

## DISCUSSION ARTICLE

### Back to the edge – heritage management, landscaping or contemplation

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#### The quest

Heritage at the edge of Jutland, and especially the destiny of the deserted medieval church of Mårup, evokes thoughts and feelings. Mårup has become a controversial icon of perishability, a ‘memento mori’, appealing to almost everybody. The image of the church and cemetery just a few metres from the edge of the cliff fascinates: What ought to happen? Should the church be saved and if so, how is it possible? The viewpoints have been and still are many and divergent.

Over the years when I have lectured and been writing about the church of Mårup (and now also three other churches and the lighthouse at Rubjerg), my words, texts and pictures have constantly been met with strong reactions. Mårup seems to be a contested example of heritage, and everybody seems to have their own opinion of what ought to happen. Over the last 15 years, I have received critical comments from listeners, readers, session leaders, editors and peer reviewers, where the comments together far exceed my own output. However, these reactions are only a small portion of the greater debate at the place, between locals and different authorities and in the media.

Even if the debate has been extensive, there are no clear-cut answers to the questions that Mårup and other sites raise; one must always look for other solutions. Therefore, I will thank three colleagues for adding new layers to this never-ending debate and contribute a few comments in reply to the comments in our common quest.

#### Heritage management

Not surprisingly, Torben Dehn from the Danish Agency for Culture, which is responsible for the process at Mårup, finds the present management impeccable. He cannot identify any contradictions or conflicts and sees no need for new concepts. The only matter that worries him is the arbitrariness observed in the management of threatened heritage at the coast, where different strategies have been applied; the sector of heritage management like all rational agencies always looks for uniform rules. According to

Dehn, the church of Mårup and other monuments threatened by slow decay ought to be treated like other threatened objects, namely by conducting rescue archaeology.

If new and better antiquarian practices can be a consequence of the experiences from Mårup, it would surely be an improvement. Thus, there is now an official heritage strategy concerning the many deserted medieval churches in Denmark (cf. The Ministry of Environment [www.kulturstyrelsen.dk](http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk), ‘Middelalder ødekirker’) and much debate on the future of churches, caused by the plan to put a number of closed nineteenth-century churches in Copenhagen on sale since 2013.

However, reducing the destiny of Mårup to a question of rules and statutes and ignoring the different values involved means giving up any attempt to understand why this monument has become a contested heritage, why there have been and still are different opinions. If anything has had an effect on the outcome of the process, it has not been rules or statutes, but the engagement and enthusiasm by which representatives of the National Museum in Copenhagen since 2008 have conducted and not least mediated the dismantling process. By telling how outstanding the church once was architecturally – and now also how unique in having become the best-known medieval church in Denmark. They have created a new best-selling story, which has the potential to settle the conflict between centre and periphery, authorities and locals. As the conflict partly originated in the top-down rejection of Mårup from the national canon of art history, it indirectly tells the locals that ‘their’ church was of no or very low interest. Thus, a different attitude from the archaeologist or antiquarians working in the heritage sector might be of greater importance than a future fine-tuning of administrative procedures in the name of a uniform treatment of monuments.

#### Soft landscaping

Nikolaos D. Karydis is not happy with the actual heritage management or way of compromising between nature and

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culture at Mårup meaning the loss of the medieval church, the lighthouse and memorials such as the large anchor from *The Crescent*. The British frigate was shipwrecked in 1808, and the anchor was recovered in 1940 and placed at the western gable of the church as a memorial to the buried dead. However, the anchor is safe for the time being as it was moved in 2008 to a new location just east of the chancel.

I agree with Karydis when he argues that the protection of a landscape with its different elements is better than a focus on individual key monuments, but it is difficult to be consistent. A more holistic protection might mean a ‘fossilizing’ of the landscape, which Karydis sees as a risk, when monuments are relocated to open-air museums.

His concern for the management is justified, when the plan for the dismantling of the church was described as ‘The future of Mårup church is secured’ (Himmelstrup 2008, p. 36), a kind of newspeak known from the political sphere. However, when Karydis proposes a ‘mild landscaping’, for example, dune interventions to protect the monuments, I have my doubts. ‘Landscaping’ along the western coast of Denmark and in other areas with drifting sand has a long tradition and was actually used in vain, for example, at the lighthouse of Rubjerg Knude. The conditions on the coast are simply too tough for ‘soft’ actions to have any lasting effect; at least it is too late.

