Negotiating heritage and tradition: identity and cultural tourism in Ærø, Denmark

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Abstract: Ronström’s tradition/heritage dichotomy is used to explore issues of cultural inheritance in the Danish island of Ærø. The 2006 publication of Carsten Jensen’s best-selling historical novel We, the Drowned turned the Baltic Sea village of Marстал into Denmark’s best-known maritime community. Locally, however, there had long been a tradition of Marstallers contrasting their community’s seafaring past to the reputedly agrarian identity of the island’s other main village, the former market town of Ærøskøbing. The community rivalry between industrial Marстал and tourist-friendly, half-timbered Ærøskøbing finds expression in the two villages’ various tourist attractions. Jensen’s novel has been embraced by both Marstallers and Danes in general, renewing interest in local traditions and the encouraging Marstal’s development as a heritage town. Although We, the Drowned has become a tool for constructing community solidarity, it has also introduced a mode of heritage tourism that may clash with elements of the local identity.

Keywords: Ærø; islands; cultural tourism; heritage; tradition; Denmark

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Tradition versus heritage

The past two decades have seen a rapid consolidation of humanities and social sciences research on islands into the distinct field of island studies. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have been brought together by dedicated academic journals (Island Studies Journal and Shima) and conference series (the International Small Islands Culture Conferences, Island Dynamics Conferences, and Islands of the World Conferences), which have offered platforms for comparative analysis of island communities worldwide. A distinct line of heritage studies has emerged within this multi- and interdisciplinary field, taking into account how the shared characteristics of islands affect the development of their heritages.

Grounded in island studies and informed by the wider literature on heritage, this paper uses the case of the Danish island of Ærø to consider the various ways in which cultural heritage relates to local and national identity. We also assess the issues involved when elements of local heritage become embraced as national heritage. Following Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, p. 6), we regard heritage production as the creation and maintenance of ownership over a particular imagined past. Central to this is the fundamentally intangible idea of inheritance, which distinguishes both tangible and intangible heritage from other kinds of culture.

This paper will employ the theory of heritage advanced by Owe Ronström of Gotland University, Sweden. Ronström’s conceptual model of cultural inheritance shifts focus from heritage objects to the processes by which heritage is selected and produced. Rather than speaking of tangible and intangible heritage as is increasingly the case (Jenkins, 2008), Ronström utilises the Swedish concepts of ‘ancient lore’ (formminnen), ‘tradition’ (tradition), and ‘heritage’ (kulturarv), all of which we would generally call ‘heritage’ in English. Of particular interest to us here is Ronström’s distinction between tradition and heritage: ‘While tradition tends to use time to produce “topos”, place, and distinct localities […] , heritage tends to use place to produce “chronos”, specific pasts that are more loosely rooted in place’. Tradition typically centres on ‘customs, rituals, and expressive forms’ and heritage on ‘monuments, groups of buildings, and sites’. Tradition and heritage possess different emotional contents as well, with tradition creating ‘a longing for and mourning over lost good old days, together with commitments to honour a specific local past’ and heritage producing ‘a much more generic past that you may pay an occasional visit to without much nostalgia, obligation or grief’ (Ronström, 2008, pp. 8 – 9). In this view, tradition is characterised by exclusivity and can only be entered via the
community itself. Any number of individual events and circumstances can make a formerly closed cultural inheritance accessible to a wider range of individuals – as we shall see in this paper, even literary fiction can give tourists a feeling of being inheritors of a particular destination (Grydehøj, 2010, p. 79; Herbert, 2001).

Ronström uses these concepts to analyse how the island of Gotland is claimed as inheritance by rural tradition promoters and urban heritage promoters, respectively. In the town of Visby, it is heritage that reigns, with restoration and building codes having succeeded in transforming the town centre into a monolithic Medieval heritage product (Ronström, 2008, pp. 4–6):

If tradition produces the local, heritage is clearly tied to larger units, such as the nation, Europe, or as in World Heritage, the entire world. […] Heritage tends to ‘empty’ spaces, which makes it possible to refill them with all kinds of inhabitants. In Visby, the Middle Ages is rhetorically populated with people of diverse origins, Germans and Swedes, jokers and jesters, tradesmen, knights and violent kings. But the space does not belong to any of these people. Heritage resists local people’s claims for indigenous rights. While tradition can be produced locally, the production of ‘heritage’ is centralised and produces something beyond the local and regional, beyond the distinctive, the ethnic and the multicultural. It is everybody’s and therefore nobody’s. (Ronström, 2008, p. 9)

The tradition/heritage dichotomy in Ronström’s model is a powerful tool in analysing historical production. Bearing in mind the strong tradition of folklife studies and the museumisation of vernacular culture in Scandinavia (Klein, 1986), this type of analysis is especially relevant for inheritance sites, such as folklife museums, that possess both material and performative elements and that may focus on either urban (for example, Den Gamle By in Denmark) or rural (for example, Skansen in Sweden) environments.

