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## Chapter 5

### **Becoming European: The Critical Heritage of Danish Classicism**

This book has explored how disparate agents and institutions have used classical heritage in a range of different contexts to construct a particular European identity within the Danish nation state, sometimes through explicit agendas and discourses, at other times through subtler, more deeply ingrained practices. Many of the issues covered in previous chapters converge in the case of a special exhibition at the National Museum of Denmark that was organised to celebrate the Danish presidency of the Council of the EU in 2012. Entitled “Europe Meets the World”, the exhibition was opened on 12 January with the participation of then Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt and then President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso.<sup>1</sup> The first object that visitors encountered in the exhibition was a fragment of an Attic red-figure vase depicting the Phoenician princess Europa on a bull, once again turning to classical antiquity as the foundation of Europe. Barroso picked up on the choice of the vase in his speech at the opening, remarking that “during this period of your Presidency, you can personally meet Europe at the beginning of this exhibition.” He furthermore pointed to culture and civilisation as the core values of Europe, staying true to the tropes of classicism that we have encountered throughout this book.

The exhibition, chronologically organised into nine themes, rhetorically and materially configured Denmark’s position within Europe, culturally as well as geographically. The small-scale geography of the exhibition thus mirrored the large-scale imagined geography that points to classical antiquity as Europe’s foundation. The ancient etymology of the continent’s name (as evoked by the representation of a Phoenician princess on a 2500-year old Greek piece of pottery) was followed by a section on ancient Athens entitled “The story begins”, reminding us of the choice of words in the European Heritage label encountered on the Athenian acropolis (Fig. 5.1). This section included a

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<sup>1</sup> Barroso’s talk: <http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?sitelang=EN&ref=I071997> (accessed 19 June 2018).

portrait of Socrates, framed here as the first free spirit in history, described as a young rebel and the wisest of all (Rasmussen and Lund 2012, 35–36). Facing Socrates was a portrait of Alexander the Great, framed as the embodiment of cultural encounter as a key element of European identity and as part of a theme entitled “Towards new horizons”, signalling the geographical and cultural expansion of the Greek world during the Hellenistic period (Kjeldbæk 2012, 421). Rome featured as a superpower, but also as a multicultural empire as both a consequence and requirement of its vast geographical expanse, exemplified by the many ethnicities and cultures represented in its army (Rasmussen *et al.* 2012). The fall of the Roman Empire was presented as a time of crisis for European coherence, which left Christianity as the sole “unifying bearer of culture” (Kjeldbæk 2012, 424) – a rather crass remark in the context of an increasingly multicultural and multireligious Europe as well as the cultural complexities of the late antique world, not least in the Middle East.

Responses to the exhibition in Danish media were varied. In *Berlingske Tidende*, the historian Bent Blüdnikow gave the exhibition three out of six stars and described it as “neat, nice, and as predictable as an upper secondary school essay” (2012), pointing in particular to its failure to address the antagonistic and diverse heritages of European history in a meaningful way. Blüdnikow furthermore implied that the exhibition’s use and conceptualisation of Greek and Roman heritage was predictable given the naturalised and consolidated role of these heritages in the Danish relation to Europe and European identity. Blüdnikow’s response is interesting for what it reveals about how the premise of the exhibition – that the roots of European civilisation are to be found in classical antiquity – could be taken as a matter of course. That assumption highlights a key aspect of what we have been pursuing in this volume: that is, to trace how such tropes have become naturalised through the practices of Danish classicism – ranging from school education to museum exhibitions and even a very particular and singular type of academic *habitus*.

