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## UNESCO and World Heritage Management in Jelling – Opportunities and Challenges

### ABSTRACT

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Jelling has been on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites since 1994. Jelling was the first site in Denmark on the prestigious list, which includes the most valuable parts of Nature and Cultural Heritage in the world. The Jelling Monuments are among the most stately and noble monuments in Denmark's history. In 1994 they consisted of two huge burial mounds, two rune stones and a church situated between the burial mounds. Research excavations carried out between 2006 and 2013 revealed a huge palisade, which encircled the area – three houses of Trelleborg-type and the largest ship setting seen in the Nordic countries in the Viking Age. These new discoveries did not only revolutionise the interpretation of the site, but also led to a minor boundary modification of the original inscription in 2018. The Jelling Monuments are one of the most visited historical/archaeological sites in Denmark. Following the conference held in 2017 in Zamość, Poland, which concerned management of cultural heritage outside of major cultural centres, I would like to contribute to this topic with some examples, thoughts and challenges related to our work with the cultural heritage management in Jelling.

**Keywords:** Jelling Monuments; Viking Age; UNESCO; cultural heritage management; opportunities and challenges

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### Introduction and background

The Jelling Monuments – a huge stone setting, two impressive mounds and two rune stones – created in the 10<sup>th</sup> c. by King Gorm, his wife Queen Thyra and their son King Harald Bluetooth, have been the focus of both public and academic interest for centuries. The inscriptions on the rune stones were published for the first time in the late 16<sup>th</sup> c. Since then, the monument complex has been the subject of numerous articles, monographs and presentations, and the site has gained an iconic status as a physical manifestation of the religious, social and

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political transformations that marked the Viking Age (Jessen *et al.* 2014, 1–2; Pedersen 2017, 5ff.); a status confirmed by the nomination and inscription of the site to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1994.

The nomination was a reflection of the monument's central importance – as one of the most significant memorials from the Viking Age. A transition from the old pagan religion to Christianity – linked with the formation of the Danish Kingdom as a nation – is shown here in an outstanding and authentic way (Hvass 2011, 75).

Rooted in a long-established pagan tradition and beliefs, the monument complex was extended and modified over time to include both a Christian rune stone, raised by King Harald Bluetooth in honour of his parents, and a Christian church, which was succeeded by the present Romanesque church around AD 1100. Surprisingly, Jelling never evolved into a major town or centre in the church administration. Nevertheless, Jelling continued to play a significant role as a royal memorial and a place of focus on Danish identity until modern times (Holst *et al.* 2012, 475).

Before moving on to the topic of cultural heritage management, I will guide you through a short version of the history and excavations of the Jelling Monuments – both the previous ones and the most recent excavations and research.

## The rune stones in Jelling

The archaeological excavations in Jelling date back to 1586, when the big rune stone in Jelling was raised to an upright position after having been lying on its side. This was done in order to give the big rune stone a more dignified impression and to regain its honour. The rune stone was raised on King Frederik II's orders. The big rune stone is by far the most famous one in Denmark, with the following inscription:

King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyra, his mother – that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself, and Norway and made the Danes Christian (This rune stone can be dated to approximately AD 965).

Today one can find a small rune stone with the following inscription:

King Gorm made this monument in memory of Thyra, his wife, Denmark's adornment,

standing beside the big rune stone. It has not always been the case. In a manuscript from around 1600, it is mentioned that the smaller rune stone was placed close to the church door and was used as a bench and at an engraving from 1591, the small rune stone is placed on the top of the southern mound. From the archaeological excavations conducted in 2011 by these rune stones, we know today that the big rune stone in fact stands in its original place (Hvass 2011, 76ff.) In 2011 both rune stones were protected by a new covering of glass and bronze (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** The rune stones in Jelling (Photo by R. Fortuna, The National Museum, Copenhagen)

## Summary of previous archaeological excavations

The first small excavations on the northern mound were carried out in 1704 by King Frederik IV, but they did not bring any significant results. The truly remarkable results came in 1820–21, when local peasants found a huge grave chamber in the northern mound. King Frederik VI was engaged in the excavations, during which the huge burial chamber in the northern mound was unearthed. The chamber grave was constructed of oak timber and it was clear from the start that the grave had been plundered. The few finds: a small silver beaker, gilded bronze ornaments, fragments of furniture items and pictorial carvings, pointed clearly towards a royal burial. The grave belonged to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. and a later dendrochronological analysis showed that the construction of the chamber must have started in the winter of AD 958–959, but the analysis also showed some activity in the chamber in AD 964/965 (Christensen and Krogh 1987, 223ff.)