Ronström’s use of ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ is in some ways complementary to the use by Smith and Waterton (2009) of ‘intangible heritage’ and ‘the authorised heritage discourse’ respectively.

**Methodology**

I lived on Ærø from 2002 to 2006, working during part of this time at the local youth club and the adult education centre. Over a period of 18 months in 2005 – 2006, I undertook dedicated ethnographic fieldwork on the island in association with The Evergreen State College (USA). The fieldwork itself
was undertaken from a folkloric perspective and tradition, and my subsequent analysis is informed by both the discipline of folklore and thinking within the field of island studies. My fieldwork consisted of participant observation, casual conversation, and semi-structured formal interviews performed in person among individuals, couples, and small groups, usually in contributors’ homes. Formal recorded interviews took place with 61 individuals, with interviews ranging from 45 min to 4 h and with the average interview being around 1 h in length. Contributors were selected through a combination of personal acquaintance, the network method, and targeted selection of individuals with a special interest in local culture, thereby ensuring a wide geographical, gender, and age range as well as a robust mix of key informants and non-specialist island residents. Formal interviews had a dual focus on local identity and perceptions of Danish folk belief. It is only the former of these two subjects that will be discussed here. I have remained in contact with many of my contributors – including the author Carsten Jensen – since moving away from the island.

The combination of formal interviews and participant observation used in this study has many precedents as a data acquisition method in small rural communities, with the work of Glassie (1983, 1995) being particularly influential in this regard. Long-term participant observation heightens, however, the importance of understanding reflexivity, which Atkinson and Hammersley (2007, p. 15) define as the acknowledgement that ‘the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them’. It is necessary to acknowledge that because the act of researching is inherently marginalising and distancing (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, pp. 71 – 72), it is impossible for even resident researchers to completely avoid influencing and being influenced by their field.

We follow Dundes (1965) in dividing the folkloric process into the actions of identification and interpretation: The objective raw data of the former are only useful in the subjective context of the latter, and the latter is impossible without the former. It must nonetheless be noted that the combined data from observation, casual conversation, and informal interviews are of limited usefulness in quantitative analysis in part because such data present relative difficulties for repeatability (reliability) and in part because of the relatively small sample sizes resulting from the time-consuming nature of this method. These issues are not unique to ethnography, however, and though they present barriers to interpreting collected data, the enhanced ability of ethnographers to build internal
validity in some ways compensates for the uncertain reliability of interpretations (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Thus, where expressions such as ‘most Ærø residents feel . . .’ are used, it is with the awareness that absolute certainty regarding these statements would be impossible to achieve in practice, and no claim is made for the existence of a monolithic community identity. However, long residence in and interaction with the community have allowed the emergence of generalisations based on unquantifiable data sets.

Ethnography presents a number of benefits in terms of boosting validity that give it a valuable place alongside more quantitative techniques and other kinds of qualitative techniques. Among the advantages to participant observation and individualised interviews are the tools they give a skilled researcher for questioning contributors in a language with which they are comfortable, thereby eliciting answers without prompting, and for allowing the researcher to cumulatively test previously collected data and adapt questioning accordingly (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In addition, because research questions occur in more-or-less natural conversation, the researcher can delve into points mentioned by the contributor that may not have been known to the researcher in advance and gain a deep understanding of context (de Laine, 2000, p. 41; Schensul et al., 1999, p. 5).

The island of Ærø

At around 30 km long and 8 km at its widest, Ærø is not a large island (see Figure 1), and nor is it particularly isolated, with four ferry connections to other island towns in Denmark (Rudkøbing on Langeland, Svendborg and Fåborg on Fyn, Fynshav on Als). It is nevertheless an island of perceived internal cultural difference.
Ærø’s total population is around 7000, and life on the island is focused around its three largest settlements: Marstal (pop. 2400) in East Ærø, Ærøskøbing (pop. 1000) and Søby (pop. 550) in West Ærø. The island’s east–west division is grounded in historical circum- stance. In times past, the two parts of the island were joined only by a narrow isthmus called Drejet, and the shallow bay of Gråsten Nor separated the then coastal settlements of Kragsnæs and Lille Rise. The damming of Gråsten Nor commenced in 1856, and the area – now covered by meadows – remains a sort of cultural no man’s land.

