

Ruins as a marker of colonial territoriality

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway tried to expand its influence into the North Atlantic by engaging in the whaling industry at Svalbard and establishing colonies along the Greenlandic west coast.¹ The missionary Hans Egede's vision of re-establishing a link between the kingdom and the distant province nearly lost to oblivion at the beginning of the 15th century propelled the colonization process.² Egede feared that the descendants of the Norwegian settlers along the said coastline had abandoned Christianity in favour of paganism. However, the Norwegian settlements had vanished due to several events such as climatic changes, plague, and failing trade.³ The only candidates left for conversion and trade was the indigenous and migratory population that lived by the coast. In 1728, Egede founded the colony of Good Hope, modern Nuuk, which was to be the centre of expansion in the following centuries.⁴ Egede outlined his colonial policy as he wrote to the king:

“The land shall be covered by colonies at the most populous places, an appropriate number of missionaries shall be appointed [and] the savages shall be kept under discipline”.⁵

To achieve this goal, it was necessary to expel other colonial powers that tried to get a foothold on the coast. British, Dutch and Hamburg whalers eagerly attempted to get their share of the valuable Greenland trade. In order to establish a viable colonial situation in Greenland, the Danes had to observe the first part of Egede's policy. If the Danes lost their grip on the territory, they would be unable to impel the Greenlanders to cooperate. Free cooperation, or procedures akin to free cooperation, was decisive to establishing a viable colonial situation because the Greenlanders could employ the vast coastline as a cover from the Danish colonial power if e.g. Greenlandic interests conflicted with Danish interests. Control and knowledge of the colonial space was critical to redeem

¹ Dalgård (1962), pp. 29-109; Gulløv et al. (2017), pp. 16-26.

² Gad (1969), pp. 25-55. Jf. Gulløv et al. (2017), pp. 16-26.

³ Dugmore et al. (2007), pp. 12-36.

⁴ Egede arrived in Greenland in 1721 where he founded the colony of Hope's Island. This colony proved unsuitable and inhospitable, and therefore the colony moved to Good Hope in 1728.

⁵ Egede (1721-36 [1925]), p. 143.

Danish mercantile and missionary ambitions. This implied guarding the colonial space through several strategies.⁶

One of the pillars to my research is consequently the formation of a colonial space controlled by the Danish colonial power. Through an interplay between power and counter-power, properly adjusted to the scholarly traditions of Michel Foucault and James Scott,⁷ it should be possible to examine how different power configurations attributed to create a viable colonial situation in Greenland. Foucault and Scott are fascinating yet difficult to employ in a colonial setting where the governmental framework rarely was as omnipotent as it were in early modern Europe (Foucault) or 20th century Malaysia (Scott). In order to mitigate this significant pitfall, a range of cultural historical prisms should prove useful. In order to understand e.g. the creation of a colonial space in early 18th century Greenland as a precondition for the exertion of colonial power and counter-power, the lessons of the material turn and time studies should be fruitful.⁸ The paper briefly discusses William Viney's spatiotemporal and poststructuralist approach to material culture in relation to reading and interpreting the creation of colonial territoriality in 18th Greenland. The paper will thereby advance an example where materiality and time contributed to stress Dano-Norwegian colonial territoriality.

Materiality through space and time

William Viney studies "waste" as a marker of spatiotemporalities. According to Viney, waste is not just something that is dislocated spatially – as claimed by Mary Douglas.⁹ Waste is highly charged with temporalities as well. Viney states that "waste negotiates a specific idea of time" implying that the chronography of things,¹⁰ or the temporal biography of things, undergoes changes over time. Old meanings vanish and new meanings appear in a continuous and complex relational interplay between subject, object, place and time. Viney's approach to waste is multilinear; it nearly resembles Jacques Derrida's sense of "bricolage" where meanings appear through complex relational interplays on several spatiotemporal levels.¹¹ Such an approach distinguishes Viney's studies from

⁶ Mølholm Olesen (2016), pp. 4-15; Mølholm Olesen (2018), pp. 31-35.

⁷ Foucault (ed. 2008); Scott (1985).

⁸ Liebmann (2015), pp. 322-326; Nilsson (2009), pp. 82-91; Damsholt & Simonsen (2009), pp. 14-23; Harvey (2009), pp. 1-23; Ingold (1995), pp. 57-77.

