

C.J. Thomsen's Museum and the Three Age System

A Description in the Diary of Frances Williams Wynn, 1827

By Peter Rowley-Conwy

The interest of the late Ole Klindt-Jensen in the history of Danish archaeology is well-known. Although never a student of Professor Klindt-Jensen, I enjoyed several years as a student at Moesgård during the 1970's; it therefore seems appropriate to place on record here the following description of C.J. Thomsen's museum.

The diary in which the description appears was written in 1827 by Miss Frances Williams Wynn (my great-great-great-great aunt). She visited the museum in the Rundetårn on August 28th of that year, and was shown the collections by Thomsen himself. She was clearly most impressed with Thomsen, and was fascinated by the objects she saw and the descriptions she was given.

That this was so is no small tribute to Thomsen's ability to generate enthusiasm among visitors to the museum, for my great⁴ aunt cannot be described as a tolerant woman. She was in Denmark visiting her brother Henry, who was at the time ambassador in Copenhagen, and she saw much of Danish society and met members of the Royal Family. Nevertheless, she found much in Denmark to displease her. She had travelled widely (diaries are extant describing travels in Majorca, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany and Holland), and she frequently drew unfavourable comparisons between Denmark and places she had seen else-

where – although she also compared these places unfavourably with each other and, particularly, with her native Wales. She died unmarried in 1857.

She had a keen and critical eye, and did not hesitate to record her disapproval of paintings or buildings she did not like. Only four days after visiting Thomsen's museum she viewed the paintings in Christiansborg Palace. The building was being rebuilt after a fire, and did not please her:

»The pictures are ill placed, the few fine ones are not in the best light, & the rooms are too low to enable them to place the larger pictures so as to be properly seen. Then, I think, I never saw such a collection so overloaded with absolute trash. Perhaps, as the walls are not even plaistered, & the pictures hang upon the brick work painted grey, it may be said, that any Daub becomes valuable to cover this nakedness, but this does not satisfy me, fewer rooms might have been opened. The riches of the collection seem to be in the Flemish school, such Ruysdaels I never saw, some fine Rembrandts but very inferior to those at Munich ... Copenhagen boasts the possession of three or four Raphaels, but I believe I am fully born out by the opinion of connoisseurs, in thinking that there is not one genuine. They have the most pleasing Giulio Romano I ever saw, a small holy family, a Head of St. Catherine which I believe to be a genuine Leonardo da Vinci; two *nominal* Correggios ...«

Frances visited other museums, and was not impressed with the displays. One extract is worth quoting, because her reactions were interestingly

different from those to her visit to the Museum of Antiquities. Individual objects could still capture her interest, but she clearly feels that the lack of order and system in these collections detracts greatly from their value.

Fig. 1. Contemporary print of the Round Tower housing the Museum of Antiquities, inserted by Frances into her diary.

»September 17th. Went to see the Collection of natural History, which being at present, under arrangement is necessarily, in a very imperfect State, this may account for the number of Specimens being extremely small, but is not any Excuse for their being very ill stuffed, and prepared. We then went to another Museum of Curiosities where everything is jumbled, and there are few articles, of which one has not elsewhere seen better Specimens ... The model of an Iceland Hut was very interesting. One side is entirely occupied by a long sort of wooden trough like that which one often sees in



RUNDE TAARN.

DER RUNDE THURN.

Guard rooms, on which they lie in rows, on Skins, two or three families occupying the same large Turf built hut. Under the roof there is a frame work, from which are suspended Cauldrons of Oil, in which, some very large wick is kept constantly burning, which gives all the Heat, and light, which these wretched Habitations know. There are small windows, through which little Light could penetrate at any rate, & that little is impeded by the thick bladder, which is their Substitute for Glass.«

For Thomsen to have caused Frances to be “very much interested, and amused”, seems to be no mean achievement on his part! Her evident fascination in the Museum of Antiquities clearly derives in part from the organisation of the collection.

The archaeological interest lies in the complete description Frances gives of her tour round the museum. She leaves no doubt that the prehistoric display was divided into stone, bronze and iron, nor that Thomsen’s exposition emphasised the chronological nature of this scheme. Thomsen’s work was not published until 1836, when *Ledetraad til Nordisk Oldkyn-dighed* appeared; letters to other scholars leave no doubt, however, that the Three Age system was fully thought out by 1824 or 1825 (Daniel 1943, Klindt-Jensen 1975). On February 19th, 1825, Thomsen wrote to J.G.G. Büsching:

“To put antiquities into a good context, I find it most important to take into account the passage of time, and I believe that the old idea of first stone, then copper, and finally iron, is becoming more and more secure as regards Scandinavia.”

(Quoted in Hermansen 1934, p. 101, my translation).

