichtskultur und Territorialität. Historisches und räumliches Bewusstsein im deutsch-polnischen Grenzraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. In: François, Etienne/Seifarth, Jörg/Struck, Bernhard (ed.). *Die Grenze als Raum, Erfahrung und Konstruktion. Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt/New York 2007. p. 243–266, here p. 243.

¹⁷ Macdonald, Sharon. *Museums, national, postnational and transcultural identities*. In: *Museums and society*; 1/1 (2003). P. 1-16, here P. 1ff.

¹⁸ Schartl, Matthias. *Idstedt und Düppel. Erinnerungsorte deutsch-dänischer Geschichte*. In: Fleischhauer, Carsten/Turkowski, Guntram (Ed.). *Schleswig-Holsteinische Erinnerungsorte*. Heide 2006. p. 29.

¹⁹ Cf. Bendix/Hemme/Tauschek. p. 9.

²⁰ *Gemeinschaftsarchiv Schleswig-Flensburg (GA SIFL)*, IX 2b/8.

conception of the exhibitions regarding regional history was necessary, this time, of course, in a Danish interpretation of history.

After World War Two it was no longer possible to adopt a revanchist position at the Idstedt Memorial Hall, so that the conception of the exhibition had to change. It focussed on the commemoration of the fallen Germans now: "A walk through the hall formed an impression of the time when our fathers fought and died on their own for their clear right [...]"²¹, described a newspaper article from 1949 the new exhibition. For the first time there was the idea to include also the view of the Danish visitors in the concept of the exhibition.²² But in opposite to the more moderate conceptualization of the Memorial Hall, the speakers at annual memorial ceremonies at the site of the battle stayed rhetorically aggressive. In particular it was more the supposed threat of the cultural policy of the Danish minority than the Danish policy in general which was attacked by them. For example, Martin Steinhäuser, member of the executive board of the Schleswiger-Holsteinischer Heimatbund (SHHB) who warned in 1953: "Just as the struggle for Idstedt was fought honorably, it is necessary to fight the battle, which was started from the North in 1945, with mental weapons honorably again."²³ In the opinion of the chairman of the SHHB, Richard Schenk, the Idstedt Memorial Hall was a memorial site which also has an important mission for the future: "Again the German character of our Heimat is threatened by the north. Since 1945 the Danes have tried an illegal attack against the German Volkstum of our Heimat [...] They have succeeded in establishing a pseudo-danish Volkstum in our German-Schleswig Heimat."²⁴

About 30 years later, we can find another controversial example for the instrumentalisation of the material cultural heritage and in particular of museums in the border area. After several new archaeological discoveries in the middle of the 1970s the decision to found a Haithabu-Museum at the place of the medieval trading place Haithabu was made. At the laying of the foundation stone for the museum building, Schleswig Holstein prime minister Dr. Gerhard Stoltenberg delivered a speech, which was the cause for a new transnational controversy.²⁵ He was criticized by the Danish media because of emphasizing that the town is a testimony of an explicitly Schleswig-Holstein and European history. Furthermore, critics reclaimed that he hadn't even used the words Danish or Denmark a single time in the context of the ancient past of Haithabu in his speech.²⁶ A trans regional followed reporting and a in parts very controversial debate in Germany and Denmark. The tabloid Ekstra Bladet wrote: "Haithabu is one of the oldest – possibly the oldest of the Danish towns. [...] The town had been in Southern Schleswig, which was stolen from us by the Germans in 1864. Recently a foundation stone for a museum of the old Haithabu was laid. The ceremony was led by the so-called state minister of the so-called Schleswig-Holstein, Gerhard Stoltenberg, who titles himself a doctor, something every German can do."²⁷ This statement is an extreme one, but it helps illustrate the whole debate. In the focus of the controversy was the question of to whom the cultural heritage belongs to and within this the surrounding space of the Schleswig region.

Another example for the exploitation of museums in the national struggle in the Danish-German border area is the Historiecenter Dybbøl Banke. At the site of the decisive defeat of

²¹ Flensburger Tageblatt, 26.09.1949.

²² Schartl, Matthias. Idstedt – Erinnerungsort gemeinsamer deutsch-dänischer Geschichte. p. 14.

²³ Von Idstedt über Deutschland nach Europa. In: Schleswiger Nachrichten, 27.07.1953.

²⁴ Die geistige Idstedt-Schlacht von heute gewinnen. Gedenkfeier anlässlich der 100. Wiederkehr des Tages von Idstedt. In: Schleswiger Nachrichten, 26.07.1958.

²⁵ Landesarchiv für Schleswig-Holstein (LAS), Abt. 605, Staatskanzlei. Nr. 6583, Haithabu, Grundsteinlegung der Schausammlung am 10.6.81, Richtfest des Wikinger-Museums am 13.8.1982, Eröffnung des Wikinger-Museums am 1.11.1985.

²⁶ LAS, Abt. 605, Staatskanzlei. Nr. 6621, Haithabu – Wikinger Schiff.

²⁷ Ibid.

the Danish troops in the Second Schleswig War in 1864 a new museum was found in 1992. The battle was one of the most important events in Danish history of the last 150 years and within that with a strong influence on the national self-conception and relationship to Germany and Europe. The heritage centre combines an exhibition of the historical circumstances of the battle with elements of re-enactment by the museum-staff. At this site, national memory is shaped by a strongly held claim to national Danish superiority.²⁸ As anthropologist Mads Daugbjergs unfolds convincingly in his PhD-thesis *A site to die for. Practices of nationalism at a Danish heritage site* the museum is still a place of a national claim for defining regional history and besides that the exclusion of German interpretations of the past.²⁹ So, the nation and the national struggle are still not gone. The Historiecenter clarifies that museums and material cultural heritage are central parts in the struggle for the past, even in the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

The Danish-German border area is shaped by two different overlapping and competing memorial landscapes and claims to power in the region. In the national struggle between Danes and Germans the material cultural heritage – monuments, architecture and museums – became a significant instrument. The occupation of the past with one’s own interpretation and within that the construction of a supposedly historical tradition should stress the rightful ownership of the region to Denmark respective Germany. Museums and their exhibitions like the Idstedt Memorial Hall or the Historiecenter Dybbøl Banke have been important protagonists in this struggle and have been exploited for political uses as cultural boundary stones up until the recent past. The transnational discourses about these museums or the Haithabu-Museum in Schleswig emphasize the role, which the material cultural heritage plays in the border area. This article has furthermore unfolded the role the supposedly peripheral region Sønderjylland/Schleswig and the struggle over it played in the construction of national Danish and regional Schleswig-Holstein identities. As “cultural brokers” between two modern political entities the border area and its material cultural heritage is the “mythomoteur” for both bordering societies.

²⁸ Daugbjerg, Mads. *Going global, staying national. Museums, heritage and tensions of scale*. London 2009. p. 1.

²⁹ Daugbjerg, Mads. *A site to die for. Practices of nationalism at a Danish heritage site*. Aarhus 2008.