Historically, the separation of East and West Ærø was industrial as well as physical. Ærøskøbing flourished early, gaining privileged market town status in the mid-fifteenth century and as a result becoming a leading shipping port in the southwest Baltic from the 1700s until the middle of the 1800s. By contrast, Marstal grew from a tiny fishing settlement into a bustling smuggling port, and as the importance of Ærøskøbing’s market town status declined, so Marstal’s primacy as a hub for legal shipping emerged. In the decades surrounding 1900, Marstal Harbour was the busiest in Denmark, save for that of Copenhagen itself. At its peak, Marstal Harbour was home to 340 sailing ships, representing a remarkable quarter of the entire Danish fleet (Jensen & Hermansen, 2009; Kroman, 2001). Marstal’s boom years coincided with Ærøskøbing’s decline: As large, new houses were being built in Marstal, paid for by profits from the global cargo trade, Ærøskøbing’s economy was turning inward and downward. Even in 1855, when the tide had already begun to turn, Ærøskøbing was home to 1712 inhabitants – over 700 more than live in the village today. It is noteworthy that the lengthy Description of Ærø written by the visiting physician J.R. Hübertz in 1834 is

Figure 1. The island of Ærø.
dominated by information on West Ærø (Hübertz, 2004): At that point, the undrained Gråsten Nor still divided East and West Ærø, and Ærøskøbing remained the island’s economic hub.

The course of history is not, however, entirely predictable. Although the eventual obsolescence of sail power did not wipe out Marstal’s shipping industry, it did remove the harbour town’s status as a global trading hub, and today, Marstal’s maritime dominance is limited to ship repairs and short sea shipping (around 50 vessels, representing the largest such fleet in Denmark). In time, Ærøskøbing began benefiting from its decades of neglect: Whereas the village’s tiny old cross-timbered and thatch-roofed houses must have epitomised lost status in the late 1800s when contrasted with Marstal’s lavish rush to build, by the mid-1900s, these same houses were being valued as relics of a more rustic and romantic Danish past (Bitsch Christensen, n.d. [2010]). Ærøskøbing is now marketed by the local tourism authority as ‘Denmark’s Fairy Tale Town’, and careful efforts to preserve what is today seen as its built heritage resulted in the village being awarded the Europa Nostra prize in 2002. So complete had been the re-reversal of fates that, while Ærøskøbing gained a reputation for being a premier yachting harbour, cultural tourism destination, and bicycling holiday base for both domestic and international markets, Marstal remained more or less off the tourism map as its industrial relevance receded.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the treatment of Ærø by Rick Steves, a popular American tourism guidebook writer and television personality. Steves recommends Ærø to his readers as one of the top three attractions in Denmark, alongside the cities of Århus and Copenhagen (Steves, 2000). Fittingly, he devotes considerable attention to the island in both his print and online publications – but does not so much as mention Marstal (Steves, 2000, 2010a). Indeed, the map of the island he includes in a May 2010 magazine article pinpoints Ærøskøbing but nothing else (Steves, 2010b). Nevertheless, as we shall see, perceptions regarding tourism on Ærø have shifted considerably over the past 5 years, and whereas it would once have been fair to say that cultural tourism in Marstal was primarily a by-product of tourism in Ærøskøbing, this is no longer the case.

**Local perceptions**

The sense of difference between East and West Ærø is deeply ingrained in the local consciousness. Echoing a common local sentiment, 38-year-old Jens Nicolai Gamsbøl-Havmand, who grew up in Næstved, Zealand and moved to Marstal in 2003, describes the distinction between the island’s main towns as
being that ‘People in Marstal turn toward the water, in Ærøskøbing toward the land’ (personal communication, 2011, translation my own).

That this is no new development is made clear in my 2006 talk with 83-year-old Esther Clausen, who has lived most of her life in and around the West Ærø village of Bregninge. When she was a child, there was very little communication between East and West Ærø:

Esther Clausen: Both a post car and a bus drove with packages from the pharmacy and, you know, parcel service that came with the mail. It drove through the island with post and letters and packages and so on and sent goods from the pharmacy to people. And then the bus trans-ported people around the island. But I was old before I came to Marstal for the first time. It wasn’t usual to go to Marstal. It was probably back when we began riding to dances, biking to dances out in Marstal and that sort of thing. So then we’re about 16, 17, 18 years old. […]

Author: Sometimes, it feels like there are three separate societies [Marstal, Ærøskøbing, and Søby] here on the island.

Esther Clausen: But you know what? It was like that in the past too. Ærøskøbing and Marstal could never really unite.

Author: But why is that?

