

Excursus: Cultural Heritage

Gabriele Alex



The excavation of the Osebergship in 1904

Picture: Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/51/Excavation_Oseberg_ship_1.jpg

The Osebergship was hidden under a burial mound for more than 1000 years. After it was excavated by archaeologists in 1904/1905, an additional museum hall had to be built next to the Natural History Museum in Oslo in 1926 to store it permanently. From this first building arose the Museum of the Viking-Age, where three large, preserved ships from the Viking-age and numerous other finds from this period are on display.

The Oseberg ship is exemplary for an object that was elevated to the status of cultural heritage: From being a functional object, a ship, it became a ritual object for a burial, then an object of archaeological curiosity and it is now an object of cultural heritage. Its 'authenticity' enhances the effectiveness and value, and the emphasis on the originality of the material creates uniqueness. Material objects are also intangible resources of knowledge – they can contain technical, chemical, craft or artistic knowledge that was necessary for their production. Authenticity of cultural heritage is also gained by providing objects with a story, which makes them special and extraordinary, in this case the two women buried in the Osebergship opened up for speculations about why women were given such a high-status burial (Holck 2006). The enthusiasm about the Viking-age has grown since the 1970s, not only in Scandinavia but also in Europe (Hannan and Halewood 2006) and is expressed actively in a participative memory culture through activities such as festivals, concerts, craft workshops, fairs or touristic pilgrimages to Viking-age sites and museums (Staecker 2005a, 2005b). The network of tangible and intangible resources around a cultural heritage can be considered as a ResourceCulture for nations and groups by providing narratives of a common history and

origin, enabling community and identity formation.

At the same time, the destruction or modification of cultural heritage is a way of influencing the memory culture of a group or even a nation and put forward ideological ideas. In 2001, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan passed a resolution to destroy all statues of non-Islamic origin (Manhardt 2001). Even the UNESCO intervened, several important sites, such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, were bombed away with dynamite (Manhardt 2015). Another example for such a turn in the understanding of and attitude towards cultural heritage in the context of violent conflicts can be observed in the Russo-Ukrainian war, where the Russian destruction of Ukrainian cultural and symbolic urban spaces and heritage has led to techniques and strategies of preserving these while at the same time the Ukraine population and government have developed a critical stance towards the exhibition and maintenance of Soviet and Russian cultural heritage with the intent to clear the public spaces of markers symbolizing Russian imperial claims on Ukrainian lands (Rachkov 2022: 34). These examples help to illustrate how cultural heritage is part of a Resource Assemblage which reacts to changes in the social and political order and becomes an expression and representation of (changing) collective identities.

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