Although these practices, and the underlying tropes that support them, have a very long and varied history (in Denmark as well as in Europe more broadly), the case studies in this book pinpoint a quite narrow period when the narrative became manifest on a new, institutionalised scale. Just after the turn of the twentieth century, a pivotal moment in Denmark’s imagined geography of classicism can indeed be identified. The launch of the Lindos excavations in 1902 ushered in a new, ambitious era of Danish excavations in the Mediterranean, starting a long-term tradition of seeking

out material remains from classical antiquity, a tradition sponsored predominantly by private means but enacted by professors and curators in state institutions. In 1903, Classical Studies (*Oldtidskundskab*) was introduced in upper secondary schools, leading to a development that would see a much larger proportion of the Danish population being introduced to Greek and Latin literature and culture than in the previous century. Three years later, in 1906, the classical collections in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek opened their doors, making one of the world's most important assemblages of classical sculpture available to the general public in a context where it was contextualised as the predecessor of later European (and Danish) art. The collection, together with that of the National Museum, materialised Danish claims to the imagined geography of classical heritage, as Ussing made clear in his memoirs. Over this short span of just four years, classical antiquity was thus both materialised and consolidated as part of Danish cultural heritage on a new, larger scale and on a much stronger foundation than during the nineteenth century, where it was tied to a small elite. The institutionalisation of the classical as a constituent element in Denmark's imagined geography has indeed been paramount for the continued preservation and promulgation of classicism through formal education and heritage.

The moment falls in a period of transformation. The Danish democracy finally had a liberal government elected in 1901, the first without royal interference, thus establishing parliamentarianism as the principle of government. Industrialisation had provided economic growth, technology had changed mobility and communication, and Europe had become "closer" and within reach of the general public. Ideologically the consolidation of classicism was tied to notions of *Bildung* and the formation of the Danish citizen as a democratic subject in a modern European nation state. Denmark placed itself in the European and especially German tradition of Hellenism, conceptualising classical Greece not only as an example of culture at its peak, but as the European foundation on which central values in Danish culture and society rested. Another movement in this cultural melting pot in which key elements of modern European identities developed was vitalism, both an epoch in its own right (1890-1940) and a current feeding into twentieth-century modernism (Hvidberg-Hansen and Oelsner 2011, 14–17). Vitalism was interested in health, beauty and strength and constitutes a form of classicism that has been rather neglected, probably because it articulated some of the ideological baggage of Fascism and Nazism in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it could be argued that thinking in this period, with classical

antiquity as its role model and an understanding of art and nature as organically intertwined, contributed decisively to the naturalisation of the classical as the foundation for Danish culture.

In our explorations of the three case studies, the meanings and appropriations of the classical by a number of actors and institutions have shown an increased naturalisation of distinct classical heritages during the periods investigated. This process laid the foundation for the shape and message of the “Europe meets the World” exhibition more than one hundred years later. Chapter two explored the establishment of the subject Classical Studies as a foundation for knowledge about Greek culture in the education of an increasing proportion of the Danish population. Focusing on canonical texts by Homer and Plato, Greek mythology and culture have become internalised in the conceptualisation of the Danish European (as the current Minister of Culture indeed reminded us in chapter one). Chapter three looked at the display of classical antiquities in two major collections in Copenhagen, where it became evident how museum communication and education have substantiated the narrative of the classical as the foundation of European identity and in this way placed Denmark within a larger, imagined geography of Europe. Finally, chapter four turned to Danish fieldwork in the Mediterranean, and Turkey more specifically, in order to establish how such work was informed by the practices of classicism. Investments in fieldwork overseas – by both private and public sponsors – can be translated into cultural capital and thus qualify Denmark as a European power within academia.

In Denmark’s case, the dissemination of the imagined geography of classicism is contingent on – and to a great extent formed by – agents and institutions that span professionals, public and private actors. The professional field embodied by archaeologists, philologists and classicists supplies the employees of both secondary schools and museums, thus making a division between professionals and public less evident. The professional voice in the public debate on the role of classical antiquity has been extremely powerful in the negotiations over the role of classical heritage as link to a European communality. A strong intellectual elite still dictates the discourses on the role of the classical in Denmark. However, the democratisation of the classical through the subject of Classical Studies potentially provides a much broader foundation to speak from and to. This also explains the Danish People’s Party’s support for the preservation of the classical as essential, in spite of its antipathy towards the EU. Danish Classicism is thus enshrined both as a core element in Danish

identity and as a link to European culture and ideals more broadly.