Esther Clausen: See, that’s a good question. I can’t even begin to answer it because they can’t answer it either. So how could I do it then? No, it’s some disagreement about how Ærøskøbing, it’s a market town, and Marstal isn’t. And Marstal feels, you know, that they’re larger than Ærøskøbing, but it’s Ærøskøbing that has market town rights, am I right? And it’s probably had an effect, I think, but whether that’s the answer, I don’t know. […] But it’s something that’s been around for many, many, many years. Huh! They just can’t stop talking about it! (personal communication, 2006, translation my own)

Indeed, so inescapable is the oppositional rhetoric that settlements such as Søby and Bregninge in the island’s far west represent a sort of safe haven, remaining outside the cultural controversy between the two villages. Ask someone in Ærøskøbing, however, whether or not Søby takes sides in the war, and you will likely be told that, yes, Søby considers itself to be aligned with Ærøskøbing for geographical reasons. Ask the same question
to a Marstaller, and you may well hear that Søby is in the Marstal camp, aligned against the arrogant people of Ærøskøbing.

It is no coincidence then that it was a resident of the Søby region, Birthe Henriksen, who set up one of the most prosaic of the island’s many low-key tourist attractions, the Peace Bench near Olde Mill. In the words of the local tourism brochure, the Peace Bench ‘is a symbol of hope for peace in the world. The bench has the shape of a bridge and it gives you the opportunity to have some positive thoughts while you enjoy the wide views over the island and the sea’ (Ærø Turist- og Erhvervskontor, n.d.). Local opinion is rather less lofty in this regard, and the Peace Bench is seen merely as a bridge between the island’s two warring factions. This was, indeed, Henriksen’s intention when she had the bench designed and built. She had been shocked by the events of 11 September 2001 and realised how vain it was to seek peace on Earth while peace on Ærø was still wanting. At the Peace Bench’s official opening, a photograph was taken of Karsten Landro (mayor of the then Marstal Municipality) and Jørgen Otto Jørgensen (mayor of the then Ærøskøbing Municipality) shaking hands while sitting on either side of the bench. Henriksen herself told me in 2006 that she is doubtful that her effort had much of an effect:

The idea was that the mayors, they were going to sit on either side and talk things over. [...] A photo was taken of them sitting there, but I’m sure it was only on the day of the unveiling. I don’t know. But I’ve seen that Landro has sat there later too, that they’ve taken a picture of him sitting on the bench [alone]. (personal communication, 2006, translation my own)

Although historical justifications for the island’s cultural division, such as those posited by Esther Clausen, may appear suspect, they are common currency on Ærø and have, indeed, become part of the local narrative of difference. Forty-one-year-old historian and Marstal native, Jakob Buhl, explains the situation thus, referring to Ærøskøbing by its somewhat affectionately belittling nickname of Pøtten:

Yeah, the way the two towns arose is quite different of course, and the towns’ heydays were in different periods. Pøtten has its roots in older structures, Schlewig-Holstein, royal privileges, and the middle classes. Marstal arose from almost nothing, very enterprising, full of initiative, audacity, and as a maritime town maybe more patriotic (in relation to the king and Denmark) but also a bit anarchistic and anti-authoritarian.
As we shall see below, some of these sentiments have been reinforced locally and distributed nationally in recent years.

The year 2005 marked something of a political turning point for Ærø. As a part of a nationwide jurisdictional restructuring, the island – formerly divided into the two jurisdictions of Marstal Municipality and Ærøskøbing Municipality – was unified into Ærø Municipality. Among other things, this meant that the then mayors of the two municipalities ran against one another in the local election, and the results are indicative of the island’s cultural divisions. Votes split along conspicuously geographical lines, with political ideology being of secondary importance (KMD, 2009). A subsequent municipal election produced different results but did not seem to indicate a shift from a very local form of politics.

These elections have seen all parties placing preservation of ferry services at the top of their agendas. Currently, Ærø – which is, as the tourist brochure prominently assures us, ‘a genuine island’ and not linked by a bridge (Ærø Turist- og Erhvervskontor, n.d.) – has four ferry routes: One departing from Marstal, one from Ærøskøbing, and two from Søby. Economic concerns suggest that a ferry route in Marstal or Ærøskøbing might have to be discontinued. Since the municipal elections have become contests between separate locally entrenched parties, campaigns have focused on guaranteeing the preservation of Marstal and Ærøskøbing ferry services, respectively. Arguing in 2009 for the need to preserve all of the island’s ferry services, Lund (2009) from the Ærø Residents’ List party highlights the factitiousness of this particular issue:

There were many of us here on Ærø who believed in a united Ærø during the last election, where the challenge was to bring together a sometimes otherwise divided island. That is not done [...] by taking the ferries from parts of the island’s society. (Translation my own)

It should be recalled that Marstal and Ærøskøbing are but a quarter of an hour’s drive from one another. The ongoing ferry debate concerns genuine cultural divisions within this single jurisdiction, and it is interesting to note that ferries and other means of transport are frequently among the most contentious political issues in island communities in general (Baldacchino, 2007).
Heritage development in Ærøskøbing

The various historical museums of Marstal and Ærøskøbing reflect the self-conceptions of the communities in which they are based. Ærøskøbing is relatively rich in museums, hosting Ærø Museum, Hammerich’s House, and the Bottle-Peter Museum, all of which are jointly managed as a charity. Ærø Museum proper was founded in 1909, and along with Hammerich’s House, the home of sculptor Gunnar Hammerich (1893 – 1970), it forms a part of Ærøskøbing’s urban fabric. Both museums enhance the village’s status as a heritage site in Ronström’s sense. Hammerich’s House, located in a 200-year-old half-timbered building, is quite concretely a curated open house that provides a glimpse into the past. Similarly, Ærø Museum feels more like a cabinet of curiosities than it does a history museum per se, and its in situ reconstruction of a market town garden serves to immerse the visitor in a particular, idealised take on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Danish town life.

The Bottle-Peter Museum, holding a collection of around 750 ships in bottles by the prolific Ærøskøbing ship bottler Peter Jacobsen, provides a reminder that Ærøskøbing too produced a considerable number of sailors. Nevertheless, the relative success of the museum is rooted in its heritage park surroundings: The Bottle-Peter Museum represents yet another self-consciously quirky display open to tourists who visit a village that is marketed more or less as an open-air folklife museum. Though guide books need listed attractions, the appeal to heritage in Ronström’s sense is its overall atmosphere: Thus, visitors to ‘Denmark’s Fairy-Tale Town’ are as likely to seek out and photograph the village’s privately owned and famously diminutive house (Dukkehuset) on Smedegade (Fyens.dk, 2007) as they are to visit any museum. Even Steves (2000, p. 54), one of Ærøskøbing’s great international proponents, presents the museums as simple set pieces that add to the overall thematic charm of this ‘town in a bottle’:

Ærøskøbing is just a pleasant place to wander. Stubby little porthole-type houses lean on each other like drunk, sleeping sailors, with their birth dates displayed in proud decorative rebar. Wander under flickering old-time lampposts. The harbour now caters to holiday yachts, and on midnight low tides you can almost hear the crabs playing cards. Snoop around town. It’s OK. Notice the many ‘snooping mirrors’ on the houses. Antique locals are following your every move.
The anthropomorphisation of the architecture and the off-handed association between the character of buildings and their residents are not mere eccentricities of Steves’ writing; they are central to the construction of heritage, of a sense of universal inheritance. The town, in this vision, does not belong to the locals; rather, the locals belong to the town, which belongs to everybody.

Søren Bitsch Christensen (n.d. [2010]), Director of the Danish Centre for Urban History, says sadly of Ærøskøbing that:

The harmonic street system and town square and church still exist because supermarkets and factories were not constructed and stole their place. The well on the town square is preserved because public water supply came first in 1952. Take a walk around the town and ask yourself: Is this a museum or a living town? (Translation my own)

Considering the pride that Ærøskøbing residents take in their community, this assessment may be somewhat exaggerated, yet it does highlight the effect that Ærøskøbing has on visitors as well as the stifling that possession of widely recognised heritage status can have on a town (Hayward, 2008).

**Maritime tradition in Marstal and Carsten Jensen’s We, the Drowned**

Such was never Marstal’s fate: Insufficiently charming, too industrial – for whatever reasons, Marstal was left in the hands of tradition. Whereas Ærøskøbing is home to numerous restaurants with recognisably old-fashioned Ærøese menus (representing the role that universal heritage can, indeed, play in preserving local tradition), Marstal has tended to primarily possess ethnic restaurants and establishments catering to a German clientele. In other words, though the popularity of Marstal Harbour with yachts means that the town has long had a tourist presence, until recently, the assumption has not been that such visitors were interested in Marstal culture.

As shown above, it has not been a case of Marstallers lacking pride in their cultural inheritance. Rather, the relative lack of objects of built inheritance and the focus of local identity on a seagoing lifestyle has led to the championing of tradition. One can visit Marstal Harbour and see boats, but unlike the buildings in Ærøskøbing, the boats are not regarded as physical manifestations of local culture. Just as the local identity concepts prevalent in Shetland and Åland have collapsed time in order to conceptually unite
various maritime practices throughout history (sail power, steam power, modern shipping, fishing vessels, etc.) (Grydehøj, 2010), so have Marstallers assembled an identity from that most intangible of places – the ocean.

