Borders, battles and authority at a symbolic battlefield site

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Mads Daugbjerg
Dept. of Anthropology and Ethnography, University of Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract

Just north of the present-day border between Denmark and Germany lies the former battlefield at Dybbøl, the spot where the Danish army was defeated by the Prussians in 1864. The defeat was a defining turning point in Danish foreign policy, shattering former ambitions of European influence and leading to introspective small-state political thinking. Also, the Prussian victory was heralded by German historians as the first of a 3-step series of victories leading to the unification of the German Empire in 1871. Over the past century, the Dybbøl nametag has held an almost sacred status in the eyes of generations of Danes, who have ascribed strong national sentiments to it, fuelled by anti-German emotions in the wake of the world wars.

This paper analyses the dominant ways that the Dybbøl stories are narrated today. Focusing on present-day tourism in the shape of a so-called Battlefield centre, the paper argues that a constant negotiation between interpretation forms and narratives is taking place these years. Two dominant and competing modes of heritage interpretation, differing in form as well as content, are identified in the unfolding of the logics underpinning a key part of the guided tours at the heritage centre. Both of these modes, it is argued, are predicated on their own claims to authority, authenticity and community. Drawing upon theoretical insights from tourism and museum studies, the paper suggests that recent turns towards 'eyewitness' and 'post-heroic' approaches to heritage interpretation does not entail a completely ungoverned and anti-authoritarian stance, as radical postmodernists would have it. Instead, as social analysts we must strive to unravel new and emerging logics and sense-making in the tourism of war heritage.

Introduction

On a hill some 20 miles north of the present-day Danish/German border, the old mill at Dybbøl marks the site of the Danish Army's defeat to Prussian forces on April 18, 1864. On that day, Danish dreams of European political power were shattered and the Danish state deprived of one third of its territory and two fifths of its citizens. Over the past century, the defeat at Dybbøl has been mobilized in the service of Danish nation-building in various forms and guises, in particular since 1920, when parts of the 'lost land' were re-unified with Denmark following the German defeat in WWI (Adriansen 2003). While obviously the 1864 battle itself is beyond living memory, the memories of the German occupation of Denmark during WW2 are still prevalent in older Danish generations. Thus, traumas from the 1940s seem to become inscribed into 'Dybbøl', which these same generations have been brought up to regard as a symbol of Danish courage, defiance and sacrifice.

In this paper, I am concerned with the present-day heritage tourism on this once-sacred spot. Throughout my fieldwork in the region during 2006, I have been focussing in particular on the representation of the war heritage at two regional institutions – one, a traditional museum, the other an experience-based heritage centre – each telling and staging the Dybbøl stories in very different ways. I am investigating the ways that Danish and German tourists take in, interpret and negotiate the narratives of national identity and war at Dybbøl. In short, I am attempting to map out the processes through which 'heritage' is being reproduced, negotiated and challenged here, in the complex interaction of hosts, guests and place.

A change of perspectives

Let me begin with a brief description of a frequently recurring situation from the so-called *Battlefield centre* at Dybbøl, one of the institutions where my fieldwork took place. The centre strives to communicate its messages on the 1864 war through film, hands-on experiences and verbal interpretation by tour guides. Apart from a small exhibition, the centre houses two small cinemas, each showing short, information-packed films on the war, as well as a so-called diorama room presenting a full-size reconstruction of a Danish entrenchment peopled by a number of very life-like dummies of Danish soldiers. Outside the post-modern building, the centre is in the finishing stages of a large construction project consisting of the building of parts of a Danish redoubt. On the ramparts are placed four cannons, two of which are originals from the 1864 war, the remaining two being

reconstructions used for demonstrations of the firing procedure by dressed-up 'soldiers' at certain times every year.

Inside the main building, one of the central exhibits is an intrinsically detailed 3D miniature model of a Danish redoubt from the 1864 battle at Dybbøl. At this exhibit, all of the many school groups taking a guided tour through the centre will be asked by the tour guide to stop and ponder over the model. 'Now, imagine that we are all small blackbirds circling high over the Danish defences, looking down at the small soldiers', the tour guide will say – or something very similar – and then he will go on to explain what the different miniature battalions of soldiers, batteries of cannons, and wooden constructions are supposed to represent.

Following these explanations, whose content varies only slightly from tour to tour, the guide will very often instruct the pupils to *kneel down* so that their eyes are level with the miniature model's ground level. While all are kneeling or squatting, the group will be asked which parts of the fortification they can physically see now, the inevitable answer being that all they can make out is the outside of the ramparts and the mouths of the cannons, the inside of the redoubt being hidden from their squatting position. The tour guide will then explain that what little they see now – in contrast to their bird's eye view a minute ago – was all the Prussian attackers were able to see when they stormed, and later overran, the Danish defences on April 18, 1864.

