Geography in Denmark

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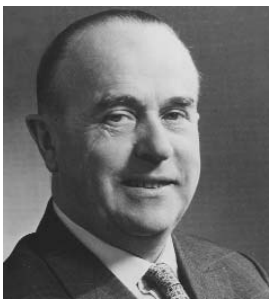
DEVELOPMENT OF GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE

Geography as a body of knowledge of places, peoples and nature has a long tradition in Denmark. More than 1000 years ago, Danish Vikings knew places along the Atlantic sea border of Europe, most of the Mediterranean, places as distant as Constantinople, and they even knew how to get there by alternative routes via the Russian rivers. But it was only from 1636 that geography became an academic discipline at the University of Copenhagen. King Christian IV required assistance to keep a record of the known world, specifically in relation to his North Atlantic explorations (the seaway north of America), and resolutely appointed a professor for that task (by the name of 'Peter Spormand' i.e. 'Peter Pathfinder'). Later, geography developed into a kind of skeletal knowledge upon which to hang historical and religious studies. Ludvig Holberg, a well-known Danish playwright, was also a professor of geography and history, but did not extend his geographical teaching much beyond exercising names of locations, national monuments and curiosities. The knowledge mastered by the geographical discipline over the centuries turned increasingly into a mass of statistical information, serving as a basis for administrative, fiscal and military purposes. With the advent of Alexander von Humboldt and Karl Ritter, geography was developed into a science of accurate description, classification and – by degrees – explanations of the physical environment and of its utilization. Humboldt and Ritter served for a long time as the main inspiration for Danish geographers, who were few in number. University teaching in 'modern' geography was initiated in 1863 under modest conditions. During the last part of the 19th century, geography gained interest, becoming a necessary implement for explorers by supplying them with a vocabulary for their descriptions, a set of institutions in which to store and analyse their maps and findings and also a means for gaining academic merit. Soon the demand for explanations of geographical phenomena increased. Answers were sought in French geography, especially in the works of Vidal de la Blache and his followers. The central focus on how the challenges of the environment were modelling human society inspired the outstanding Danish geographer H.P. Steensby in his work on the origins of the Eskimo culture (1905). Published in the last days of the great explorations, his work spurred a massive amount of activities, but it took about one hundred years of Arctic research to prove that his hypotheses were basically right. The excitement of heroic expeditions meant that geography acquired a place in common awareness as never before. Geography played a great part in the exploration of Greenland, supporting and sometimes implementing expeditions. Central Asia and Northern Africa were also explored by Danish expeditions.



Left: H.P. Steensby, professor 1911-20. His book on the origin of Eskimo culture was a strong impulse for research in Greenland.
Centre: Martin Vahl, professor 1921-39, contributed to geography with a plant-ecology based climatic system and to plant ecology.
Right: Gudmund Hatt, professor 1929-46, was at the same time human geographer, ethnologist and archaeologist.

WWI obviously meant a brutal interruption of Danish overseas research, but during the following decades Steensby's two successors, Martin Vahl and Gudmund Hatt, continued and expanded the research. Vahl developed the ideas of climatic control of the vegetation into a world-wide system, whereas Hatt elaborated the Eskimo-theme further, at the same time generating a systematic overview of the stages of evolution of material culture. Furthermore, the two professors produced a valuable handbook, 'Jorden og Menneskelivet' I-IV (1922), in which a quintessence of contemporary geographical knowledge was concentrated. Until WWII, Danish geography followed the trend in 'continental geography' and maintained a strong position, reinforced by the impact of Niels Nielsen's work in the Danish Wadden Sea, that set new standards for research in physical geography and inspired a whole generation of geographers and demonstrated that geography could be put to practical uses, especially regarding land reclamation. Progress in university geography resulted in a general improvement in the teaching of the discipline at all levels, mainly based on a series of excellent textbooks.

Left: Niels Nielsen, professor 1939-64, initiated field surveys in the Danish Wadden Sea and founded the Skalling-laboratory among a wealth of other activities.
Right: Axel Schou, professor 1953-72, an inspiring teacher and author of 'The Marine Foreland'.

