

# INTRODUCTION

The minute-books of the Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, henceforth referred to as the Antiquity Commission, spanning the years of 1807-48 constitute a unique historical document shedding light on the earliest period of Danish museum history. Even though a few quotations from these documents have been used in classical publications about museum history, they have never been available in their entirety. A thorough analysis of the contents of the minute-books will therefore be of great and scientifically novel value and relevance to anyone with an interest in the study of the origin of modern archaeology.

Although the Antiquity Commission was a true product of the absolute monarchy it is in many ways comparable to the Ministry of Culture's "Kulturarvsstyrelsen" (Board of Cultural Heritage) of today. A glance at the objects clause in the Museum Act (Museumsloven)<sup>1</sup>, will reveal, that its contents are very similar to the Antiquity Commission's Royal Ordinance of 1807. The government of the present day aims, as did the Antiquity Commission, at a long term effort in all areas of culture in order to preserve the common historical heritage and make it accessible to the general public in a vivid, interesting and immediately appealing way.

Another parallel to the modern scientific world's working method is reflected in the Antiquity Commission members' open discussions and exchange of ideas and information with other scholars at home and abroad. Letters were exchanged, papers were published, and comprehensive, mutual inspection and study tours to remote destinations were undertaken. Many and often famous foreign scholars visited Copenhagen in order to see and study the Museum of Nordic Antiquities, which was the Commission's model museum of its time. In a time before the age of photography, there was also a lively exchange of original antiquities, drawings and copies of antiquities among museums and private collectors etc.

In the minute-books it is also to be noticed, that in spite of the different way of thinking and the different

habits of those days, the Antiquity Commission actually did function in a highly democratic way. Meetings and the casting of votes were conducted in what we nowadays consider a normal manner, all members carrying one vote each except when the vote resulted in a draw, in which case the vote of the chairman would carry the day. Minutes were being recorded during the meetings and signed by all members present, and detailed accounts were being kept and were properly audited at the end of the year. Altogether the minute-books exhibit considerable evidence of the Antiquity Commission having discharged its official duties in an honest and upright manner.

The invaluable primary source material of the Antiquity Commission's minute-books is now for the first time published on the occasion of the 200 years' birthday of the National Museum of Denmark. It has been the aim and hope of the author of the subsequent commentary to make the minute-books more easily accessible to research within the fields of archaeology, history, conservation, museum history, and possibly other areas of scientific research.

As a historical document the Antiquity Commission's minute-books cannot stand alone. It goes without saying, that the entries of minute-books or of year-books will only reflect carefully selected and edited elements of the activities of an organisation. To the participants of the Commission's meetings much will naturally have been merely implied and much will have been left unsaid. In order to acquire a deeper understanding and interpretation of the many brief particulars of information entered into the minutes during the period of the Commission's existence, spanning the years of 1807-48, it is necessary to take into consideration the many other sources left behind by the Commission<sup>2</sup>. The major foundation of the activities of the Antiquity Commission is the Commission's own publications, the most important of which are the *Antiquariske Annaler* vols. 1-4 (Antiquarian

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<sup>1</sup> Lovbekendtgørelse no. 739 of July 17th 2000.

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<sup>2</sup> An important and indispensable publication is Christian Adamsen and Vivi Jensen (eds.): "Danske Præsters Indberetninger til Oldsagskommissionen af 1807", vols I-V, Wormianum 1995 - 2003." ("The Reports of Danish Clergymen to the Antiquity Commission of 1807").

Annals). A large amount of the Commission's written material was, however, never published, a circumstance, which makes it extraordinarily difficult to achieve a thorough and overall view of the Commission's activities. In addition to the Commission's extensive correspondence with colleagues and friends, letter-books and accounts<sup>3</sup>, the National Museum's accession registers recording the acquisition of museum items are particularly indispensable to the study of the origins of the Danish National Museum and to general museum practice concerning the history of Danish cultural history.

The main purpose of this study has been to make the minutes, now published for the first time, accessible to a larger number of scholars. In order to achieve this purpose it has therefore been necessary to accompany them with a detailed description and interpretation of their contents, arranged according to their most important subjects which are mentioned in various and widely discrepant places throughout the pages of the minutes.

The minutes of the Antiquity Commission consist of two volumes, Vol. I spanning the period of 1807 to 1821. Up to and including the year 1818, the descriptions on all pages are entered consecutively. From 1819, however, the text proper is entered on the left page, the right page being devoted to the Antiquity Commission's comments and resolutions. This practice is continued in Vol. II, spanning the period of 1821 to 1848 with the exception of the gap mentioned below. The minutes cover the period of 1807-32 without any interruption, but include no entries concerning the Commission's activities for the period of 1833-1837. The entries are then resumed for the period of 1838 to 1848. The last year of the Commission's existence (1849) is curiously enough not mentioned at all, a fact which is to be regretted, as it would have been interesting to gain some insight into the reasons for - and discussions about - the decision to dissolve the Commission.