This small but recurring episode's change of perspective, from the bird's eye view – the blackbird circling high above the battlefield – to the partial perspective of a Prussian storm trooper, in a very condensed way illustrates a notable shift in the heritage interpretation here – and elsewhere, I believe: from the objectivism of the bird's eye view to the personal and partial perspective of the soldier on the ground. In the following, I shall elaborate on each of these two perspectives in turn, arguing that this shift holds changes both in terms of form (i.e. interpretation, communication) and in terms of content (i.e. which stories to tell, whom to include and exclude). It is about *how* to tell, and *what* to tell. Importantly, I am not arguing that a univocal landslide shift is taking place and that the partial perspective is taking over completely; rather, this is an example of two different paradigms of heritage interpretation being evoked alternately and sometimes competing in the ongoing negotiation of the war heritage at Dybbøl.

The bird's eye view: the world as exhibition

The initial bird's eye view of the above episode is paradigmatic of a traditional mode of heritage communication in which the world is objectified, taken for granted, and subject to assumed unproblematic readings from the public. This is what Sharon Macdonald (borrowing Timothy Mitchell's term) has termed 'the world as exhibition' (Macdonald 2003:3), entailing 'a detachment of the viewer' and a belief that 'it was possible to find external viewing positions from which the world would appear as ordered and complete' (ibid.). Macdonald goes on to link this way of seeing to the tourist panoramas and viewing platforms set up in the 19th century. She also notes that 'this way of seeing helped 'objectify national identities' connected to Richard Handler's argument on the objectification of Quebecoise culture (1985; 1988). Indeed, just as Handler argues that 'having a culture' has become of increasing official concern in Quebec and elsewhere, Macdonald convincingly unfolds how 'having a history' became a main aim in the 18th and 19th century nation building following the French 1789 revolution (Macdonald 2003:1-5). Museums, of course, were paramount vehicles for such configurations of authority and legitimization in these processes (ibid.).

Back with my own case, it is interesting to note that the battlefield centre at Dybbøl only hails from 1992. Nevertheless, it holds a range of basic structures reminiscent of the objectivist paradigm. More than anything, the belief in the bird's eye view is visible in the abundance of *maps* found in the relatively small centre building; maps of Denmark, of Dybbøl, of Europe – now and then, and in-between; maps showing former borders, present borders, local results of the 1920 plebiscite that led to the present-day border; maps indicating the hometowns of Danish and German casualties from the wars; maps illustrating the movement of troops and the capturing of land; maps, even, showing the emergence and spread of the Danish folk high schools in the wake of 1864, or the communication lines of the telegraph system as of 1864. On top of these dozens of physical maps, we may add the filmic representations at the centre, once again dominated by maps and arrows showing military manoeuvres, breakthroughs, and routings. And of course, the 3D miniature model where the squatting sessions are performed is also in a sense a map – at least when viewing it from the bird's eye view.

What are the purposes of this mapping and modelling frenzy? Of course, on the most basic level, the maps are there to illustrate and give an overview of the events in 1864. But, as Anderson has famously argued (1991: 163-185), maps – in his case maps over foreign colonies – are not just neutral illustrations of land. Instead, he interprets them as parts of a regime of possession, or of appropriation, characteristic of colonialism – not just depictions

or models *of* reality, but also, and perhaps more importantly, models *for* reality, i.e. normative templates for how this or that land should be interpreted, gazed upon, read. Indeed, Anderson sees the *map*, the *census*, and the *museum* as three tools of classification and authority of the colonial period. In his words: 'Interlinked with one another (…), the census, the map and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain' (1991: 184). Given this inspiration, which of course fits nicely with Macdonald's account of the formation of the early museum from the same period, I would argue that the abundance of maps at the Dybbøl centre can be read as precisely that: tools of authority, of classification, of the mastering of order. The fact that no one can actually be bothered to read all of the maps (except perhaps the anthropologist visiting over and over again!) does not matter; the maps and models serve their duty as emblems of authority simply by being present.

While all of the above pertains to interpretation *form* – the way the story is told and its underlying authority – this form is very often connected to a *content* of a specifically national kind. This is true of the 19th century museum movements that Macdonald analyses (and see Bennett 1995; Boswell and Evans 1999; McLean 2005), and it is very true of the battlefield centre at Dybbøl which, judged by its architectural structure and material installations, is very much predicated upon a traditional Danish stance. Thus, we find very few Prussian exhibits here, and through films and so-called 'dioramas' the visitors are profoundly put in the shoes of their Danish battle-brothers, hearing their voices, sharing their perspectives and their grief. In line with this heavy overarching Danish perspective, the full-size reconstructions outside the centre are all of Danish defences, and the aforementioned miniature model does not depict any Prussian soldiers. As such, the materials on display – even the very recent ones – do not challenge the traditional Danish-only perspective. Instead, this challenging is left to the tour guides.

Being there: the soldier on the ground

What happens when a group of Danish school pupils are asked to squat down in front of the miniature model? Not only are they forced to give up the bird's (or even god's) eye view of the objectivist museum (form), they are even, by the tour guide, suggested to imagine themselves as Prussians (content). Asked to identify with the 'enemy', if only for a moment, the kids are in a sense asked to give up the nationalist gaze on which the centre is itself predicated.