It is no coincidence that Marstal Maritime Education Centre is still a source of intense local pride (Hermansen, 2000), connecting as it does the town’s past and present. The intangibility of this inheritance is merely heightened by the fact that Marstal itself is located in a particularly calm corner of a sea; the wide oceans in which local identity has formed are elsewhere. When I lived in Marstal from 2002 to 2006, Marstal’s status as a place rich in tradition but poor in heritage was exemplified by Marstal Maritime Museum, which was founded in 1929 and also holds the local archives. The Maritime Museum is a strangely rambling affair, with hall after hall of paintings, model ships, far seas curios, and full-size dioramas.

This, however, is changing, and the reason for this change is a book. In 2006, the essayist, travel writer, and television pundit Carsten Jensen, a native of Marstal who splits his time primarily between Copenhagen and London, published his 693-page novel We, the Drowned (Danish: Vi, de druknede). This work of historical fiction follows the lives of four generations of Marstal sailors from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Influenced by classic maritime literature, Jensen’s book garnered critical plaudits and became an instant bestseller in Denmark. We, the Drowned has since won both the prestigious Danske Bank’s Literature Prize and the readers’ vote in the Danish Novel of Our Time competition.

Not merely a national publishing phenomenon, We, the Drowned is subject to local admiration: In the first 2 months following its publication, the novel sold 1200 copies in Marstal alone – this in a town with a population of 2700. The admiration goes beyond the fact that a famous book has been written about the town. Jensen (n.d. [2010]) made a point in writing the novel to take inspiration from Marstal’s history and made particular use of the Maritime Museum:

They have an amazing archive, and when I dove into it, I realized that within the last 20 to 30 years, one half of the inhabitants of Marstal have done nothing but interview the other half.

Then, together with the local public library, I organized a lot of town meetings where I read from the work in progress and explained my ideas. […] So I was invited home, seated in the sofa, served coffee, and then I
was presented with old letters, diaries, and unpublished memories meant for only the closest family. All this became a huge source of inspiration for me. It also meant that the whole town really ended up feeling that this was their book as much as mine.

It was the strong sense of local tradition that made it possible to write We, the Drowned in its eventual form. What is interesting from the perspective of Ronström’s work is the sense in which tradition builds upon itself. Unlike heritage, which is trapped in a particular more or less arbitrary time, tradition is able to adapt in meaning without losing its initial emotional content. It is thus that We, the Drowned has itself become a part of Marstal’s inheritance, as Jensen and Hermansen (2009, p. 27) make clear:

Marstallers would come up to me in the street to ask which families I wrote about. I answered that everyone in the novel was fictional [. . .]. ‘Yeah, but’, they objected earnestly. They had, of course, a great-grandfather, uncle, or other family member who had had a really interesting story. They were sure I could find place for it in the book.

I eventually got the impression that, for some people, the novel was a sort of company you could buy stock in. So I had to explain to the Marstallers that, right enough, it was their history, but it was my book. (Translation my own)

The novel’s contents have even been subject to the temporal collapse mentioned above in which the various elements of tradition are sublimated to the power of place. Marstallers recognise from their childhood certain stories and individuals from the novel that Jensen had, in fact, simply invented. Indeed, history has to some extent adapted itself after fiction. A number of entirely fictional scenes in We, the Drowned involve the (non-existent) shrunken head of the English explorer James Cook. As a result, the Marstal Maritime Museum began displaying a shrunken head that is labelled in the museum as being the same head one can read about in We, the Drowned (Jensen & Hermansen, 2009, pp. 36 – 37). Jensen himself has joked that ‘I have this feeling that future local historians will hate me, because I have totally corrupted the town’s history’ (Cox, 2010).

**From tradition to heritage**

Though We, the Drowned has been thoroughly integrated into Marstal’s tradition, its national and international popularity has had other results. Jensen’s own fears that the novel might not speak to the interests of an
off-island audience (Jensen & Hermansen, 2009, p. 40) have proved unfounded. The novel has been published in 14 countries and has sold 450,000 copies in total. Internationally, We, the Drowned has been read as a distinctively Scandinavian novel. Overseas reviewers have thus pointed to cultural inheritance from Icelandic sources (‘this ambitious, restless, Nordic saga’ (Behrens, 2011)), Ingmar Bergman-inspired clichés (‘Scandinavian blend of humour and gloomy fatalism’ (Martin, 2011)), and pan-Scandinavian mythologism (‘The Nordic peoples live in relation to, or as an extension of, their extraordinary mythology: Sagas, Eddas, Viking tales’ (Garnett, 2011)). Most Danes, however, do not feel themselves to be particularly Scandinavian or Nordic, much less intimately connected with Iceland and Sweden.

