

“Getting to the bottom of things”

A reply to Mads Densø Jessen

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*What I find perhaps most satisfying in Mads Densø Jessen’s comments about *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* is his appreciation of its “fairly subtle humour”. I am often unsure whether anybody actually notices. Helmut Ziegert, one of my former professors at the University of Hamburg, used to make much of the fact that anything you do “costs” some of your finite lifetime. Since the truth of this insight is inescapable, I have tried to take it seriously in my writing (as well as in my teaching). I want people to smile when they work their way through my ideas and, in this case, positively to enjoy their reading experience of my book – although they may at the same time want to disagree with the argument. I am inspired by the shining example of Niklas Luhman’s works which are dealing with serious topics but are incredibly amusing to read (at least in the German original). Jessen’s comment suggests that reading my book, too, was ultimately worth the “investment” of several hours (I hope) of his lifetime. My next book has been illustrated by the cartoonist (and archaeologist) Quentin Drew and will be the first book in academic archaeology to feature a flip cartoon... (Holtorf forthcoming).*

I could leave it at that, the most important comment having been made. But a writer does not often get the opportunity to engage in detail with a critical reader. It is more than a polite phrase to state that I am very grateful to Jessen for his discussion of my book. It is a privilege to be able to clarify a few aspects – and decisively reject a few other aspects – of what this thorough reader has been picking up. I have a sense (and hope) that many of his points are not merely the outcome of his own specific personality exposed to my words and sentences but are indeed shared by a few others so that what follows will hopefully make a valuable contribution to the lives of more than one person.

Archaeology is bigger than academic archaeology

My book is an account of the field of archaeology as it exists in popular culture (and art), hence its subtitle. It thus develops a theory of archaeology rather than simply more theory for archaeology (see p. 14). Several reviewers including Jessen have failed to appreciate the elementary fact that *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* deals with archaeology one level higher than the specific manifestation taught in universities: archaeology is not just an academic subject but also a cultural field and it is that field that in my view should be the main

reference point even for the academic discipline of archaeology (see chapter one). I have been trying to present a persuasive argument for “a new understanding” of professional archaeology as “a set of relations ... in the present” (p. 12-3). The book provides an outline of that understanding and its potential consequences, not a set of detailed instructions for scientific practice and its quest to amass knowledge about what happened in the distant past.

In fact, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* contains no ontological argument, and I am not advocating that a real past or material remains of that past do not (or did not) exist. What I am arguing is that by and large the real past that-once-was is not of much significance today, unlike the practice of archaeology and our constructions of the past (p. 2-7). In passing I apply this point even to academic archaeology. *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* contains no epistemological argument either, and I am not advocating a radical subjectivism or indeed mental solipsism. These terms are Jessen’s, not mine. What I am arguing is that the past is being constructed in different present-day contexts and that we need to ask who-remembers-what-today rather than what-really-happened-then (p. 3).

The limitations Jessen identifies in my thesis no. 2 (“Archaeology is mainly about our own culture in the present”) turn out to be liberations of a wide range of exciting and useful new research concerning the role and meaning of archaeology in our present and indeed possible future cultures (see also Moore 2006). The real limitations are imposed by those denying these liberations under the pretence that this would alienate “us” from our “actual” subject of research, jeopardise the academic legitimacy of archaeology, and put into the question the seemingly self-evident task of archaeologists to communicate their knowledge about the past to the general public. In fact, the opposite is the case.

An academic archaeology that fails to engage with issues relevant to living human beings and with the realities of contemporary society constantly reconsidering its own role, and that misses opportunities to broaden and rejuvenate its area of competence risks becoming increasingly redundant (see also Moore 2006; Holtorf forthcoming). Arguably, archaeology has always been about story-telling. But the stories that were popular and relevant at the times of Christian Jørgensen Thomsen, Heinrich Schliemann, or Gustav Kossinna, to pick just three arbitrary examples, are not necessarily equally popular and relevant today.

We live in a market economy

It is incomprehensible to me how so many academics can be literally afraid of doing anything that may relate positively to mass-culture, make a profit, or give their discipline a value that could possibly be expressed in monetary terms (see also the forthcoming discussion of my book in *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 39(2), 2006). *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* is by no means a book about how to maximise profits in archaeology (though my next book might be...). Indeed, there are short but clear references to the way archaeology is being employed by profit-driven enterprises like Disney themeparks and Las Vegas casinos (p. 139, 143). Jessen seems to have missed them. However, if he was expecting me to castigate businesses for being businesses he has indeed been looking in vain.

