

*Nekrologer*

*Niels Lund*

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BY IAN WOOD



*Niels Lund, ca. 2007. Foto: Saxo-Instituttet.*

Niels Lund was an imposing figure, both physically and intellectually. He was also something of a renaissance man, being a fine amateur clarinetist, who played in a local amateur symphony orchestra. He was born in Aarhus in 1939, a town with which he retained a strong connection (not least because of his family ties), even after his career took

him to Copenhagen. His father worked in finance in the city. On leaving school and completing his military service in the airforce he embarked on a degree at the University of Aarhus, studying history and Scandinavian archaeology. At the same time he worked as a student-assistant in the University Library (Statsbiblioteket), where he developed a considerable love of books – their typography, layout and production – something that can be seen in the printed version of his own thesis. Naturally he ended up with a fine library of his own.

He completed his master's degree in 1969, although in the previous year he had already acted as teaching assistant, a post for which his library-training provided the essential preparation. But even before that he had published a short book, *De danske vikinger i England: Røvere og bønder*, derived from a series of radio talks that he had delivered, *De danske vikingers togter til og bosættelse i England før 991*, for which he was awarded a scholarship and a gold medal in 1967. In 1970 he transferred to the Historical Institute in Copenhagen, where he was initially an amanuensis. He was subsequently appointed lecturer at the University in 1975, becoming Professor in 1998. He retired in 2011. In addition he gave lectures both in Denmark and abroad, as well as appearing on television.

Before taking up his post as lecturer in Copenhagen Niels spent two formative years working with the English historian Peter Sawyer at the University of Leeds, where he held a British Council Fellowship from 1973-5, to continue his work on the Danish settlement in England. As a result he became one of the earliest key proponents in the Scandinavian world of Sawyer's interpretation of the Viking Age, which downplayed the scale of the Norse onslaught, while also directing attention towards their non-violent activities. For a long while his views, for which the interpretation of English place-names ending in -thorp and -by was central, were met with considerable opposition, although in time they were increasingly accepted. Niels published his own final view of the subject in *De hænger og de brænder. Danmark og England i vikingetiden*, in 1993. He was certainly not the only Scandinavian scholar with close links to the British Isles, but among historians (as opposed to archaeologists and linguists) he had few equals in the 1970s, 80s and early 1990s.

Although his early work was devoted to the Vikings in England, Niels concentrated increasingly on the history of Scandinavia, and most especially of Denmark, and its broader kingdom, stretching as it did into the modern territory of southern Sweden. A key interest was military organisation – as was already apparent in what he wrote in the 1960s and 70s about the British Isles. In his 'doktordisputats' dissertation, *Lið, leding og landeværn*, published in 1996, a study which looked

as far forward as the fourteenth century, he argued against the antiquity of the Danish *leding*, and against the extent of royal control asserted in the high medieval legislation – it was a book that prompted a good deal of criticism and debate, particularly between Niels and the historian Rikke Malmros. At the heart of their disagreement was the question of how much credence one should give to the Old Norse sources. Malmros was happy to use the poetic and saga evidence, unlike Niels, who relied largely on the earlier Latin documentation. For Niels source criticism, which is more easily directed towards the Latin sources of the eleventh and twelfth centuries than to the sagas, was always a central issue. It should be said that the later evidence for the *leidhangr* in Norway and the *ledhung* in Sweden somewhat undermines the position he adopted.

Already in 1980 he had jointly authored a history of Medieval Denmark with Kai Hørby, *Samfundet i vikingetid og middelalder 800-1500*, which was the second volume of the *Dansk social historie* – but which was much more than a statement of standard views. His eminence in the field of the history of Scandinavia in the Viking Age was marked elsewhere in Europe by his 1995 contribution to the second volume of the *New Cambridge Medieval History*, edited by Rosamond McKitterick, where he supplied an account of ‘Scandinavia, c.700-1066’. A year later he provided a masterly chapter on ‘The Danish Empire and the End of the Viking Age’ for *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, edited by Peter Sawyer. These general pieces were backed up by a string of articles on specific aspects of Danish history in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, and especially on the interpretation of the writings of Adam of Bremen. Among his most insightful interventions are discussions concerning Harald Bluetooth, Cnut the Great and Sven Estridson. The summation of his views on early Danish history appeared in his final book, published in 2020, *Jellingekongerne og deres forgængere*.

