

Obituary

Klavs Randsborg

28 February 1944 – 13 November 2016

*It is most certainly evident and thus free from doubt
that all things which are seen are temporal
and the things which are not seen are eternal¹*

Klavs Randsborg, who has died at the age of 72, was the most influential Scandinavian archaeologist of the post-war generation. In a career spanning 50 years he excavated and undertook research in Europe, North America, and Africa. In many ways he was a humanist of the old school, who paradoxically introduced modern interpretive concepts to his students at Copenhagen University, as well as to international audiences through his immense range of publications. But Klavs was more than the sum of these parts: he thought like a creative writer, curiously exploring new themes and approaches specifically for the purpose of constructing new narratives about the past. The romance of narrative was important to Klavs, and each venture, small or large, was introduced with a citation from a poet or historian.

Klavs Randsborg was a son of Copenhagen. The city, its streets and especially its architecture were in his bones. A student of prehistoric archaeology with C J Becker, Klavs was a graduate of the 1960s with a restless desire to see and learn about the world. This restlessness remained with him to the end. He had excavated in Greece and Nubia (Sudan) with Scandinavian teams before he graduated, but eschewed pan-European themes for his doctorate at Copenhagen in favour of Bronze Age chronology. Regularly he returned to issues of chronology, inventively renewing his relationship with the evolving revolution in dating archaeological levels that began in the later 1960s. Chronology, in Klavs's hands, provided historical narrative to the past, whether it was in deep prehistory or the 1st millennium AD.



Klavs Randsborg age 24 (1968), just after graduation from the University of Copenhagen

Bronze Age chronology led Klavs to attend Colin Renfrew's conference at Sheffield on *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory* in December 1971. Here he had a Damascene experience, as he recalled it. Renfrew had assembled European archaeologists to confront the ideas of the American processual anthropological archaeologists. The clash of cultures made a deep impact upon Klavs and led to his first major published essays – on 'Social stratification in Early Bronze Age Denmark, a study in the regulation of cultural systems' for

Praehistorische Zeitschrift, 1974, and ‘Social dimensions of Early Neolithic Denmark’ for *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 1975. At this time he completed his doctorate on ‘Period III and Period IV chronological studies of the Bronze Age in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany’, and was appointed in 1971 to a junior position in his own department in Copenhagen University. But in the aftermath of the Sheffield conference the United States and its new ideas about culture process based upon quantified analysis beckoned. In 1975–6 he spent a year as visiting professor at George Washington University, St Louis, with Patty Jo Watson, a leading exponent of the so-called New Archaeology. While there, he excavated a cave in the Mississippi valley, travelled to almost every US state and, most significantly, abandoned his dedication to Bronze Age archaeology and focused instead upon re-interpreting Viking Age Denmark, using the forensic tools of a supreme prehistorian. It was no coincidence that it was Colin Renfrew who commissioned Klavs to write *The Viking Age in Denmark: The Formation of the State* (1980) for his Duckworth series.

I met Klavs at this time – now back at Copenhagen University – as he toured the UK, introducing his ideas on the Vikings to largely sceptical audiences. His demeanour was cautious and thoughtful as he systematically explored an analysis of Viking Age archaeology using models based upon quantification drawn from archaeology to tacitly rewrite the early history of Denmark. There was no pretence to his new narrative: it was efficacious use of the available settlement and economic data, graphically illustrated, and crisply described within a historically sound framework. I recall only my profound sense of boundless admiration, as though I had witnessed some genuine miracle. Later, when his book was published, he was damned by the doyen of Viking studies, Sir David Wilson, in a review in *The Times* and damned in many other historical periodicals. The damnation clearly pierced Klavs’s sensibilities, but he recognised that he had truly discovered a new narrative to replace the ‘vulgar histories’ of the (Viking) Other that were then the substance of Viking studies.

Ever since its publication in 1980, this book has divided the field, but a modern generation ascribes its loss of archaeological innocence to this bold venture. Aged 35 when he completed the book, Klavs had discovered a new direction for his career. Although he would regularly return to his comfort zone of Danish prehistory, this was always mediated by the lure of other narratives that brought him equal pleasure.