As to the interpretation *form*, the aims of the centre have been alternative from the outset. Despite the remnants of what seems to be very objectivist and top-down modes of interpretation (as indicated by the maps, miniature models, etc.), the centre staff see their institution as an alternative to a traditional museum, preferring the term 'house of storytelling' as a label for the centre. No longer, is the basic philosophy, are traditional museum top-down ways of learning about 'reality' sufficient. We need instead to become subjective, personal, and sensual – we need the experiences, we need to smell the gunpowder, hear the cannonades and feel the lice of the 1864 war. Of course, these trends are well known from studies in heritage tourism. As early as 1990, Urry described a turn towards what he called the 'postmodern museums' – arguing that a shift from 'aura to nostalgia' (1990: 130) was taking place in the heritage industry, a shift during which there has been, according to Urry, 'a tendency to treat all kinds of objects, whether it is the Mona Lisa or the old cake tin of a Lancashire cotton worker, as almost equally interesting' (ibid.). An exhaustive number of social theorists have further contributed to the analysis of the experiential turn in heritage tourism (e.g. Bagnall 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; McIntosh & Prentice 1999).

At the Battlefield centre at Dybbøl, this tendency from the outstanding to the ordinary is very clear: it is precisely the ordinary private of the war and his personal experiences – in contrast to the officers and generals of the armies – which the tour guides seek to bring to the fore. Specifically, the story of a particular Danish soldier, Private Peter Hansen, is narrated time after time, based on this very soldier's letters and diaries, from which the most experienced guides are able to cite by heart. Peter Hansen's story is not that special, but it is personal, and he was there.

The authority of this soldier-on-the-ground view is predicated on exactly this: Private Peter Hansen actually took part in the war, he *was* there. He did write letters and keep a diary. Although the original letters or diaries are not actually produced in front of the visitor groups, the Peter Hansen story as narrated by the guides of course holds a claim to authenticity. And through these claims, the centre gains authority; a type of authority very different from the bird's eye objectivist view, instead predicated on the 'personal' presence of Private Hansen. The tendency towards including 'eyewitnesses' or what in Germany is known as *Zeitzeuge* – literally 'time witnesses' (e.g. Jarausch & Sabrow 2002) – is widespread in the heritage industry today.

Pertaining to the *content* of this newer strand of interpretation, I have already mentioned the softening up of the traditionalist national perspective. Connected to this, the

eyewitness approach, focusing on the privates of the war in contrast to officers and leaders, suggests that what scholars of strategic and security issues refer to as the 'post-heroic' tendency of our times (e.g. Luttwak 1995; Freedman 1998) has also made its imprints in the heritage industry. The verbal interpretation of the Dybbøl tour guides is no longer dominated by stories of outstanding (Danish) individuals and courageous deeds; instead, we hear stories of illness and bad hygiene, of sergeants trying to drown their own fears in alcohol, and of private agreements and secret ceasefires between Danes and Prussians in the 1864 field. In a sense, the eyewitness approach concerns not so much this particular war as the nature of war itself, any war. And in place of national boundaries, the borders at Dybbøl are currently being drawn on the basis of rank – the common private (no matter his nationality) symbolically pitted against the decision-makers and 'masters of puppets' behind the front.

Conclusions: reconfiguring authority, identity and borders

This celebration of the ordinary soldier, the *eyewitness* speaking directly to the tourist, fits nicely into theories on post-modern culture as characterized by anti-elitism and anti-authoritarianism (Urry 1990; Rojek 1995). However, we should be careful not to assume that these reconfigured ways of identifying with the past mean that everything flows and that all meaning is lost, as radical postmodernists would have it (Baudrillard 1986; Eco 1988; for a convincing critique of these standpoints, see Bruner 1994). Indeed, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this brief presentation, the soldier-on-the-ground view carries its own logic, legitimacy and authority. But now, authority is not derived (only) from top-down objectivist approaches hailing the nation as sacred ground. Rather we see how new configurations of border-drawing and identification emerge on the shoulders of previous modes of interpretation.

Those I have not included in my presentation today are, of course, the tourists themselves. This omission – caused my the simple fact that I am yet to tackle the large corpus of visitor interviews and video recordings from my fieldwork – is of course unforgivable, and my greatest analytical task ahead is to map out the actual engagement, resistance or negotiation of Danish and German tourists at the Dybbøl heritage institutions. They all have to find their own ways of dealing with what they see, hear and smell at the 1864 battlefield in the borderland – and to make up their own minds, and draw their own conclusions and their own borders.

Mads Daugbjerg is currently enrolled as a PhD student at the University of Aarhus, Dept. of Anthropology and Ethnography. With his project, entitled *The Battle for Dybbøl: heritage, tourism and identity at a contested site*, he continues to work his way into the anthropology of heritage tourism. Mads holds an MA Research Degree from the University of Aarhus.

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