The reference to the Three Age system as an “old idea” presumably refers to the fact that the historian Vedel Simonsen had suggested it in 1813. In the same letter Thomsen goes on to stress that bronze and gold were in use long before iron and silver; and to support

his contention that iron was very valuable in the first period of its use he describes a bronze axe with an iron edge.

These identical points appear in Frances’ diary, which indicates clearly that Thomsen was using the museum display to drive home his chronological scheme as early as 1827. One recent discussion on the origins of the Three Age system states that “following Jasperson’s division into stone, bronze and iron of the grave goods found in Østergaard (1828) near Flensburg”, Thomsen wrote *Ledetraad* in 1836, when other scholars such as Danneil and Lisch were also using the scheme (Böhner 1981). Frances’ diary must be added to Thomsen’s letters, mentioned above, and help to demonstrate that the background of *Ledetraad* was not the work of other scholars, but that it was based on Thomsen’s own work in the museum. The scheme was fully thought out by about 1825, and the museum rearrangement began as early as 1818 – the minutes of the meeting of the Antiquities Commission on 5th September of that year mention that Thomsen “will carry out those changes in the museum display which he has verbally presented to the Commission” (quoted in Hermansen 1934, p. 112, my translation).

That the new display had already become a subject of much attention in Denmark by 1827 is shown by Frances’ statement that she only went to the museum in the first place “merely to escape the plague of being continually asked why I had not seen these Antiquities”. Before leaving Denmark, however, she concluded that the museum was part of the spirit of the age:

“It seems as if a spirit of research, a love of literature had made rapid strides, with the last few years, probably since peace has given leisure for these pursuits. The Collection of Scandinavian Anti-

quities seems to have awakened a Taste for Investigating the Ancient History and Mythology of the Country. Even in Iceland a library is forming ...”

Francis provides us with the most complete known description of the museum in the 1820's. This, then, is what she writes.

Aug^t 28th [1827] Went to Copenhagen to see a collection of Scandinavian Antiquities, which are preserved in a curious round tower (fig. 1), which is ascended by means of a winding paved road upon which a Carriage might easily be driven (1).

I went expecting to be very much tired, merely to escape the plague of being continually asked why I had not seen these Antiquities. To my great surprise, I was very much interested, and amused, and I attribute this much less to the intrinsic merit of the Collection, than to that of the person, who showed it. Professor Thomson (sic) first suggested the Idea of this Collection, and having bestowed upon it unwearied attention for sixteen years, calls it only the rude beginning of a Collection. It is so arranged that in showing it, he gives you nearly a regular course of history of the progress of Art.

He begins with showing the Wedge shaped heads of Hatchets made of flint Granite, and other hard stone, before the use of metal was discovered. These have been found in various Tumuli, and with them several of the grind Stones, by means of which they were originally brought to a form, and polish, which seems very extraordinary when one considers how they were produced. It is also interesting to trace the provisions made for the wants of the Warrior in a future State, all were to be supplied by means of his Hatchet, it was therefore of importance that he should be able to restore any damage that it might receive in service.

The next case shows you further improvement in the Art of cutting stone, Heads of Spears and Arrows which are sharp and pointed. You are then shown the first attempts at using the metals, Copper and Gold were discovered long before Iron, or

Silver, the former was for a considerable period, much more valuable than Copper, it was used with great economy.

We were shown an Ax of Copper to which was attached about half an Inch of the precious Iron, to give it an Edge. The funeral Urns of this very early period, are not without elegance of form. There are some heven in Stone, some of burnt Clay, others in Copper, one in the purest Gold. Most of them are ornamented, the earliest with annulets placed in a regular horizontal Line, those of a rather later period with Snakes twisted into something like what we call a true Lover's Knot.

There are also some Specimens of the Ornaments, Torques in Gold, Silver and Copper for the Neck, but not one of them near as large as that found a few years ago in Flintshire, and now at Eaton. Bracelets and Rings of the same design, several of these are broken evidently by violence. It is ascertained that in those early periods when the metals were of so much more value than they are in these Days, these Ornaments were used as money to barter for commodities. There is one species of Bracelet shown here, which seems peculiarly adapted to this purpose, it is of Copper Wire, about half an Inch in Diameter, looks exactly like the Worm Spring of a Coach. Besides these there are Amulets, chiefly of Gold, some Gold Earrings, etc. but these are of a later period. Some of the Idols would I should think be among the most interesting objects, if one knew a little more of the History, and Religion of their worshippers.

The drinking Horns mounted in Gold, and Silver, are interesting, some of them really beautiful. I have made a slight scratch of a very large one (fig. 2), which was mounted in silver, and jewelled round the Brim, it appears by an Inscription on one of the rims, that it was repaired, and modernized, late in the 17th Century, when the feet were added for the accomodation of the degenerate moderns, who could not like their forefathers, quaff the Horn at one Draught, without ever setting it down.