The southern mound was excavated by King Frederic VII in 1861 and by Ejnar Dyggve in 1941. Despite high expectations, the mound only revealed two rows of stones (monoliths) beneath the mound, belonging to an older construction (Dyggve 1955, 144ff.)

Dyggve also carried out archaeological excavations underneath the present-day church in Jelling, where he found traces of three older wooden buildings (Dyggve 1955, 165ff.). Later excavations in the church yielded a chamber grave from the 10<sup>th</sup> c., containing gilded bronze ornaments, matching those previously found in the northern chamber in 1820–21. An analysis showed that the deceased was male and also that the bones were not found in an anatomically correct position. This soon led to a theory about a translation of the deceased – moving King Gorm from the pagan northern mound and into the Christian church (Krogh 1983, 208ff.; 1993, 246f.) This interpretation has been widely discussed and debated among scholars (Andersen 1995; Harck 2006; Ottosen 2006; Ottosen and Gelting 2007; Staecker 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the research, excavations and different interpretations is vast and beyond the scope of this paper. For those interested in the history of the monumental area in Jelling, I can recommend the following literature: Jessen *et al.* 2014; Holst *et al.* 2012. Further reading will soon be available in the upcoming comprehensive volumes from the Jelling project, to be published in 2019: *Jelling – Monuments and Landscape*. In: Publications from the National Museum, Studies in Archaeology & History, 20.4, 1–2; see also: Pedersen 2014b; Moesgaard 2015; Christensen, Lemm and Pedersen (eds.) 2016.

## Recent excavations and research

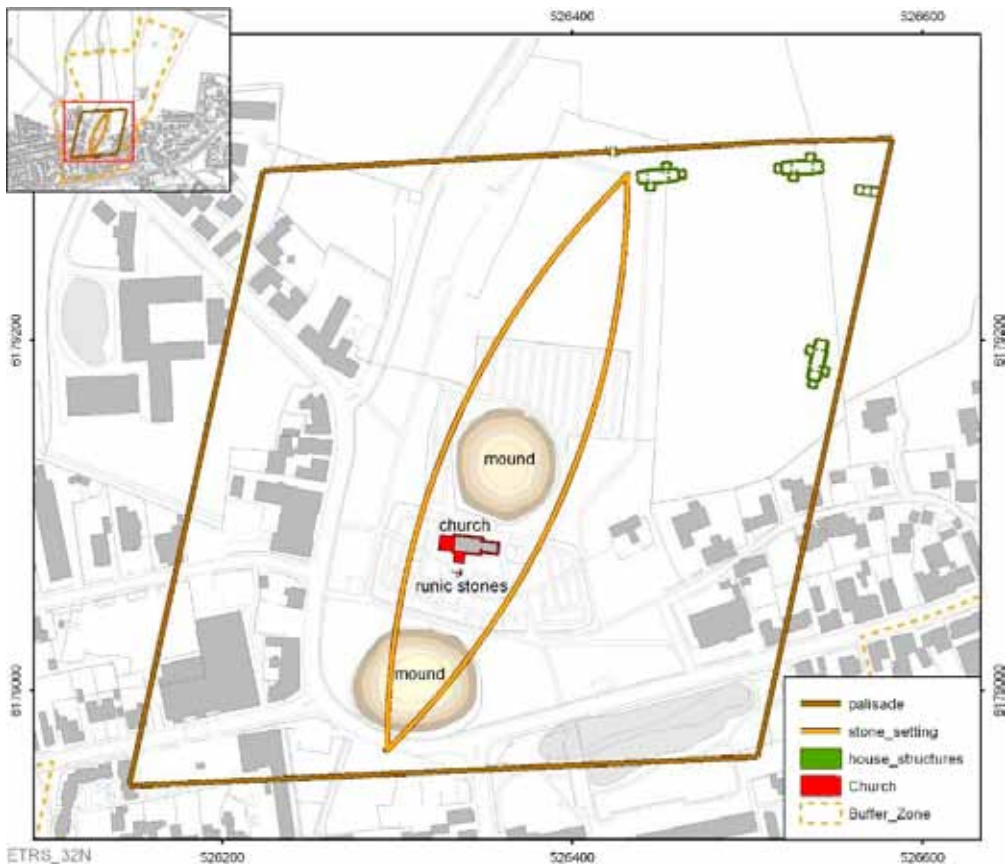
When looking at the vast archaeological material from Jelling, it is obvious that the focus was previously on the monuments themselves and thereby also on the excavations relating to the research. Later it became evident that one must take a much larger area around the monuments into consideration. Around 2003–2005 detectorists began to take an interest in the area around the monuments. It was by no means a huge number of artefacts that were detected, but some of them were remarkable. Among them was a golden tremissis (triens), found east of the northern mound (Fig. 2). This is an imitation of a golden Madelinus-type triens produced in Dorestad. The coin can be dated to AD 650–675 and is indeed a very rare artefact to find in Denmark and especially in the eastern part of Jutland, as it is usually connected to Frisian trade and therefore to be found in the western part of Denmark (Moesgaard 2018, 122). This find clearly inspired the excavations to come. Between 2006 and 2013, several archaeological excavations were carried out by the Vejle Museum and under the Jelling project – a huge research project in collaboration with the Vejle Museum, the National Museum of Denmark, and Aarhus University (Andersen and Christensen 2008, 3ff.; Holst *et al.* 2012, 474ff.)