Following the publication of the *Viking Age in Denmark*, Klavs embarked on a book to place the Vikings in their European 1st-millennium context. Analysing mountains of Roman and early medieval archaeological evidence from excavations and monuments west of the Crimea, he compiled graphs which would elicit a mixture of admiration – and reproach. How was it that a prehistorian was meddling with the Romans or the Middle Ages? Working from Copenhagen and with fellowships at Amsterdam (1980–1) and Frankfurt-am-Main (1989), his gargantuan and restless research took him in multiple different directions. Subjects as diverse as traded Roman glasses, burial patterns, consumption of animals, winter markets at Birka (Sweden) and women’s graves all served as means to the larger project. The results were again controversial but have created an enduring platform for an altered paradigm. In January 1987 he organised a conference at the Danish Institute in Rome to bring Scandinavian archaeologists together with Italian archaeologists and historians. The mixture was explosive and genuinely remarkable for parading the profound ignorance of many historians about the possible merits of archaeology, and equally the profound ignorance of European-scale evidence by most of the fortunate archaeologists present. It might be an exaggeration to describe this as Klavs’s version of Renfrew’s ground-breaking Sheffield 1971 conference, but it had two immediate outcomes. First, Klavs edited the conference proceedings² speedily and followed it with his *First Millennium AD in Europe and the Mediterranean* (1991) that drew opprobrium from historians and admiration from archaeologists. Second, Klavs embarked upon uniting the departments of prehistoric and classical archaeology to bridge the divisions which had created ghettos in Copenhagen

for generations. The latter struggle cost him much emotional effort as colleagues belittled his expansive pedagogical vision, yet won him promotion in 1990 to the status of ‘super professor’ in the university.

Perhaps it was this opprobrium that pricked Klavs into still further explorations, still in the Mediterranean. With Alessandro Guidi (from Rome) he united Scandinavian and Italian prehistorians to return after two decades to the issues of Bronze Age chronology.³ If this was safe territory, his real gaze was on understanding the Mediterranean in the 1st millennium BC, as much as anything to show the students of the new united department the potential for modern analytical research in the Mediterranean basin. Excavations in Bulgaria and Ukraine, in the disorganised aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, were appetisers for a larger project that brought him profound satisfaction in the 1990s: Kephallénia.

At the invitation of the Danish Institute in Athens and the *ephor* of the Ionian island of Kephallénia, working with a group of his Copenhagen students, Klavs focused not on the

rich prehistory of this large but understudied island, but on the rise of the four Greek cities in the archaic period. Of course, there was an echo from Denmark ringing in his ears as he contemplated connections to the late Bronze Age in the southern Scandinavian regions, but his fieldwork had a coherence as never before. Here he managed his research team and excited them with his intellectual vision, while also delivering outstanding results, and achieving lasting friendships from admirers on the island. Winning honorary citizenship on Kephallénia amounted to a new badge of honour, profoundly more affecting to him than the many fellowships he had enjoyed as a scholar. Two major volumes were published on the Kephallénia fieldwork and its analysis and a third followed on the Hjortspring boat.⁴ This latter volume essentially experimented with his ideas about agency and the military in the earlier Greek periods and their impact far away on the Danish rim of classical Europe. No Danish classical archaeologist has published so extensively in a lifetime on his or her Mediterranean fieldwork. Needless



Billund, Jutland, July 2015, exploration of enigmatic post-built structures of The Single Grave Culture

to say, not every reviewer was impressed by this vision and narrative drive, but once again, Klavs provided a profound and imaginative archaeological vision of rich archaeological material that had previously only been studied on micro-scales.

Kephallénia released Klavs. In this period, returning to his home in Copenhagen, he worked on many national projects, but undoubtedly the most important was his biography of the 16th-century polymath, Ole Worm (1588–1654).⁵ Worm carried out precocious work on megaliths, barrows and runes, and deduced that man might have existed before Adam. In one of his most exhaustive studies, Klavs showed how Worm, through his writings and museums, shaped the basis for modern prehistoric studies in northern Europe. In his punctilious approach to Worm's life there was of course the admiration of someone in his 50s searching for his own ancestor, and seeking historical reason for the resistance he continued to experience from his peers.