Post-WWII, Danish geography followed the line of Niels Nielsen, successfully emphasizing physical geography, but with an added, strong influence from abroad. Whereas Danish human geography had been closely linked to ethnology, human geography in Sweden, England and the USA had focused strongly on the problems of contemporary, western society. First Hägerstrand from Lund, later the British geographers Haggett and Chorley, greatly influenced Danish human geography: urban themes and planning featured strongly on the agenda and new, quantitative methods were applied. New employment opportunities developed from this, and public attention to geography grew. From the late 1960s, Denmark involved itself in international aid to developing countries, and geographers proved themselves useful as advisers/administrators of the many types of activities that resulted from the new initiatives. At the same time, European youth became politically activated, often trying to obtain a role in solving practical problems in society. Political engagement was usually to the leftist fronts, resulting in a 'Students' Revolt' in the universities with geography students demanding that quantitative geography and Marxist theories be added to the curricula. The effects were evident: the next decade in geography was characterised by the publication of several critical articles, many of which on developing countries and theories on the causes of their poverty. Works of a descriptive analytical type also appeared, often applying new techniques, especially the use of computers, that facilitated much more than just the numerical side of work. The positive effect of this was that the applicability of geography increased, but on the other hand a slight opposition to geographers also developed. This was only partly balanced by geographers' successful and steadily increasing use of satellite-technology that became an important tool for planning and monitoring, especially in developing countries and in relation to environmental problems. The new ways of acquiring data together with systems-thinking also provided possibilities for establishing not only models for describing and understanding functions, but also for reliable prognoses.

Presently, Danish geography, having experienced a period of substantial expansion and specialisation, may have to reconsolidate somewhat. A strong urge to specialize has increased the distance between specialists, the use of synthesizing models being one of the few means to arrive at general overviews or the 'man-environment' connection that geography previously strived to establish. Development has urged research to concentrate on special topics such as coastal and arctic morphology, pedology, and their interaction with climate, hydrology and general environmental conditions for plant productivity and resource-management, urban and regional development and its consequences for both developing and developed countries. Projects along the lines indicated have given geography a public image which is connected to landscape morphology and dynamics, tasks in developing countries and urban-regional planning. The main connection is still to natural sciences at the University of Copenhagen. At the University of Aarhus, physical geography is now a part of the Institute of Geology, and at the Roskilde University Centre (RUC) it is included in the Institute for Geography and International Development Studies. At the Aalborg University Centre (AUC) the teaching of geography has recently been initiated.

Previously, nearly all geographers were employed in teaching; this is no longer the case. Many jobs have been created within the sector of international aid or in environmental management, aside from the fact that many geographers have acquired jobs requiring less specific professional qualifications, for example, in administration. In spite of this, many Danes still see geographers as people 'who know rivers and lakes etc. from maps'. Others see certain geographers as natural or social scientists.

General education became compulsory in Denmark from 1814 on. It aimed first of all to eradicate illiteracy from the population, which was successfully achieved at a remarkable speed. Geography was included in teaching, mainly to reinforce a 'love of the fatherland' and to implant a general idea in the minds of students of what the world looked like. Even at the higher education level ('Latinskolen') that prepared for university, geography students had to concern themselves with learning by heart simple facts about nations and places. In 1850, pressurized by the growing interest in 'realia', the Latin School was reformed to become the 'Lærde Skole', but geography, which included information on Denmark, retained its character of a mass of facts to be learnt by heart.

From 1871, geography in a modernised form entered the schools of higher education, though only in one of the two options that could be chosen. Competent teachers were in short supply because a university degree in the subject could only be obtained after the establishment of the 'Skoleembedseksamen' in 1883.