These excavations altered the interpretation of the monumental area in Jelling by revealing the first structural elements of a complex on



**Fig. 2.** The golden triens from Jelling (Photo by Vejle Museum)

a scale not seen before – a massive wooden palisade, a huge ship setting, and buildings of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century type. Continued excavations showed that the palisade had been an immense four-sided enclosure, covering an area of 12.5 ha, at least five times the size of any known Viking Age “manor” in Scandinavia. Timber houses, similar to the buildings known from King Harald Bluetooth’s circular fortresses (Aggersborg, Fyrkat and Trelleborg), but which also drew inspiration from contemporary rural architecture, were placed along the inner boundary of the north-eastern corner of the palisade, and it is likely that a central building or hall stood on the site of the present Romanesque church (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Plan showing the monument complex in Jelling (Graphics by the municipality of Vejle)

## The palisade

Fortunately, the excavations in 2013 revealed preserved oak timber in a wetland area (today a pond) in the south-eastern part of the palisade. The construction of the palisade was verified as a wall-type architecture consisting of a line of rectangular, cut planks with round posts on each side of the wall (Fig. 4). The dimensions of the planks in the wall were approximately 0.15×0.35 m and the round posts on each side of the wall were approx. 0.25 m in diameter. The function of these posts, positioned regularly and quite close to each other (approx. 1.2 m between the posts), is not quite clear but they surely had a strengthening or scaffolding purpose, maybe forming the scaffolding of an upper construction. We estimate the height to have been approx. 4 m above ground. The palisade runs for 1,440 m (4×360 m) and that would require more than 4,110 planks. Additionally, the number of supporting posts is estimated to have been approx. 2,300 posts (Jessen *et al.* 2014, 12ff.).

In the northern part of the palisade, a gate was found. The gate was 2.4 m wide, which was enough for two horsemen or two wagons to pass at the same time. It is also possible that the northern gate served as a secondary gate. The western side of the palisade could be regarded as the most plausible location of the main entrance. A couple of kilometres to the west we also found the historical Oxen road, which led towards Hedeby in the south. The most important gift to the archaeologists was, however, the preserved part of the palisade, which created an opportunity for a dendrochronological dating of the complex. 11 samples of oak were dated, but only one with preserved sapwood. The felling



**Fig. 4.** The preserved timber from the palisade during excavation (Photo by Vejle Museum)

of the tree has been dated to between AD 958 and 985 and most likely close to the year AD 968 (Bonde 2013).

