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Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865): Comparing Prehistoric Antiquities

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Christian Jürgensen Thomsen published his essay “Kortfattet Udsigt over Mindesmærker og Oldsager fra Nordens Fortid” in January 1837.¹ Thomsen was not an academic by occupation or training, but the son of a rich merchant family in Copenhagen and trained as a businessman.² However, he was a passionate antiquarian and collector of antiquities. Since 1816, he had served as voluntary curator for the collection of the Danish Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities. He had transformed this collection into the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities, open to the general public as of 1819, and the essay explained his curatorial principles, most importantly the division of prehistory into the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. The essay appeared in a collected volume, *Ledetraad til Nordisk Oldkyndighed*, published by the Danish Royal Society for Ancient Nordic Manuscripts. The volume, which also contained an essay on Nordic manuscripts by the literary scholar and later Copenhagen professor Niels Matthias Petersen, was intended to promote the work of the society abroad. Later in 1837 the society also published a German translation and an English translation followed in 1848. These were mailed to scholars, libraries, and universities across northern Europe. Thomsen’s essay, therefore, almost immediately reached a large European audience. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, historians of archaeology have described Thomsen’s essay as an important beginning of modern “scientific” archaeology.³ During the nineteenth century, the essay also served as a model for museum-based research in the human sciences and comparative studies of human artifacts.

1. For a more elaborate version of the arguments in this essay, see Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “The Language of Objects: Christian Jürgensen Thomsen’s Science of the Past,” *Isis* 103 (2012): 24–53.

2. On Thomsen’s life and work, see Jørgen Jensen, *Thomsens museum: Historien om Nationalmuseet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1992).

3. See, e.g., William Stiebung, *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 46–49; Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Varndell (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 298–303; and Bruce C. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 73–86.

Although Thomsen was not an academic himself, he was familiar with contemporary European scholarly debates. In his essay, he reacted to the crises of universal history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The collapse of biblical chronology as well as doubts about the philosophical and conjectural histories of the Enlightenment cast doubts on the unity of history. The increasing focus of professional historians on philological methods and written sources further limited the access to the past. Much of human history, which had not been recorded in writing, was discarded as “prehistory.” It was, as the Berlin historian Leopold von Ranke dramatically instructed his students in 1831, “draped with death” and “should be excluded from history.”⁴ This seemed an especially pressing problem in the Nordic countries, where credible written sources only appeared during the ninth century. Thomsen started his essay with the argument that material remains of the past could supplement the written sources and allowed scholars to reconstruct the earliest human history. The use of artifacts demanded not only that scholars moved beyond the philological and text-based methods of historians but also that they reconsidered their concept of history. Written sources, Thomsen argued, delivered “an interconnected, chronologically ordered, narrative of events and persons.” While ancient artifacts did not offer much in this regard, they allowed for “a more graphic conception of the ancestors’ religion, culture, external life, etc.”⁵ However, to Thomsen, the history recorded in material remains was primarily the history of the material remains themselves. His history of Nordic prehistory was therefore not as much a history of religion and culture as a history of craftsmanship and technology.

The focus on the history of craftsmanship and technology is especially evident in Thomsen’s division of prehistory into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. While antiquarians before him had noted this gradual transformation, Thomsen structured his narrative and named the ages of the past according to the materials. Just like the concept of “prehistory,” Thomsen’s Three-Age System revealed how the methods of inquiry increasingly defined the object of investigation. History was not what had happened in the past, but rather the past(s) that could be reconstructed with the methods of the modern disciplines. If historians accessed the past through written sources, the museum curator investigated its material remains. These material remains, and not the worldviews and beliefs of the people of the past, framed his description of the past.

4. Leopold von Ranke, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, vol. 4, *Vorlesungseinleitungen*, ed. Volker Dotterweich and Walther Peter Fuchs (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1975), 84.

5. Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, “Kortfattet Udsigt over Mindesmærker og Oldsager fra Nordens Fortid,” in *Ledetraad til nordisk Oldkyndighed udgiven af det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab* (Copenhagen: Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1836), 27.

Thomsen's methods of inquiry also focused attention on specific types of artifacts and on how these artifacts represented larger developmental trends. As he wrote in the introduction, the artifacts should be "connected and compared" to reveal the past.⁶ He assumed that the Nordic countries had gone through similar stages of development and grouped the artifacts according to their materials, form, and function in everyday life. He then noted differences in fabrication and how these slowly changed over time. Even when describing religious and ceremonial artifacts, Thomsen primarily focused on materials, form, and function, and refrained from speculations about their symbolic meaning.