The beginning of the 20th century was characterised by a totally modernised educational system (1903). In the new three-tier system: 'Folkeskole' (primary school), 'Mellemskole' (intermediate school) and 'Gymnasium' (secondary school), geography was represented at all levels. All pupils studied geography from their fourth year in school, following a small but concise curriculum. At the intermediate level, teaching was by countries, often arranged in a topical sequence similar to that applied by Malte-Brun in his 'Précis de la Géographie Universelle'. Geography won a respectable place in the curricula at all levels of teaching, including the Gymnasium and university. Secondary schools originally only had geography in one of its three options (mathematical-physical), but this was expanded to two hours per week in one of the three years' duration. The geographical textbooks for the Gymnasium were written by university professors and were of outstanding quality, serving the newly-expressed aim of the school: to expand knowledge and increase understanding. The ideas of the early stages were, no doubt, that geography was a necessary assembly of knowledge, an introduction to natural sciences and, at the same time, an important element in general education. With minor modifications the system was in continued use up to WWII and some time afterwards. Modernization of the educational system in the middle of the XXth century was mainly aimed at teaching methods. Focus was moved from the individual to also encompass group work, and conventional texts were modified with selected themes for project-work, unconnected to any prescribed text. Emphasis was placed on motivating the pupils, who often took an active part in selecting the issues for analysis. Good working habits were seen as more important than training in specific curricula. Geography teachers played an important part in developing these new ideas and implementing them in practical life.

In most of the educational system modifications were introduced at the end of last century: for all disciplines there was a definition of what was compulsory and what was optional. In geography, most project-work had been applied to human geographical themes; with the latest reform human geography has been sharply reduced in the Gymnasium with only physical geography retained.

Geography now occupies a modest place in the Danish educational system and the traditional 'länderkunde' has been left out. The volume of geography-related teaching has also been reduced. In Danish primary schools, a special topic of 'Nature and Technology' has been introduced from the sixth grade with two lessons per week in one year. Much of this encompasses geography in the classical sense: the productive use of natural resources.

At the upper secondary level (which has two options: 'HF' and 'Gymnasium') geography used to be taught for three hours

per week during one year (compulsory) and four hours per week during one year (optional) along the classical lines with both physical and human geography. However, when the 'Gymnasium' was recently reformed (May 2003), it was initially proposed to totally remove geography from the curriculum. In the end, physical geography was retained, though it had to be chosen only as one out of three disciplines (chemistry, biology or geography). Geography is thus no longer a compulsory subject for all pupils at the Gymnasium-level, having been so for about 150 years.

The background for the declining weight of geography in the curricula is no doubt founded on a loss of trust in its practical usefulness: relatively few jobs are specifically for geographers. There also seems to be a certain disbelief in the necessity of geography as an element in the 'normal mental tools for the educated'. In modern times, most information can easily be extracted from the internet or from handbooks, and for mental training more demanding topics are available. As to creating a better understanding of conditions for human life, geography is rivalled by many competing subjects, especially economy and sociology. However, the points of views cited are heavily debated. The recent reduction of geography in the Gymnasium raised sharp criticism, but the government stood fast: human geography was cut out, and physical geography only remained because it is a part of natural sciences – and because of strong public resistance to its removal. For the time being, the new geography is at the planning stage. It should be composed of physical geography and geology, aiming at providing pupils with knowledge and understanding of the Earth and the physical environment. It remains to be seen if the social sciences, new in the Gymnasium, will absorb and develop human geography as a part of their curricula. With regard to the primary school level, a very recent survey (September 2003) revealed that pupils' geographical knowledge was incredibly modest. Public demand for more training has been met with political promises of improvement in primary schools.

At the university level, geography is administered differently at the three universities with geography departments (Copenhagen (KU), Roskilde (RUC), and Aalborg (AUC)). The University of Aarhus (AU) has no geography department, but physical geography is taught at the Geological Institute. They all encompass both physical and human geography but in different combinations. At KU and AU, physical geography is strongly represented, whereas it is weaker at RUC and AU. In Copenhagen, geography and geology together form the 'Geocenter Copenhagen' which thus incorporates human geography. Currently, both geographical teaching and research is carried out as usual, but some adaptations to the new situation at the Gymansium level must be foreseen.

It is an open question whether the weaker position of geography in the 'Gymnasium' in a further perspective would also induce a splitting of the subject in two separate parts at the universities, one becoming part of geosciences, the other of social sciences. Amidst a time of overwhelming environmental problems that need an overview such as that supplied by geography, a splitting of the discipline into two separate units seems ill-advised.

