



Jørgen Meldgaard (1927-2007)

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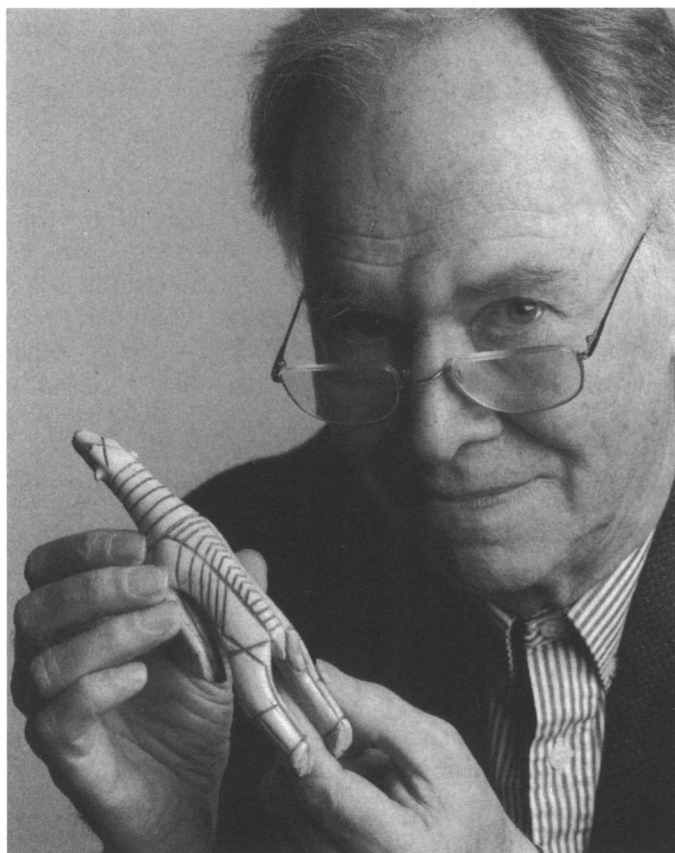
When Jørgen Meldgaard passed away on 9 March 2007, an era in Danish Arctic research ended. Ten years earlier he had retired from his position at the National Museum of Denmark after almost 40 years as a curator and half a century in the service of Eskimology. As the last person in a unique line of Danish Arctic scholars, Meldgaard succeeded through his work in continuing a research tradition that includes Therkel Mathiassen (1892–1967), Kaj Birket-Smith (1893–1977), Erik Holtved (1899–1981), Helge Larsen (1905–84), and Eigil Knuth (1903–96). Their pioneering work in Arctic cultural history and Eskimo archaeology was carried out for the National Museum of Denmark.

Jørgen was born on 7 March 1927 in Skive, a town in Jutland, but he grew up on the island of Funen. Like Hans Christian Andersen, who also came from Funen, Jørgen led a life that resembled a fairy tale. In 1945 he came fresh from high school to Copenhagen to study prehistoric archaeology and was soon introduced to the multifarious activities of the Department of Ethnography. After five years of German occupation, the museum was at last able to resume its research in the Arctic.

Eigil Knuth had conceived the plans for the Danish Peary Land Expedition, and the first team traveled north in 1947. Knuth was looking for employees for the following summer's archaeological investigations, and many years later Jørgen told us what happened: "As a young archaeology student, I was sitting in the reading room one day with some fellow students, when P.V. Glob, who was then the curator, came rushing in, shouting "Who wants to go to Greenland? Raise your hand!" And I was the first to raise my hand. I literally jumped on board the old ship *Godthåb*, which for four weeks thumped across the Atlantic with sails and steam through storms, and struggled through the ice. I ended up in the northernmost part of Northeast Greenland—and was deeply fascinated. After this first expedition I was stuck with Arctic archaeology" (Damsgård, 1997:10).

Together with Hans-Georg Bandi, he spent the summer in the northeast where they emphasized the cultural ties between the north of Greenland and the Dorset and Thule cultures in the Smith Sound region and Arctic Canada. During his studies in prehistoric archaeology, Jørgen had the opportunity to participate in the National Museum's expedition to the Norse settlements in southwestern Greenland in 1949. This expedition revealed another topic of research to this young student, one which would later turn into a major interest. But Helge Larsen had noticed Jørgen's skills and invited him to join a 1950 expedition to Alaska as his assistant. The excavations of the Trail Creek caves were to be completed that summer, and the Ipiutak culture men's house at Deering was also excavated.

At the museum, Jørgen was given the task of describing a donation of 182 stone objects from the village of Saqqaa in Disko Bay, and he concluded that the material represented a Pre-Thule Palaeo-Eskimo culture that was closely



Jørgen Meldgaard (Photo: National Museum of Denmark).

related to the early Alaskan Denbigh Flint Complex. He explained the Dorset types as a result of later influences from the Canadian Dorset culture, calling attention to the collections that the Norwegian Solberg described in 1907 by way of comparison. Meldgaard's results, published in 1952, were among the earliest descriptions of a burin in Eskimo archaeology.