Between 1969 and 2005 Niels was a regular member of the Danish delegation to the quadrennial Viking Congress, a standard meeting point for scholars in the field, to which he often contributed. He was also one of the co-founders of the more rough-and-ready Interdisciplinary Viking Symposia (*Tværfaglige vikingesymposier*), largely a gathering of Danish and north German scholars, the first annual meeting of which took place in 1982, and he was active in getting its proceedings rapidly into print. In addition Niels was involved in the publication of the proceedings of several other conferences. He was co-editor (with Niels Skyum-Nielsen) of a volume to mark the 500th anniversary of the University of Copenhagen in 1981, and he edited the proceedings of a conference held at the National Museum in Copenhagen in

2000 (*Viking og Hvidekrist*), and another held in Roskilde in 2003 (*Kristendommen i Danmark før 1050*). He was also co-editor of Festschrifts for Peter Sawyer (*People and Places in Northern Europe* (1991)) and for Michael Gelting (*Denmark and Europe in the Middle Ages, c.1000-1525* (2014)).

At first sight Niels was reserved, even reticent, although there was almost always a twinkle in his eye. Despite his manner, he could be a fierce polemicist, indeed intellectually he seemed to be happiest when engaged in controversy – something that was already apparent in his first interventions in the history of the Vikings in Britain. A fine example of his argumentative abilities can be found in an article published in *Fortid og Nutid* 35 (1985), ‘Med Clio ad nye Veje. Mellem metodisk nytænkning og Legoland’, where he defended his contribution to the second volume of the *Dansk social historie*.

At the University of Copenhagen Niels was a committed teacher, who did the best for those he taught, both undergraduates and graduates. He was a keen pedagogue, introducing the department’s students to the science of history, writing a short handbook, *Skriver I, karle?* (second edition: *Tankernes klædedragt*). And he was equally happy to address students in other universities, whenever he was invited to deliver a lecture or a seminar, especially when the invitation came from a younger colleague. But he was not merely active in his particular subject area. Among other duties at his own university he took on the role of Director of Studies.

He also had strong views on what a scholar should do, and should be able to do – I personally remember protesting to him that I was unable to read Danish, to which his reply was that, already having some competence in English and German, I should be able to master enough of the basics of the language with two weeks of proper application to be able to read a Danish thesis on a subject with which I was already familiar. Certainly he did not suffer fools gladly, but he was extremely helpful to colleagues, and not just those in his own university, who benefitted greatly from his deep familiarity with written sources.

For Niels history was primarily a subject concerned with written texts – and this despite the archaeological component of his initial degree. In his published work he consistently downplayed the value of archaeology – a point that caused him some disagreement with Else Roesdahl. Despite this, he took great delight in showing foreign visitors the major sites of Jutland, Fyn and Sjælland. Archaeological sites only really appear in Niels’ writing where the written word and archaeology explicitly intersect – that is essentially in discussion relating to the centres of royal power. It is no accident that the place-name Jelling is present in the title of his final book, or that its runestones fea-

ture prominently in his contribution to the Festschrift for Peter Sawyer (*People and Places in Northern Europe*). He was equally fascinated by the excavations at the royal site of Lejre. Roskilde was another centre that attracted his attention, as is clear from his short book on *Harald Blåtands Død og hans begravelse i Roskilde?*, published in 1998 – although here his main concern is to question the information provided by Adam of Bremen. Again the point of issue was the written text rather than any excavation.

In addition to being a fine and productive historian, Niels was a deeply committed family man: he and Jette were happily married for almost sixty years, and together they have one son and two daughters. It was a household that welcomed many scholars most hospitably. Moreover, Niels was a staunch friend, who would travel miles to see those he admired and liked, something he demonstrated in the close contact he maintained with Peter Sawyer during his old mentor's last years. Although he could seem forbidding in his reticence, and in the combativeness of some of his scholarship, he was a true gentleman even with those with whom he disagreed. Indeed, he was among the warmest of individuals.