The increased focus on a culture-historical understanding of the classical world has imbued the imagined geography of ancient Greece and Rome with a relativistic, organic idea of culture. This narrative makes it possible to fuse the imagined geographies of Denmark, Europe and the ancient world two times over – in the past, and in the present. In the first instance, the narrative of cultural exchange illustrates how elements of classical culture made their way across Europe to Denmark so as to become part of Danish cultural history. The perceived central qualities of classical culture take on a universal character that not only defines them, but places them in a cultural continuum defining Europe across time and space. Subsequently, through appropriations and receptions, classical antiquity continues to define European culture precisely because it represents a core cultural trait. The central values ascribed to classical antiquity are cultural exchange as a precondition for European/global civilisation, but also democratic and critical values. These are the values sustained by contemporary museum displays and found in the advocacy of the continuing relevance of Classical Studies, which argues that the study of classical antiquity prepares students for the reality of globalisation in the present.

The case studies have shown a dichotomy between a universal conceptualisation of the classical as European heritage in the singular, and a fluctuating emphasis on the diversity of classical heritages. In the latter case, while the main divide is whether the classical is to be defined predominantly as Greek or Roman, a third idea of the classical has emerged: the idea of classical antiquity as multicultural, even global. This new conceptualisation has challenged the established imagined geography of classical antiquity as a specific cultural realm limited to Europe and the Mediterranean. This opens up the possibility of new futures for the field, while also potentially raising new questions about universalism – or, even better, by questioning universalism altogether. This is clear above all in the case of Turkey, where European archaeologists have increasingly become frustrated in their efforts to secure excavation permits as well as to present their finds in ways that have been regarded as universal for more than a century. Such changes in the geopolitical landscape pose challenges to classicism in all of its different forms, but also opportunities to revisit the discipline's history, its fault lines and inherent biases.

Challenges to classicism have been met by arguments relating to the threat of cultural

marginalisation instead of reflections on the broader question of the concept of culture that is being challenged. The repetition of the tropes of democracy, critical thought and the aesthetics of primarily classical Athens becomes an act of appropriation of imagined places and pasts, resulting in a singular conception of identity. This appropriation excludes certain narratives of classical antiquity, for example, of slavery, gender roles and aggressive imperialism, sanitising these parts of European heritage to the point where it is beyond critique. Sustaining this narrative not only fuels potentially dangerous narratives of Western cultural superiority and “Othering”, but also runs the risk of cultural imperialism within the borders of Europe denying the influence and agency of other past cultures as part of the cultural matrix that constitutes Europe today.

Recent political and cultural developments, with increasing economic and social mobility and globalisation at their centre, are profoundly changing the concept of Europe as a coherent, homogenous cultural entity. Acknowledgement of the rapidly changing political and cultural conditions within and outside Europe has furthermore resulted in a need within Europe, and especially within the EU’s institutions, to seek out and define an especially “European” identity for the twenty-first century. It is this kind of agenda that the “Europe meets the World” exhibition responded to, in a way that can be said to be paradigmatic of how Danish institutions have used classical heritage to construct a particular imagined geography that places Denmark within Europe. At the European level this agenda is further promoted by the award of the European Heritage Label to classical Athens and its monuments as well as within the House of European History in Brussels in which the imagined geography of classical antiquity still holds considerable resonance as a shared European past. Yet such a monolithic narrative frequently leaves too little space for dissonance and for a critical approach to classical heritage to emerge, in turn creating blind spots and an unhealthy resilience towards changes in discourse and approach. The pressing question now is how this new Europe will reframe its classical past in order to reflect its contemporary challenges.