In Denmark, the novel is read from a solely Danish perspective and has influenced conceptions of Ærø as a whole. For instance, Peter Nielsen (2010), Culture Editor of the Danish newspaper Information, writes:

As I biked from Ærøskøbing to Marstal last summer, I had the feeling of travelling from a little sea to a great ocean. Or maybe I was just influenced by a certain book that was sloshing around in my consciousness. […] Marstal has embraced Carsten Jensen. The maritime museum arranges walking tours in which readers are shown the streets and houses in which the events take place. And the museum has experienced a significant increase in visitors since the novel. (Translation my own)

This kind of comparison between Ærøskøbing and Marstal was virtually nonexistent prior to the publication of We, the Drowned. As noted above, Ærøskøbing – with its market town fabric, agricultural hinterlands, and easily accessible heritage – had been the prime tourism destination on the island. What Marstallers regard as their living tradition, Danes in general have embraced as their heritage. The novel relates a part of Danish history; it is just that this particular manifestation of the history happens to be located in the houses and lanes of Marstal. Jens Nicolai Gamsbøl-Havmand expresses how We, the Drowned has helped shape ideas about Marstal’s culture:

In my own case, as an incomer [to the island], there are things that suddenly made sense in terms of the town’s self-image. The people I know who’ve read the book [and don’t live on the island] ask if life was really like that. (personal communication, 2011, translation my own)
Jensen himself speaks of his ‘political’ attempt to reconnect Danes with their maritime inheritance, which he feels has been largely taken over by an anachronistic sense that Denmark’s cultural inheritance is largely agricultural. Jensen feels that, as far as cultural symbols are concerned, nineteenth-century sailors – with their international perspectives and experiences – are far superior to nineteenth-century farmers in this new age of globalisation (Jensen & Hermansen, 2009, pp. 10–12).

While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the novel has brought about a sea change in Danish historical thinking, it is fair to say that it has altered ideas about what constitutes Danish identity. Benjamin Krasnik (2009) of the Kristeligt Dagblade newspaper writes:

A few hours in Marstal gives you an impression of a town of historical and maritime significance. […] ‘We, the Drowned’ and its more factual follow-up ‘We Just Sailed’ emphatically document a decisive piece of Danish cultural heritage [kulturarv] about the time when Denmark was a proud maritime nation. (Translation my own)

In Ronström’s terminology, this is precisely the language of heritage as opposed to the language of tradition. Few Marstallers would claim that spending a few hours in town would provide any real insight into local tradition. Local tradition constitutes a way of life. Tradition is not a thing you can just visit and return home from with a souvenir. From the perspective of heritage, however, the lessons that Marstal provides are quick, easy, and painless, placing no obligations on the visitor. The result has been an attempt by outsiders to gain entrance to Marstal’s traditional culture. This process of transforming exclusive community-centred tradition into inclusive heritage has been facilitated by the local community in the form of outreach activities like the ‘In Carsten Jensen’s Footsteps’ walking tours, arranged by the Ærø Tourism and Business Association.

In the absence of further research, it is unclear to what extent visitors are now being drawn to Marstal by its associations with We, the Drowned. There are a variety of visitor motivations at work in literary tourism (Busby & George, 2004; Herbert, 2001). Nor is literary tourism’ role in creating a sense of cultural inheritance a new phenomenon: For example, a novel by Sir Walter Scott was instrumental in creating a sense of Viking inheritance in Shetland in the early- and mid-nineteenth century, an inheritance that was embraced by visitors and subsequently locals (Grydehøj, 2010, p. 79). It seems as though it is not just a matter of visitors wanting to follow Jensen’s
footsteps; Jensen’s novel has, on a more general level, alerted potential visitors to the availability of heritage – i.e. the very existence of ‘cultural capital’ (Busby & Meethan, 2008) – in Marstal.