Unlike most antiquarians before him, Thomsen disregarded antiquities that were unusual and unique and instead focused on the construction of series of artifacts, evidencing the interconnected history of craftsmanship and technology. When he presented unique materials in his essay, he reduced them to representatives of a type. One striking example is the richly ornamented fifth-century Golden Horns of Gallehus, which were stolen and melted down in 1802 and central to the Danish Romantic imagination. Thomsen included the horns in his essay but placed them in the unlikely category of "household tools," together with containers for serving beverages.⁷ Unlike most archaeologists after him, Thomsen paid only scant attention to excavations and the context of discovery. In a few places in his essay, he mentioned that artifacts had been found together. However, these observations served his investigations into the history of craftsmanship and technology and were not an attempt to understand the particular cultures and ways of life of the prehistoric inhabitants of Scandinavia.

The *Ledetraad til nordisk Oldkyndighed* was intended as a contribution to antiquarianism, which for centuries had combined textual and material investigations to understand the past. However, Petersen's and especially Thomsen's essays divided antiquarianism into different fields of inquiry, historical philology and prehistoric archaeology, with different methods and objects of investigation. These fields also occupied distinct venues of inquiry. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, historical research was increasingly associated with archival research. Prehistoric archaeology, on the contrary, became a museum science. Almost all the artifacts that Thomsen described in his essay could be found in the Royal Museum for Nordic Antiquities. To contemporary readers, Thomsen's curatorial principles and practices exemplified how the museum researcher, by bringing together large amounts of artifacts, could investigate processes of human development and uncover new temporal connections.

6. Ibid., 27.

7. Ibid., 54–55.

The proximity of objects within the museum enabled the curator to overcome distance in space as well as time. Already in his 1837 essay, Thomsen indicated that his program of comparative museum research could be applied not only to Nordic antiquities but also to artifacts from other parts of the world. He even speculated that Stone Age Scandinavians must have resembled “savage” people in other parts of the world. In the Royal Museum for Nordic Antiquities, he tested these ideas by exhibiting artifacts from the South Pacific islands, as well as from other parts of the world, next to prehistoric Scandinavian artifacts. In the decades following the publication of the essay, Thomsen acquired the older royal ethnographic collections, started collecting new ethnographic artifacts from Danish colonies, and in 1849, opened the Royal Ethnographic Museum. He presented there a new kind of universal history that was based not on revelation or philosophy but instead on the material remains of the past. He detached prehistoric archaeology from the tradition of antiquarianism and helped establish a new branch of the human sciences, which included archaeology and also ethnography and anthropology. His essay was in this way a precursor to what historians of anthropology have named the “Museum Period” of the modern human sciences, which lasted until the first decades of the twentieth century.⁸

Thomsen’s resurrection of universal history as a history of craftsmanship and technology further contributed to the reduction of many non-European peoples to “ahistorical” people. Those who did not progress technologically, whether in the distant past or in other parts of the world, remained outside of history. Even if they did progress, the history of people without literature became, as Thomsen repeatedly emphasized, a kind of “natural history,” which belonged together with the natural histories of other museum sciences, such as comparative anatomy, rather than with the histories of humanistic disciplines, such as history and philology. For Thomsen, these distinctions did not have racial connotations. He also preferred not to speculate about the political significance of his work. To many contemporaries, however, comparative archaeology and the Three-Age System, confirmed and delivered scientific evidence for the fundamental assumptions of nineteenth-century racist theory and colonial thinking.⁹

8. On the museum period, see William C. Sturtevant, “Does Anthropology Need Museums?,” *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* 82 (1969): 619–49; George W. Stocking Jr., ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); and Donna C. Mehos, “Colonial Commerce and Anthropological Knowledge,” in *A New History of Anthropology*, ed. Henrika Kuklick (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 173–90.

9. See also Michael A. Morse, “Craniology and the Adoption of the Three-Age-System in Britain,” *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 65 (1999): 1–16; and Chris Manias, *Race, Science, and Nation: Reconstructing the Ancient Past in Britain, France and Germany* (Routledge: New York, 2013), 61–62.

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Thomsen, Christian Jürgensen. 1836. "Kortfattet Udsigt over Mindesmærker og Oldsager fra Nordens Fortid." In *Ledetraad til nordisk Oldkyndighed udgiven af det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab*, 27–90. Copenhagen: Møllers Bogtrykkeri.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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RECOMMENDED SELECTION FOR STUDENTS

Thomsen, Christian Jürgensen. 1836. "Kortfattet Udsigt over Mindesmærker og Oldsager fra Nordens Fortid." In *Ledetraad til nordisk Oldkyndighed udgiven af det kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab*, esp. 27–29, 57–63. Copenhagen: Møllers Bogtrykkeri.

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