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Book Review: Excavating Nations: Archeology, Museums, and the German-Danish Borderlands by Laurence J. Hare

David B. Broad
University of North Georgia

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Hare, J. Laurence. *Excavating Nations: Archeology, Museums, and the German-Danish Borderlands*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. xvi + 261 pages. Hardcover, \$70.00.

This volume examines the relationship between archeology and modern national identities and nationalism, focusing on the Danish-German borderland. The German side of the southern Jutland Peninsula is the state of Schleswig-Holstein and the Danish side is Sønderjylland. The author, historian Laurence Hare, traces that relationship from the early nineteenth century when knowledge of a shared history brought the Danes and Germans together, to the late nineteenth century when border disputes were fueled by emerging nationalism, to the twentieth century when Nordic antiquity and mythology were part of the Nazi agenda, and the post-war period was marked by trans-national scholarly collaboration.

In 2015, the traditional dictionary publisher, Merriam-Webster, selected the suffix “ism” as the *Word-of-the-Year*, and Dictionary.com, arguably a locus of the information age, selected the word “identity.” The author of this timely work is mindful of the two-way flow of the forces that shape national identity and nationalism, and that the “rules pertaining to the national culture in which they worked” actively shape the construction of the meaning of the bones, wood, brick and stone that come from digs (p. 9). The case of the German-Danish borderlands exemplifies the intertwining of cultural elements, including the artifacts unearthed by archeology, and the language shaped by national identity and its ideological expression, nationalism.

For the first 120 years or so, the archeology of the borderlands was shaped by the ebb and flow of individual, provincial and national identities. In the long period of archeological practice before the strong bridge across national cultures was built, the forces of nationalism and rational scholarship produced two forms of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus* – the vehicle for social structure to influence social action. One *habitus* focused on cultural memory that had already long been a part of the creation of national identities. The other focused on the scientific empirical data that sometimes cast an inconvenient light on nationality and claims structured by nationalism.

The influence of the Nazi racial ideology, and the claim of the Third Reich that they were the heirs of the Germanic and Nordic destiny, was the ultimate expression of the nationalist pressure on archeologists of the region. When national identities are heightened, such as during war, scientific and academic norms may lie dormant or even moribund. Such was the case with the museum-based archeology of these borderlands during the Second World War. However, archeologists found ways to proceed with their work relatively unimpeded by the Nazi agenda. The archeologists worked with bog bodies, that is, well-preserved human remains, dating from the Neolithic and even Paleolithic ages. The study of individual bodies made identification with the work less an issue of national identity, and advances in chemistry, geology and other scientific dating methods strengthened the empirical validity and reliability of the analysis. It was only in the post-Second World War era that archeology was professionalized by science, as well as fostered by museums, and a new spirit of trans-national cooperation emerged.

The breadth and depth of Professor Hare’s work presented in this volume is impressive indeed. This study of a borderland where national identities abut is significant for many reasons.

Science is sometimes infused with resources from interested but biased sources, such as state and aristocracy, and sometimes it must cope with heavy-handed ideology. In all of that political turbulence, the archeological study of these borderlands not only survived but also provided a model for scientific cooperation and national amelioration of other border relations.

David B. Broad, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology
University of North Georgia
Dahlonega, Georgia