As will be seen below, the contents of the minutes change character during the period of 1807-1848.

During the first period of 1807-16, the entries constitute minutes proper, containing detailed information as to the subjects, which have been discussed, as well as the date of the meeting - and signed at the end by the members present.

The minutes reveal the Commission's extensive contacts, mentioning and describing, as they do, stationary ancient monuments, acquisitions of antiquities, drawings, letters etc., specifying the name and title of each donor. A predominant item of the minutes of this period is, moreover, made up of lists of the many answers from clergymen and other civil servants in response to the Commission's inquiries regarding possibly existing antiquities and medieval relics in various regions of the realm. Furthermore, the minutes provide us with an insight into the inquiries to and from national and international scientific contacts.

After his appointment as secretary to the Commission in 1817, the entries are mainly made by the legendary archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen though he very often did not sign himself. Until 1832 the nature and character of the minutes remain as before, although strongly influenced by Thomsen's somewhat peculiar style of writing. The year 1832 is dominated by the imminent establishment of the sister collection in Kiel in Schleswig, which took place in 1833/34. During this period the entries retain their character of minutes proper, reflecting the Commission's steadily increasing areas of activity, and describing the acquisition of items of Antiquity, drawings, letters etc. The names and titles of the donors are still being considered as essential information, but gradually the descriptions as to the provenance and circumstances of the finds, or other relevant information, become more comprehensive.

Following a single entry in the minutes of 1832, we come upon the previously mentioned strange and inexplicable gap, which lasts from 1833 until 1838. It is much to be regretted, that the minutes are therefore of no help in shedding light upon the museum's removal to Christiansborg Castle and the new arrangement there. Meetings were, however, undoubtedly still being held, as witnessed by the Commission's account vouchers testifying to meals served at the meetings, which were, most certainly, much less frequent than before.

<sup>3</sup> The accounts (vouchers and account books) were treated by Tove Jakobsen: "Museet for nordiske Oldsager, med særligt henblik på bevaring i perioden 1807-1891 & Appendiks", Ph.D. thesis. Det kongelige danske Kunstakademi, Konservatorskolen 2004 & Københavns Universitet 2005.

From the year 1838, when the minutes were once more resumed, the character of the entries alters, no longer constituting minutes proper, but are rather summaries of resolutions already passed and of events, which had taken place. During the last ten years, the minutes turn into a kind of annual report, recording the achievements and intentions of the Commission during the preceding year. Minutes proper become the exception, and it is not always possible to ascertain

which members have been present at which meetings. The minutes, moreover, now serve as inventories of particularly comprehensive donations and of the collection's valuable items before and after Thomsen's many journeys. This naturally entails, that information regarding this period is somewhat insufficient, a fact which is unavoidably reflected in the balance of the commentaries of this study.

## 1. THE HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN DENMARK BEFORE 1800



Fig. 1. Ole Worm at the age of 38. Copper by Simon de Pas 1626.  
Reproduced after Randsborg 1994.

### OLE WORM

The first Danish antiquary proper was Ole Worm (1588-1654) (Fig. 1). He was physician-in-ordinary to the eldest son of King Christian IV (r. 1588-1648), the elected Prince Christian (1603-1647), who took a keen interest in the monuments and relics of Antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

In 1622 Worm obtained the King's permission to have instructions issued to the bishops of Norway and Denmark enjoining them to furnish reports about old documents, runic inscriptions, legends and tales about ancient events, fields of battle, stone accumulations etc (Jørgensen ed. 1964 & 1974). Three years later in 1625 Worm was given the task of travelling round the country to study runic monuments, which were later to be drawn and engraved in copperplate. In 1643 he published "Danicorum Monumentorum libri sex", a study of runic stones, barrows, places of sacrifice, stone circles etc. Though the book clearly is a milestone in the development of runology, unfortunately his attempts at deciphering the runic inscriptions were not always felicitous. In 1652 he persuaded the new King Frederik III (r. 1648-70) to have a number of runic stones conveyed to Copenhagen

<sup>4</sup> Editorial note: Ole Worm is perhaps somewhat underestimated by the author. Thus, his travels, wide studies in many fields, including recognition of stone artefacts as human products, numerous international contacts, museum (not least), teaching at the university, and his immense topographical initiative ought to have been stressed here. Cf. K. Randsborg, Ole Worm: An Essay on the Modernization of Antiquity. *Acta Archaeologica* 65, 1994, 135ff. Etc.