Erik B. Kromann, curator of Marstal Maritime Museum, notes the novel’s effect:

Interest in and thus visitor numbers at the Maritime Museum have risen after We, the Drowned was published. The interest, the publicity also includes subsequent TV shows that were inspired by the book – not just in Denmark but also in Germany for example, so there are a lot of positive effects derived from it. There’s no doubt that a lot of the attention the museum has been surrounded by and continues to be surrounded by derives from the book. […] It’s definitely a significant factor in increased interest/visits [to the museum]. The book has meant that more people than those just interested in maritime history visit the museum, for instance people interested in art too. (personal communication, 2011, translation my own)

Jakob Buhl has likewise perceived how We, the Drowned has changed perceptions of Marstal:

There has been a big advance, a colossal noting of the island, especially in countries, where we maybe hadn’t gotten too much attention before. […] The book has also contributed to eradicating the misconception that Marstal is a kind of subsidiary to Pøtten [Ærøskøbing]. The book is, in this sense, a sort of milepost both for Marstal and for the entire island and has maybe contributed to a tiny bit more cohesiveness in that some Pøtten residents have gained more respect [for Marstal]. (personal communication, 2011, translation my own)

Buhl does, however, note another development as well. Commenting on the differences between the tourism cultures in Marstal and Ærøskøbing and on the aspect of ‘international mass tourism’ that is present in the latter, Buhl states that ‘More of Pøtten’s tourists are snobbish, but more of that sort have started to come to Marstal’.

We have discussed here Marstal’s transition from a tradition site to a heritage site, but it is, perhaps, more correct to put this in terms of heritage developing alongside tradition. This does not make the situation unproblematic though. While there are many sites worldwide that have retained their traditional
value even as they have developed into heritage attractions, there are likewise many sites in which heritage development has competed directly with tradition (Hayward, 2008). This is a particular problem in places characterised by heritage dissonance on account of their current inhabitants (i.e. tradition holders) being of a different cultural group than the people who inhabited the place’s heritage-vaulted past (for example, Ashworth, 2002; Çalışkan, 2010; Grydehøj, 2010, 2011; Martin & Storr, 2009). However, Ronstrøm’s (2008) own example of Visby in Gotland shows how, even in cases of continuity of population, the greater monetary and ideological power of a world heritage argument can force out living tradition in its attempts to fix a site in time. Similarly, the simple fact that heritage is much more easily monetised than tradition means that, in the long term, heritage tends to win out when there is a conflict – over space, the use of historical structures, traditional practices, etc. – between heritage and tradition (Farber Canziani, 2011, pp. 118–119).

How the relationship between heritage and tradition in Marstal develops in the future may depend in part on the extent to which We, the Drowned continues to be read and viewed as significant to Danish heritage. Another development worth watching is whether the partial shift of tourism focus from Årøskøbing to Marstal will provide tradition with an opening in the former town. It is not that Årøskøbing is actually lacking in traditional practices: Indeed, a number of indigenous traditions – for instance, the localised celebrations of the Fastelavn (Carnival) and Easter holidays – are arguably stronger in Årøskøbing than in Marstal, and as we have seen, there exists a very strong sense of local identity.

**Conclusion**

By taking up Ronstrøm’s tradition/heritage dichotomy, we have been able to evaluate the different processes at work in interpreting history on Årø. Årøskøbing’s status as a sort of period-specific open-air folklife museum (including period-typical open house-type attractions like Hammerich’s House and the Bottle-Peter Museum) places it snuggly in a heritage pigeonhole. Hayward (2008), writing from a comparative island perspective, notes that the discourse of ‘world heritage’ tends not only to overshadow issues of local importance but also to place emphasis on material cultural inheritance, regardless of whether the local community views such tangible culture as being of primary importance. As in Ronstrøm’s Visby, the fear is that building conservation and the promotion of an easily accessible inheritance may in fact enforce cultural stagnation.
Marstal, in contrast, is still very much a tradition-centred community, in which objects of tangible heritage have historically been of lesser importance to the community’s sense of identity. A work of literary fiction, however, is challenging the dominance of tradition in Marstal, leading to a shift of heritage focus from West to East Ærø.

Tensions between tradition and heritage are widespread, and one need not adopt Ronström’s terminology in order to discuss them. It should also be recognised that tradition is by no means inherently superior to heritage; the two simply represent different processes of recreating the past and, to an extent, take place on different levels of the local, national, and global communities. There is an understandable tendency in heritage scholarship to champion local interests over broader ones. Even disregarding the fact that heritage holds the potential to be exploited for income for the local community, it is possible to ask whether, to use the Ærø example, Danes in general might not possess just as much a right to cultural inheritance localised in Marstal as do the Marstallers themselves. All cultural inheritance is intangible and represents an interpretation of the past. The one is not more ‘authentic’ than the other.

Experience shows that a coincidence of needs can allow the coexistence of tradition and heritage surrounding particular sites. If local tradition is sufficiently strong and heritage interpretation and creation are carried out with sufficient sensitivity, the latter need not displace the former.

Notes on contributor
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