Before finishing his dissertation on European prehistoric archaeology at Aarhus University in spring 1953, Jørgen spent one more summer (1952) in Greenland. He went to the now famous Sermermiut site, where he, together with George Nellemann, Prof. P.V. Glob, and curator Helge Larsen, established the three phases of Greenland's prehistory: Saqqaa, Dorset, and Thule. The resulting monograph, which came out in 1958, is now a classic in Greenland archaeology.

Immediately after his return, Jørgen spent one year at McGill University in Montreal in preparation for his archaeological investigations at Igloodik. With Richard Emmerick of Philadelphia and Father Guy Mary-Rousselière of Churchill, Manitoba, he explored Arctic prehistory on the raised beach terraces of Fury and Hecla Strait, now considered a classic location within Palaeo-Eskimo archaeology. Here he continued the efforts of Knud Rasmussen and Therkel Mathiassen, who had worked in the same area during the Fifth Thule Expedition three

decades earlier. He also had access to Graham Rowley's exciting finds from Abverdjar, an important incentive for his future research on Palaeo-Eskimo cultures. He continued his investigations at Igloolik in 1957 and 1965, but the year 1954 remains a turning point in his Arctic life—it was the year he received a namesake among the local Inuit, George Quviq Qulaut.

Jørgen's adventures continued with his search for the lands of the sagas. "As a student of professor Brøndsted, and inspired by his encouragement, I left for the coast of Labrador and the northern part of Newfoundland for a short period in the late summer of 1956. I returned home convinced that the long sand beaches of Markland, the Furdu beaches, and the striking foreland, Kjalarnes, could be identified in South East Labrador, and Leifsboderne, in the northernmost part of Newfoundland. But ruins and antiquities did not appear. Concrete and reliable evidence has been dug up over the last 30 years. Our breakthrough came in 1961, when Helge Ingstad found the l'Anse aux Meadows site on the north tip of Newfoundland and began excavating ruins, which turned out to originate from the period around 1000 AD" (Meldgaard, 1992:9).

Jørgen had long been fascinated with Inuit art, and in 1959 he published the Danish version of *Eskimo Sculpture*—another aspect of his versatile working with Inuit culture. For his achievements up to that point, he was awarded the Loubat prize of the Royal Swedish Academy for History in Stockholm. In 1959 the then 32-year-old Jørgen took up a position as curator of Eskimo collections at the Department of Ethnography. During the following almost four decades, he concentrated on museum tasks, exhibitions, consultancy for the new Greenland Museum in Nuuk, planning new fieldwork in Greenland, and from the introduction of Home Rule in 1979, repatriation of objects to the independent museum in Greenland. Last, but not least, his long and admired experience made him an appreciated adviser for upcoming students in the Arctic field.

Jørgen's research initiatives were many, and he always invited Greenlandic, Danish, and foreign scholars and students to follow him in the field. His applications were always well written: he could convincingly describe the purpose of the investigation in a few incisive words. Some of these have become legendary: for example, "As I have phrased it before, several of these new traits in early Dorset smell of forest" (Meldgaard, 1962:95).

In 1961, Jørgen launched the excavation of Thjoldhild's Church, the oldest church in North America, where one of the team members, Gwyn Jones, collected material for his famous book *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (1964). He was the head of the Danish Archaeological Expedition to Iran in 1962–63. In 1966, he initiated the project on cultural encounters between Eskimos and Europeans that resulted in excavations of the early 18th-century mission station and surrounding Inuit settlements in 1969–75, as well a large-scale Inuit-Norse project with around 50 participants in 1976–77. He was a member of the scientific group that presented the studies of the mummies from Qilakitsoq,

Greenland. He initiated the Knud Rasmussen Memorial Expedition to Melville Bay (1979–80), and in 1982, he invited his old teacher Helge Larsen to the Qaaja site in Jakobshavn Icefjord. In 1992, he traveled to Thule on a research trip, with the main purpose of returning the human remains of the small group of Polar Eskimos whom Peary had taken to New York alive a century earlier. He ended, as he had begun in 1948, by sharing the joys of life in the field with his experienced colleague Hans-Georg Bandi, on a field trip to Disko Bay in 1996.

In 1976, Jørgen was awarded the Hans Egede Medal of the Royal Danish Geographical Society, and in 1997, the Greenland Home Rule decoration given for meritorious services. In 2003, six years after his retirement from the National Museum, he was awarded the Erik Westerby Prize, the highest distinction given an archaeologist in Denmark.

There is hardly a research topic Jørgen did not touch. His efforts span from the earliest Palaeo-Eskimo cultures, over the fabled Dorset culture, to the whalers of the Thule culture. He also explored the European presence in North America, from medieval Norse settlements to traces left by the whalers to colonial Greenland. For many years, it was customary for foreign scholars to stop over in Copenhagen for inspiration from the Danish research environment, which has been described as "the world center of arctic anthropology" (Fitzhugh, 1994:77). Jørgen was instrumental in maintaining this position.

All honour to his name.

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