The reasons why geography is part of the educational system have changed over time. During more recent times, the role of geography has steadily been expressed as one of improving international understanding and providing an understanding of 'the Earth as a living place for people'. In essence, this has been the content of various declarations on the purpose of geographical training as expressed by shifting ministries.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE MEDIA

Danish geography as such does not attract much interest from the media. When geography-curricula were recently reduced in primary schools, substituted by 'Technology and Society', and in upper secondary schools, reduced to 'Physical Geography', the media took no great notice – aside from the fact that a flow of letters from readers were printed in various newspapers.

However, this disinterest does not relate to geographical topics in general. Geography has often been cited in public discussions, especially in connection with infrastructure-development, such as the Öresund-connection, both in the press and on television. The discipline gave responses on the effects of this connection on the economy, on traffic and on the effects on water quality in the Sound. In fact there was almost continuous reporting on the possible effects on the European urban system and the future ranking of the Öresund region in Europe. Similarly, problems of urban development have been dealt with by geographers in the press, as well as environmental problems: coastal protection, regeneration of wildlife sites in the Wadden Sea, climatic development, the carbon-dioxide issue and global warming, etc.

On Danish television, geographical themes are often touched upon, mainly in the form of 'reports from foreign lands'. They take a multitude of forms, from news on current problems abroad, to ethnographical surveys, to simple advice on travelling possibilities in remote regions. Most of these reports are foreign-made and prepared without the cooperation of professional geographers. Some would undeniably have benefited from such support. Regretfully, no Danish parallel to the products of the 'National Geographical Society' exists. If Danish geographers are consulted, it is usually on an individual basis.

A very similar situation can be seen with the radio. In Denmark, this is largely operated by the State in cooperation with television. Geography is also relatively weakly represented here, although perhaps a little more than on television.

The written media, mainly newspapers, often deal with geographical topics. In this case specifically, in-house employed newspaper-people are responsible, supplemented by their occasional counsellors. Articles by geographers are seldom presented, and it is far from being the rule that they are used as advisers. In fact, only two periodicals report on geography: 'Geografisk Tidsskrift' (Danish Journal of Geography), published since 1877 on scientific progress, and 'Geografisk Orientering' on topics of a more general interest. Besides the journals, publishing of geographical topics finds an outlet via the publications of the Royal Danish Geographical Society, notably in two series: 'Atlas of Denmark' and 'Folia Geographica'.

GEOGRAPHY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

In Denmark, teaching and research in geography has mainly been financed by the State; private funding is, however, important when it comes to publishing and supporting new initiatives such as expeditions. Teaching at all levels is publicly paid, in primary schools via the Communes, upper secondary schools are administered by the Counties, and all universities are largely self-governing and state-funded. Some private schools exist at both primary and secondary levels, but not universities; they are, however, supported by public means, usually covering about 85% of expenses.

The state-funding of research takes place through two channels: one is via basic support to institutions, some of which are solely responsible for research, the other (at universities) offers both teaching and research. In such institutions, teachers have an obligation to use about half of

their paid time for research, and institutions can, via their funding, provide them with basic implements and support for research, usually to be reinforced by external sources. For more expensive projects external funding must be applied for. Most often projects are supported by funding from the State Research Councils. These provide more than half of the means for geographical research, assisted by funds from the Council for Research in Developing Countries, other state-institutions and ministries, and sometimes from private funds (e.g. The Carlsberg Foundation)

Geography has over the years had a fair share of funding. It deserves to be mentioned that research in the Danish Wadden Sea, at the 'Skalling Laboratory', has received substantial means over the decades, and so has glacial research in Greenland, at the 'Sermelik Station'. The Skalling Laboratory was from the start financed by the Carlsberg Foundation and has only relatively recently been state-funded. In recent years, private funds, such as the Kann-Rasmussen Foundation, have supported major geographical publications, like the Atlas-series of the Royal Danish Geographical Society.

Danish geographers are often used as consultants by ministries and other official bodies, especially those concerning relations with developing countries, and environmental and planning problems relating to towns and infrastructures, and similarly, geographers have seats in many steering committees.

Danish geographers have found employment in many branches of public administration and in research institutions, mainly those dealing with area analyses or planning. In recent years, expertise in the use of satellite imagery has opened many job opportunities for geographers. The private sector, e.g. technical consultancy-firms, especially those working in developing countries, has employed both human and physical geographers.