### New interpretations

It is obvious that the new investigation altered our understanding of Jelling in the Viking Age – both regarding its structure, complexity and also interpretation. Further, it established closer and more diverse parallels to other royal and aristocratic sites in Scandinavia. With the reservation that the dates are uncertain and varied in nature, all the large constructions – the gravemounds, the huge stone setting, the enclosure, the rune stones and the constructions within the enclosure appear to fall within the historically assumed reign of King Gorm the Old and King Harald Bluetooth from somewhere in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. to AD 987. On the more general level, both the short duration and the considerable transformation of the site may be seen as epitomising the dynamic and fluctuating configuration of the early royal Danish power, both with regards to architectural and political means, as well as the geographical organisation (Holst *et al.* 2012, 68). However, the status of the site might, according to Anne Pedersen, cause a certain risk of isolation and research inertia.

While aware of the long historical tradition of Jelling, both researchers and presenters are faced with the challenge of approaching the site from new angles and remaining open towards new ideas, even if it means that the known and accepted narratives will have to be modified or even abandoned (Pedersen 2011, 26; more relevant literature for further reading: Pedersen 2014a; 2017).

So, what impact and consequences did these new results have for Jelling's status as a UNESCO site?

The most essential result was that the findings showed a different form – a previously unknown structure within the monuments. These structures were unknown in 1994, when Jelling was nominated as a UNESCO-site. As the recent excavations altered that, it was obvious that the original description of criterion and authenticity should be changed. The status of Jelling was changed and accepted by ICOMOS in July 2018 as a *Minor Boundary Modification*.



## Working within a Management Plan for the Jelling Monuments

The property is owned by the Municipality of Vejle and the church in Jelling. Additionally, there are more stakeholders, who work and operate within these frames. In order to make the management more operational, a Cooperation Council was established in 2013, with members from the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces, the Vejle Museum, the National Museum of Denmark, the Church, the Deanery and the Municipality of Vejle. Later, local groups from Jelling were added to the Council. In 2017 an extra level was added – in the form of a Steering Group (executive level). The purpose of the Cooperation Council is to revise the Management Plan with respect to the Jelling area and to implement it. The Management Plan describes topics like legislation; economic, educational, informational and social values, together with values concerning research; threats to these values; administrative measures; economic resources; implementation; and finally monitoring and protecting the site (*Management Plan for the Monuments in Jelling, 2017–2020: The Municipality of Vejle*).

The overall tool is the Management Plan – updated and administrated by the Municipality of Vejle which, together with the Museums and the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces, holds the statutory and legal responsibilities. In Jelling the monuments are protected by the Nature Protection Act §18 and the Museum Act §29e.

## The role of local authorities

According to *The Planning Act in Denmark*, local authorities in Denmark must designate and protect valuable cultural environments. In collaboration with the Danish Ministry of the Environment, the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces lays down the overall guidelines for securing valuable cultural environments.

Under the Museum Act, the local authorities must consult the local cultural heritage museum when they draft plans for new housing, infrastructure etc. A local plan (by the municipality) is required to contain guidelines to safeguard cultural heritage assets in both urban and rural areas. Those assets comprise ancient monuments, buildings and cultural environments, including churches and their surroundings. Municipalities are required to protect both preservation-

worthy individual elements and composite assets, i.e. valuable cultural environments. Municipal efforts are to be directed at showing human endeavours in all periods, i.e. from prehistoric times to the present day (<https://english.slks.dk/work-areas/cultural-heritage/municipality-and-planning/municipal-planning/>; accessed on 29.12.2018).