⁹ Viney (ed. 2015), pp. 1-20; Mordhorst & Simonsen (2012), pp. 4-13.

¹⁰ Viney, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ Derrida (1986), pp. 49-66.

most scholars. For instance does Lynn Åkesson emphasize that the attitude to waste changes unilinearly through time and space.¹² If one asks Viney, the unilinear approach is hardly sufficient to comprehend the multitudes of meanings assumed by and ascribed to “waste” – or material culture *per se*.

To illustrate his points, Viney engages with an array of empirical materials from contemporary artworks (created with objects from different ages) through 20th century literature to ruins (in the form of follies). Viney’s empirical evidence is later constructs created by objects from different ages, and they contribute to stress his point about continuous de- and reconstruction of waste’s meaning. It becomes clear that “the meaning of waste is drawn from where it is and where it is no longer” in the said spatiotemporal sense.¹³ Viney invites his readership to think spatiotemporalities into their work as such a category, or “categories” to be accordingly poststructuralistic, helps differentiate and enlighten the way individuals interact with waste. Even though his approach might be beneficial to study the spatiotemporalities of objects in general, his approach does have some pitfalls. Most importantly, his poststructuralist approach, e.g. given by his empirical materials and his explicit and implicit references to and uses of poststructural theorists such as Jacques Derrida, implies that all meaning is always-already moving and shifting as well as exposed and vulnerable from/in its provisional centre. It seems quite elusive when, where and why the transformative breaches within these provisional meanings do happen. Viney provides a tentative answer when he writes that spatiotemporalities charge waste with new meanings.¹⁴ Exactly how?

Viney’s empirical materials are constructs guided by forms of intentionality conceived through a given yet fluid spatiotemporal point of view.¹⁵ Although such considerations consciously undergird his empirical choices in order to better stress the theoretical points, strategies of intentionality, including their genealogy, could profitably have been addressed in more detail. Viney’s thoughts are fruitful, however, to historians that study e.g. colonialism in the scholarly traditions of Foucault and Scott. For Foucault and Scott alike, power and counter-power is something that shifts continuously.

¹² Åkesson (2007), pp. 39-45.

¹³ Viney, p. 112.

¹⁴ Derrida, p. 62; Viney, pp. 67-69, 127-148, etc.

¹⁵ Bakhtin (1981), pp. 358-361.

Viney's thoughts on spatiotemporalities can enrich this perspective by adding new layers to the interplay between actors. Below, an example demonstrates how to engage this theory of spatiotemporalities to interpret historical sources.

Spatiotemporalities as a strategic tool for colonialism

Several colonial agents worked in the Greenlandic waters in the 1720s and 1730s. Dutch and Hamburg whalers in great numbers had sailed these waters since the 1660s.¹⁶ Foreign whaling, sealing and trade posed a threat to Dano-Norwegian aspirations. Dano-Norwegian kings, scholars and politicians of the 17th century had stated Denmark-Norway's historical rights to "our and the crown's land Greenland and surrounding islands" in accordance with custom law grounded on the notion of "Arilds tid" or "time beyond living memory".¹⁷ This judicial term, buttressed by several heraldic, historical and/or political pictorial and worded statements, proved somewhat ineffectual by the late 17th century. The kings, scholars and politicians gradually realized that an actual colonization or settlement had to occur if the Dano-Norwegian claims were to be the least respected.

As mentioned above, Egede considered the expulsion of the "foreigners" to be of paramount importance for the establishment of Danish (colonial) rule in Greenland, and he drew heavily upon the Dano-Norwegian perceptions of Denmark-Norway's historical right in order to realize the said ambition. Yet when he eventually arrived in Greenland, he did something different from just advance pictorial and worded statements. Egede wanted to prove a historical link between Denmark-Norway and Greenland in order to define Danish territoriality besides founding colonies, making a judicial system, creating trade networks and spreading the word of God. The materialised colonial presence of the early 18th century, as opposed to the vivid imaginings of a continued yet unsubstantiated historical link in the 17th century, allowed and encouraged the colonists to gather knowledge about the landscape where they resided in order to strengthen said claims of primacy to Greenland. The colonists' attention was soon directed towards the Norse ruins scattered in the landscape as a means to connect the pictorial and worded claims with material evidence along the coast. The Norse had left numerous ruins after disappearing during the 15th century,¹⁸ and these remains

¹⁶ Oesau (1955), pp. 70-76;

¹⁷ Monopoly letter issued by king Christian IV of Denmark-Norway, February 18, 1636, p. 1; Porsmose (1997), s. 46ff.