Like Worm, Klavs could not focus on one subject alone, as his long list of publications shows. A long excursus into the antiquarianism of the architect *Inigo Jones and King Christian IV* (the latter being one of his heroes) followed in 2004. But by then he had found supreme pleasure – perhaps the mythic place he had always been seeking – when he was offered the opportunity in the later 1990s to work in West Africa. The Kephallénia experience had given him the confidence to be bolder as a leader and field director. With his study of Worm completed, there were new frontiers beyond Europe – beyond even his fascination with south-east European archaeology and its chronological riches. Bénin and northern Ghana beckoned. Here he was to devote the remaining years of his life, re-shaping the old department in Copenhagen as the Centre for World Archaeology as opposed to simply a department of prehistory and classical archaeology. In doing this, he owed a huge debt, as he readily acknowledged with a certain contentment, to his partnership with Inga Merkyte.

The greater part of Klavs's research over almost 20 years in Bénin was to provide archaeological context for a small West African

country previously known for its slave-trading kingdoms. It was a *tabula rasa*, much as Graham Connah and Thurstan Shaw had found in neighbouring Nigeria some 30 years earlier. Supported first by the Danish research funds and then by numerous sponsors, partnering with the Department of Cultural Heritage in the Ministry of Culture, Klavs with Inga and a small cohort of graduate students created a number of small museums in Bénin. Their research ranged as widely as Klavs's intellect: from enquiries on Middle Palaeolithic up until large-scale research on huge Iron Age iron working sites, and the ubiquitous and extraordinary underground souterrains from the early modern period.⁶ Numerous sites were surveyed, many were excavated, and with characteristic diligence, publications both at an academic and popular level followed. In some respects, Bénin, a small and established French ex-colony, became an African version of Denmark. Klavs found in Africa an unalloyed humanity and satisfaction that was absent in the fragmented archaeology departments of northern Europe.

As an archaeologist, Klavs Randsborg was remarkable for his creative and critical thinking. His *curriculum vitae* embraces the range of many normal lives, products of an intense capacity to focus and countless nights spent writing in order to complete deadlines set by himself. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge, shaped endlessly by his evolving narratives. Almost despite the travel and research, Klavs proved himself from 1983 to be a dedicated editor of the Scandinavian establishment archaeological periodical, *Acta Archaeologica*, and a string of single-themed supplementary volumes. Needless to say, its personality altered, becoming a successful vehicle based upon Klavs's own interests.

Klavs will be remembered as a gentle, if provocative teacher and most of all for being generous with his time and friendship. Cohorts of students from Copenhagen enjoyed his archaeological tours of regions of Europe, from Ireland and Scotland to parts of eastern Europe. Cohorts of students, too, found him far more approachable than the initial impression of this taciturn, bear-like, slightly deaf man. His manner, especially in later years, was shaped

by a deep awareness of how fortunate he was to change career at 35 and to escape the confining bounds of Danish prehistory, and to roam the past across continents. And yet he never deserted his homeland. A brief spell in the University of Goteborg revealed how much intellectually and culturally he owed to Denmark. So, it is perhaps appropriate that his last books include *The Anatomy of Denmark: Archaeology and History from the Ice Age to the Present* (2009) and *Roman Reflections: Iron Age to Viking Age in Northern Europe* (2015). Each book bears the hallmark of the perpetual excitement he found in his own past and his deep commitment to sharing this excitement as widely as possible. Only a handful of European archaeologists since the time of Ole Worm have left such a legacy.

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NOTES

- 1 Anglo-Saxon charter AD 770, cited by Klavs Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark: The Formation of the State* (1980), viii.
- 2 *The Birth of Europe: Archaeology and Social Development in the First Millennium* (1989).
- 3 *Absolute Chronology: Archaeological Europe 2500–500 BC* (1996).
- 4 *Hjortspring: Warfare and Sacrifice in early Europe* (1995).
- 5 Ole Worm: An Essay on the Modernization of Antiquity, *Acta Archaeologica* 65 (1994), 135–69.
- 6 With Inga Merkyte, *Bénin Archaeology: the Ancient Kingdoms* (2009).

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