## Protecting cultural heritage

It is a very difficult task to discuss and compare topics like heritage protection between different countries, due to different national legislations. It is also of importance to distinguish between *cultural heritage by legislation* and areas we museums refer to, and *cultural heritage of interest* – but without legal protection. This naturally also concerns the use of metal detectors. Here we see a wide range of different national legislations. In Denmark it is forbidden to search with a metal detector on sites protected by the Danish Museum Act. It is, however, allowed to use your metal detector in all other places – with the landowners' permission, of course. This means that we usually never see the plundering of sites in Denmark. Metal detecting can be a huge problem without the proper legislation and without cooperation between museums and detectorists. An interesting discussion about different national models regarding the use of metal detectors can be read in Martens and Ravn 2016. The problems are also due to the level of intensity of agricultural activity. Intensive agricultural activity is seldom a good thing for the preservation of cultural heritage. Together with protection, the most valuable factor is, however, the educational perspective. It is of utmost importance to educate people and especially the local communities to be cultural heritage ambassadors. You do not want to work against people – but with people. We should all take ownership of our cultural heritage.

## Opportunities and challenges

After having been working closely on various aspects concerning the cultural heritage in Jelling – research, excavations, mediation and cooperative administration – it becomes very clear that there are both opportunities and challenges to handle. There is a wide range of stakeholders to take into consideration when taking decisions. There are both primary and secondary stakeholders and these groups

do not necessarily have the same interests or concerns. The primary stakeholders are usually the owner of the property, museums, the government or the municipality and the legislative authorities; the secondary stakeholders are researchers, scholars, tourist organisations and various local stakeholders. To illustrate the problem, it could be that a local group of re-enactors want to arrange an event including horse-riding within a cultural heritage area. Many of these kinds of events are often chosen to be held in authentic cultural heritage areas, which is understandable and positive. The negative part might, however, be the horse riding in the area, as it could pose a threat to the site. A museum with antiquarian responsibilities would therefore have a restrictive approach. A compromise could be changing the type of event – maybe a Viking market could be held next to the cultural heritage area and its presence would still give the event the right aura of history.

In order to solve these kinds of upcoming situations, it is a good idea to have an operational system to handle such requests. Within the frame of the Management Plan in Jelling, we have organised a small group of members from the Cooperation Council who meet around four times a year to discuss the events applied for (in a booking system), to be held in the cultural heritage area. On this forum we evaluate the event and whether it poses any threats to the area, but also if there is a relevance to arrange the event in this area. Based on the principle of *best practice*, we feel that this is a good way of screening the events and protecting the area.

Having a cultural heritage area gives a range of opportunities. As described in our Management Plan, our objective is to strive to uphold different values – such as educational, research, social and economic values. The educational values can be fostered on many levels: educational programmes and mediation for children and schools, “all-around” mediation and other educational programmes. The local museum can, for example, start a collaboration with a university on educating students in Cultural Heritage Management. This is the collaboration the Vejle Museum and Aarhus University have had for several years. The research can both engage scholars nationally and internationally, which will bring real benefits beyond borders.

Social values are less tangible and appear on different levels. By engaging the local communities, one can add the social value to the cultural heritage area. Using the area and educating visitors will also



**Fig. 5.** Jelling today with the monument complex as an educational and recreational area (Photo by L.H. Olesen)

add to the social value. This will naturally bring topics like economic values and sustainable tourism into the picture (Fig. 5).

### Economic values and sustainable tourism

Tourism related to cultural heritage has growing potential. Tourists and visitors are generally engaged in sites with an interesting history to tell and there is vast potential in this field, which we naturally all wish to benefit from. There is a fascinating story to tell and there is an interested audience. In the case of Jelling, it is obvious that the recent excavation and research results have generated interest in the monuments and brought in economic means from both public and private sources. Jelling is incorporated as a core component in the branding of the new, enlarged municipality of Vejle (Pedersen 2011, 260).

Many cultural heritage sites are very good at using the economic potential offered by the site, for example by boosting businesses such as hotels, restaurants, museums etc. in the local area.

Given the rapidly growing tourism, we therefore need to consider the concept of sustainable tourism and more importantly – how to implement it. The growing number of visitors causes wear and tear on the site and this needs to be monitored, so that we can take action if needed.

The overall idea is to use our common cultural heritage and to use it wisely – with respect and care – and to educate and inform visitors to do likewise!

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