¹⁸ Recently studied by: Dugmore et al. (2007), pp. 12-36; Høegsberg (2009), pp. 85-126; Arneborg (2012), pp. 588-597.

proved to be the ideal starting point for the creation of a vibrant and tangible historical link. Egede visited some Norse ruins in 1723. His visit encouraged him to write that:

“In earlier times our old Norwegians have lived here, and their deserted houses [...] were not only amusing as they also clearly confirmed and testified the right that our most gracious hereditary king holds to this country and its inhabitants rather than other countries’ people which in this country everywhere pursue their good fortune”.¹⁹

Egede revives (in the present tense) the ruins (in the past tense) in order to emphasize Denmark-Norway’s historical and exclusive right to settle Greenland. The notion of “Arilds tid” or “time beyond living memory” was hereby not only supported by pictorial and worded claims but also by “waste” in the landscape that became loaded with several spatiotemporalities as an argument for Dano-Norwegian claims of primacy to Greenland. The Norse or Norwegian architecture, implicitly referring to buildings made out of stone and turf,²⁰ provided the crucial link for Egede’s argument. Denmark ruled Norway, and the Norwegians settled Greenland “in earlier times”, and that gives the Danish king, subtly the state, an exclusive right to rule Greenland and her inhabitants besides expelling foreign traders and whalers from the surrounding waters. The Norse ruins becomes a “setting [that] can be rendered a stage to expose the narratives that it [now] mediates”.²¹

The ruins become conspicuous for their situatedness in the landscape and historical links to a distant past, and they therefore substantiate Hans Egede’s arguments. Reinvigorating ruins became an intentional strategy to signify and mark colonial territoriality. During the 1730s through 1760s, the Danish king prohibited foreign trade in Greenland and he buttressed this policy by founding several colonies to exclude the foreigners from the most rewarding entrepôts along the coastline.²² The narrative of Denmark-Norway’s historical right to Greenland seems to have influenced the colonial architecture too. Houses of stone and turf were not only practical constructions in the harsh North Atlantic climate, but they were most likely identity markers for its constructors and inhabitants too. Merchant Paul Moltzou wrote in 1743 from Good Hope, the colony founded by Egede 15

¹⁹ Egede, p. 76.

²⁰ Høegsberg, pp. 85-126.

²¹ Viney, p. 140.

²² King Christian VI’s ordinance of April 9, 1740.

years earlier, that the colony's intentional Norwegian-fashioned houses needed repairing, and therefore he ordered his men to quarry stone and gather turf.²³ Missionary Christopher Glahn described the newly founded colony of Holsteinsborg in the late 1760s as having several houses built according to "the Norwegian fashion".²⁴

Egede's colonial vision materialised through a complex of spatiotemporalities arranged to mark colonial territoriality. The spatiotemporal workings of designating Norse ruins and constructing new houses according to the Norwegian fashion meant that the colonial narrative was emplotted in a way that facilitated the Danish colonial power's attempt to fill the Greenlandic space. Intentionality played a critical role within these spatiotemporal configurations as it apparently guided the ways in which ruins (as waste) were loaded with new signifiers to mark colonial territoriality on a multitude of levels within a contested space. The ruins were no longer ruined dwellings for dead people. Instead, the ruins were the footprint of space and time that held the potential to reclaim a nearly lost territory.²⁵

Conclusion

This paper discussed how to employ William Viney's insights on spatiotemporalities to study ruins as an intentional marker of territoriality. 18th century Greenland was dotted with Norse ruins. When the Danes arrived in Greenland in 1721, the old ruins signified and marked Dano-Norwegian claims to Greenland. Colonial architecture was subsequently fashioned in accordance with Norwegian traditions to illustrate historical continuity in relation to the Norse ruins. A spatiotemporal complex, along with other strategies, thus emerged that drew lines across time and space in order to facilitate the formation of an exclusive Dano-Greenlandic colonial space.

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²³ Moltzou (1743-44 [1935]), p. 53.

²⁴ Glahn (1763-68 [1921]), p. 155.

²⁵ Jf. Mølholm Olesen (2018), pp. 31-35.

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