GEOGRAPHICAL ORGANISATIONS IN DENMARK

Geographers in Denmark find many organisations at their service. Most of those teaching are members of the 'Geografforbundet' ('Association of Geographers'). The journal of the association, 'Geografisk Orientering', publishes articles on geographical themes, foremost those of current interest, such as topics for teaching, reports on current professional discussions, organises meetings and training courses and offers various services to members, such as travel arrangements etc. The association has taken the initiative to publish an impressive collection of books, valuable in order to ensure the steady improvement of geography teaching in schools.

A similar organisation, 'Geografilærerforeningen for gymnasiet og HF', the members of which are mainly teachers from upper secondary schools, is the caretaker of their professional interests. The organisation has had a special role in the discussion of curricula and in the organisation of additional training courses, etc.

Det Kongelige Danske Geografiske Selskab (Royal Danish Geographical Society - RDGS) organises meetings, publishes a journal and a set of books on geographical topics, and supports expeditions. It has a very large library, about 4 kms of shelves filled with books and several hundred geographical periodicals, and a map collection. Great importance is attached to the fact that the RDGS is an active forum for the discussion of geographical topics with participants representing wide circles of Danish society.

It is necessary to add to the above that geographical connections and co-operation also have an international aspect. An example of this is the relation to Swedish geography, notably geography at the University of Lund. The inspiration provided by Lund has meant much for Danish geography, even to the point of drawing on Swedish resources for teaching and research in Denmark.

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Ole Olufsen, Secretary-General of The Royal Danish Geographical Society 1903-23, was himself a devoted explorer, having travelled widely throughout Central Asia and Saharan Africa. The author of i.a. 'Through the Unknown Pamirs' (1904) and 'The Emir of Bokhara and His Country' (1911).

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The Royal Danish Geographical Society was established 1876 at the initiative of professor E. Erslev. From the virtues of its purposes and the backing of viceadmiral Steen Bille and rear admiral O. Irminger the society immediately received royal recognition. HM King Christian IX became protector and HRH Crownprince Frederik became the first president of the society. A tradition of relation to the Royal House followed ever after was created.

The purpose of the society, unchanged during more than 125 years of its existence, has remained 'the promotion of knowledge of the Earth and its inhabitants' and 'the spread of information of on the geography of Denmark and of the work of Danish geographers'. These aims are strived at through the publication of 'The Danish Geographical Journal' (Geografisk Tidsskrift) and three series of occasional publications: 'Kulturgeografiske Skrifter', 'Folia Geographica Danica', and 'Atlas of Denmark' and further by an annual series of meetings with lectures. The publications and ensuing exchange with foreign societies have been the base for assembling a relatively large library; this is open to the general public.

Initially the attention of the society was concentrated on exploration, mainly in the Arctic regions, specifically Greenland. All expeditions were reported to the society, and an impressive representation of renowned explorers were received at the society and honoured with its Gold Medal (Nordenskiöld, Scott, Amundsen, Shackleton, Wegener etc). The society acquired an interesting position regarding Danish research in Greenland from being the place where plans were presented and discussed, and the results from the projects reported. One of the effects was that the exploration came to be relatively well coordinated and effective, which again served to sustain Danish sovereignty in Greenland. Also the highlands of Central Asia were the place of Danish expeditions from Olufsen's early Pamir-expeditions in the last decade of the 19th century to those of Haslund-Christensen's three expeditions to Central Asia in the 1930-40s.

Post WWII the society has focused its attention largely on research in the geography of Denmark (including modern Greenland and the Faeroes). A major development has been the Dansh Wadden Sea research, which not only contributed much to understanding the genesis of the marshlands, but also assisted in a modernisation of physical geography as a discipline. Similarly, meetings and publications of the society has helped in introducing new ideas into human geography, which has had many new tasks to perform in relation to Dansih assistance to the developing countries.

The society's major role in opening links to international geography and in maintaining connections to other geographical societies to promote the flow of fertile new ideas into Danish geography and to report on Danish achievements remains one of its most important duties.