### Contemplating destruction

Tim Flohr Sørensen adds a number of new perspectives to the discussion. First of all, he is critical of what is called the ‘paranoia of losing material culture’. In line with this critical attitude, he prefers to keep the destructive part of the concept of ‘creative destruction’ by Joseph Schumpeter; creation yes, but he would also like to see some destruction. While referring to Sigmund Freud, he emphasizes the importance of the transience or perishability of all things. Instead of seeing threats against the heritage, he sees a threatening heritage, a heritage exposing our own vulnerability. A demonstration of this was the seemingly popular demolition of around 120 bunkers from World War II along the western coast of Jutland in 2013; their hidden concrete and iron reinforcements were perceived as a threat to bathers. According to Flohr Sørensen, when heritage cannot be controlled, when it is no longer passive, people want to get rid of it. Finally, he calls for a ‘letting go’ attitude. Permit the church to disappear, confronted with the forces of nature and let us use this opportunity to contemplate the passing of time.

First of all, I would characterize Flohr Sørensen’s diagnosis of preservation as ‘paranoia’ a viewpoint typical for followers of David Lowenthal, who for many years has defined heritage studies as a very critical approach (e.g.

Lowenthal, 1997), even though there is no reference to his publications in this contribution. The hypercritical thinking by Lowenthal has become a concealed paradigm in heritage studies since the 1980s.

Secondly, I deliberately constructed and chose the concept of ‘creative dismantling’, not ‘creative destruction’ by Schumpeter, because I find the first to be the most adequate description for what actually has happened at the cliff; it is a concept in an attempt to understand the process. I never ‘seek(s) to preserve the dismantled building for potential future reconstruction’, as it is claimed in the comment; that is nowhere to be read. In fact, I suppose that the storing of material from the church is only a calming action to prevent criticism. And to put it plainly, I have no ambitions to persuade others about how things ought to be done, if the church ought to go or not. My quest is rather to try to understand why the destiny of Mårup has been so controversial, to understand the creation of heritage; there is no shortage of people promoting heritage politics under the label of doing heritage studies, trying to persuade others what to think and do.

Thirdly, I am not against letting material or immaterial culture disappear in all cases, how could anybody be that? Whatever the ambition, it would be an impossible task. For the same reason, I wondered years ago why the church of Mårup was not allowed to fall:

Let the church fall! Let the old church fall into the sea. The church on the cliff is only one of many superfluous deserted churches. Impossible to preserve on the spot, difficult to move, out of use as a church, architecturally insignificant, historically of little interest and economically an embarrassment. Let it fall, just as the sea has taken numerous other churches through time. Why not just let it disappear from the cliff? (Wienberg 1999, p. 183, also p. 199)

However, the questions, and the following vision, which is not quoted, of the fall of the church in the future, are only means for an investigation and rethinking of the motives for the preserving of heritage. And my conditions proved to be wrong, as the church, with the ‘creative dismantling’ and a new narrative, later turned out to be both architecturally significant and historically interesting.

Fourthly, yes, I am also convinced that the fate of the church of Mårup has become so sensitive and controversial as an icon of ‘memento mori’, or as Flohr Sørensen puts it, our own vulnerability. The threatening bunkers are of course a fascinating example of heritage, which can be drawn into the discussion; the four churches and the lighthouse are only chosen because they (also) are good to think with. As a child I played in the abandoned bunkers in the forest near my hometown Silkeborg, which functioned as the German military headquarters in Denmark during World War II. Sunday outings by the family often went to the coast, where bunkers were impossible to avoid

as they were scattered everywhere. By the way, the bunkers at Silkeborg were open in my childhood, partly water-filled dark rooms to investigate, but are now closed precisely for security reasons except for a bunker museum; Dehn also mentions a dolmen on a cliff as a potential threat to bathers. However, I find it surprising that the political implications of the bunkers are not mentioned at all. The bunkers of the Atlantic Wall are probably the largest building complex in Denmark, but also an example of contested heritage. The bunkers are a reminder of the problematic Danish collaboration policy during the occupation. They are normally called ‘German bunkers’, even though they actually were built using a Danish workforce. Thus, the bunkers are not directly a national heritage to be proud of and there are good reasons, other than ‘vulnerability’, why politicians and others want to get rid of them. It’s the narrative!

Fifthly, protected or investigated heritage such as Mårup is still an exception. The overwhelming majority of human creations disappear silently around us every second – and some of the creations are even aggressively destroyed, for example, at present in Syria. Thus, there is no lack of examples of ‘letting go’, if we are looking for places where we can contemplate the decaying process, nature and culture, time and change, perishability and history. And if we ask for places where people are allowed to participate in the demolition of a monument and the creation of narratives, we only have to

travel back in time to the Berlin Wall in 1989, an event being celebrated as I write these lines.

### Continued dismantling

While we are discussing here which attitudes are the best towards heritage, the edge comes closer. Waves continue to hammer the coastline, erosion of the cliff goes on and the antiquarian management continues as planned. The first phase of dismantling the church of Mårup was conducted in 2008, the second in 2011 and now the third in August 2014 with a fourth and last probably soon to follow. Thereafter, we would be left with stories to tell, memories to recall or ruminate about and maybe even some stored debris of the heritage to refit in the future.

### References

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