Let us not forget that for better or worse we are living in a monetary market economy governed in

parts by commercial principles and practices. In simplified terms, this means that value in our society is determined by supply and demand and expressed in price. This is obviously not the best and fairest system imaginable, but it is the system we have right now. As things stand, it is thus not at all “the strength” of the arts and humanities that their value does not need to be expressed in monetary form, as Jessen suggests. If anything, it might hold investors back to give them the support they badly need. Archaeological research cannot claim some special right somehow to stand beyond tight and politically highly contested budgets receiving instead all the funds it needs via some direct channel to the treasury. Like everybody else, archaeologists need to justify carefully why they deserve the funding they desire.

Since I doubt that Jessen intended to imply that the market economy ought to be scrapped as soon as possible, I am at a loss what he actually meant by throw-away comments like “knæfald for kapitalen”, “populærkulturelle kapitalisering af arkæologien” and “blindhed overfor profitmaksimering”.

Don't we love Ansgar & Loke?

Hardly more than a tangent in the context of *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* but of considerable relevance for my argument in *Archaeology is a brand!* (Holtorf forthcoming), and thus worth considering, is Jessen's claim that my selection of popular culture examples has not only been selective (which clearly it had to be) but also biased in that I excluded examples where archaeology is presented in more negative and perhaps unpopular terms.

It is fair to refer to individual investors (land owners, developers) who resent the fact that they have to pay money and lose time due to archaeological assessments and excavations. However, these attitudes are not (yet?) reflected to any significant extent in popular culture (with the possible exception of a minor role they play in local newspapers). Moreover, I suspect that many who would prefer to save money themselves nevertheless do not question to the same extent the existence of archaeology as such. In all likelihood, they can still enjoy the appeal of, say, excavations of a Greek temple or a film featuring Lara Croft.

The problem, it seems to me, is often less an outright denial of value of archaeology and more a disbelief that the site at hand actually qualifies as 'proper' archaeology in the first place. In that case it would be inappropriate to refer to the grumbling of investors as evidence for a negative image of archaeology. Instead, one might regret the finite applications of an image of archaeology that is actually very positive.

The case of *Ansgar & Loke* is however different. As Jessen mentioned, Ansgar and Loke are two archaeologists who feature regularly in the Danish TV comedy series *Wulff & Morgenthaler*. They are forever digging the same site, wearing anoraks, sporting bad hair cuts and talking a lot about women and sex... Interestingly, a somewhat similar character is Professor Roland Crump, the "distinguished archaeologist" in the British comedy *Carry On Behind* (1975). He is an uptight, confused and whimsical scholar who encounters numerous situations of sexual innuendo while excavating a Roman brothel with a mosaic depicting erotic scenes. Significantly, we meet him first while giving a lecture entitled "Getting to the bottom of things".

In Swedish popular culture, the best equivalent might be the comedy *Den ofrivillige golfaren* (1991), where a somewhat hopeless (minor) character played by Claes Månsson represents the county archaeologist Berglund. The audience smiles at the seemingly ridiculous endeavours of the naive and inept archaeologist. But at the same time they feel for this poor guy who is trying to do his important job without being taken seriously by anybody. Significantly, the film is well known among Swedish archaeologists and heritage managers... How do these examples then fit into my celebration of archaeology's positive image?

First of all, they represent a very minor proportion of representations of archaeology in popular culture.

References

Holtorf, Cornelius (forthcoming)
Archaeology is a brand! The portrayal of archaeology in contemporary popular culture. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Neither Ansgar and Loke, nor Professor Roland Crump or state archaeologist Berglund are in the same league as global heroes like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft and all the popular culture they have inspired. Although these figures may be well known among professional archaeologists in Denmark, Sweden or the U.K., they are hardly the first thing that comes to mind when non-archaeologists in these countries hear the word archaeology.

Secondly, although Ansgar and Loke, Professor Roland Crump and state archaeologist Berglund are hardly role models they are not exactly 'bad guys' either. After all, these characters would insist more than anybody that the value of the arts disciplines cannot be expressed in monetary form! They are weird, alright, but essentially harmless, benevolent and even loveable people. Instead of citing them as examples for a less positive image of archaeology, I would much rather categorise them as a variation of the common and widely appealing stereotypes of the archaeologist as detective, respectively the archaeologist as care-taker of ancient sites and remains (Holtorf forthcoming).

The figure of the detective, which we love in fiction and on TV, is not usually that of the strong and unbroken hero. Detective inspectors in popular culture tend to be elderly males, often with glasses and seemingly somewhat dull, fully occupied with their cases and, significantly, a little out of this world (e.g. Inspector Columbo). The archaeological scholar as commonly represented in popular culture can be described in a nearly identical way. Arguably it is precisely the fact that archaeologists are slightly abnormal and 'out of this world' that enables them to bring lost civilizations and our dead forebears back to life or make ancient artefacts speak! To my mind it is in part this (not entirely negative) image that is parodied in *Ansgar & Loke*, *Carry On Behind*, and *Den ofrivillige golfaren*.

Moore, Larry (2006)
Going Public: Customization and American Archaeology. *The SAA Archaeological Record*, May 2006, 16-19.