An Altar with brass Ornaments brought from a Church in Aland (I think) and said to be about the period of the reign of

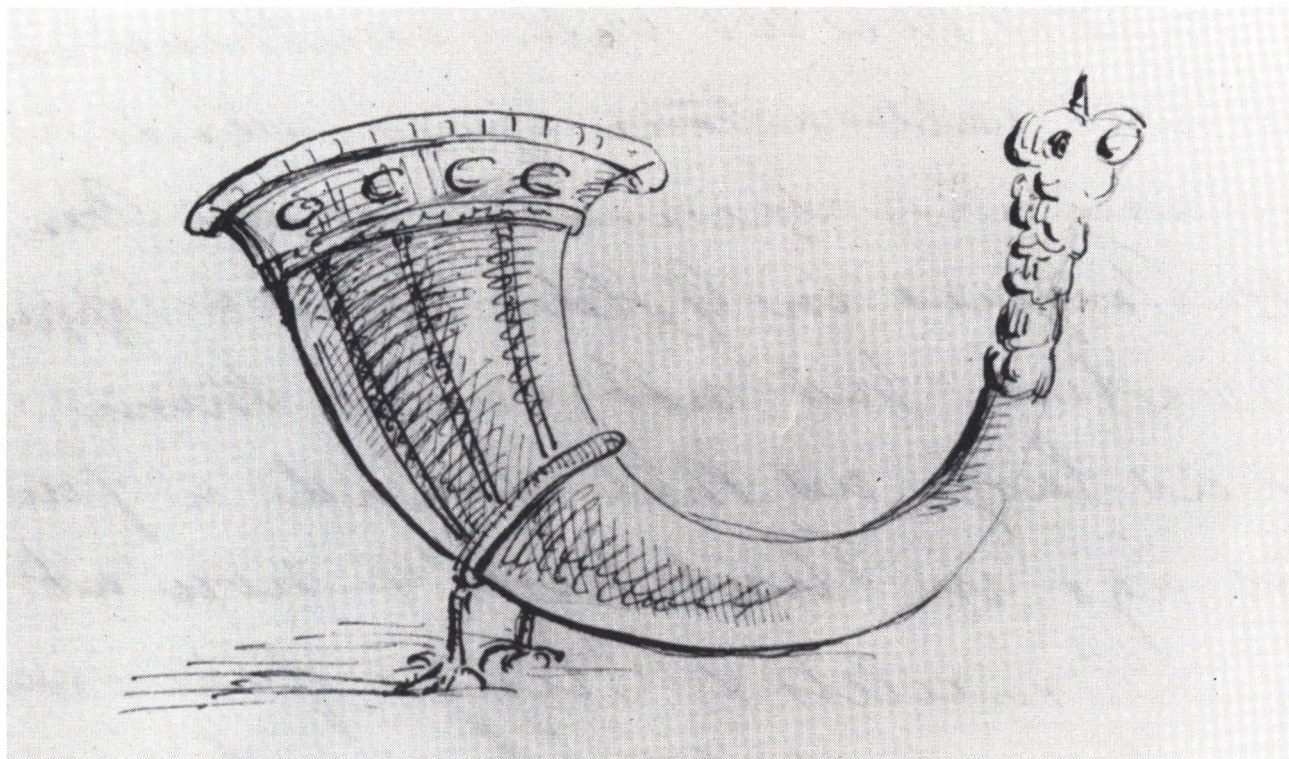
Canute, seemed to me to be nearly, if not quite the most interesting Article in the Collection, more unlike anything I had ever seen before. This and several of the most curious Articles are I hear to be engraved. Near this are several of the wooden Calenders, which to this Day, are in use among the Norwegian Peasants. They resemble a wooden Rule with Notches to mark the Days, a deeper for the 7th and various rude Signs to indicate the Seasons and some of the Festivals. Upon the Staircase, or to speak more properly winding ascent to the Tower, there are some Stones with Runic Inscriptions. Modern Ingenuity has been exerted to discover their meaning and was for

some time baffled by the Appearance of the Cross, I should rather say the Crucifix. This seemed to bespeak them posterior to the introduction of Xtianity, Centuries later than the Date, which every other Circumstance assigns to them. At length it was discovered that this rude sign represented the Hammer of Thor.

Notes

* Thanks are due to Tony Legge and to my wife Debbie, who together stimulated the search that led to the discovery of Frances Williams Wynn's diaries at Bodrhyddan, North Wales;

Fig. 2. The »slight scratch« made by Frances of a large drinking horn.



to Flemming Højlund, who pointed out that little is known of Thomsen's museum in the 1820's and suggested that the diary extract be published; and to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, who provided much information about Frances and the other members of her family.

1. "It is 115 Feet high – It is said that Peter the Great drove a Carriage up, others say that this feat was performed by Catherine, nobody here heard of it being done in their Day". The whole of this interesting Collection was soon afterwards removed to some Apartments in the Palace of Christiansborg.

Litterature

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