

## **The unwritten history. Remarks on the role of the Wadden Sea Area within European history of mentality since 1500.**

Ludwig Fischer

Only since the mid-nineties, the trilateral efforts in preserving and protecting the Wadden Sea Area have also come to include its cultural heritage. The 'Lancewad'-project – 'Landscape and Cultural Heritage in the Wadden Sea Region' was founded to register and to map archeological and architectural monuments, scenic elements and traces of regional landscape development in order to evaluate their need of protection.

The publications related to this project have included articles on the cultural and social history of the region and a study on the history of perception of this particular coastal region. The project „Lancewadplan“ primarily defined 'cultural heritage' as tangible facts in landscaping, the history of settlements, as well as economic and social history and traditions. There still remains a lot of research to be done regarding the material relicts of a rich cultural history of appropriating 'natural landscapes' in the Wadden Sea Area. It is, however, necessary to remember that the term 'cultural heritage' entails much more than tangible aspects and elements of human history.

Cultural heritage also describes that, which forms us on an intellectual and emotional level; that, which underlies our thoughts and actions; and that, which affects to a greater or lesser extent our patterns of perception, our concepts, ideas, beliefs and assertions, as well as our scientific understanding. The history of medicine sets an example in proving the concrete benefits of the usage of our cultural heritage in healing specific ills and diseases, such as coastal malaria.

There are comparatively few studies in the history of mentality in Central Europe that analyze the role of cultural heritage in the Wadden Sea area. It would be a misconception to include in such a study of the Wadden landscapes merely the marks left by literature and the visual arts, even though there can be no doubt that pictures and texts can provide essential clues to the history of our intellectual heritage, and visual and linguistic lore and tradition can be seen as major sources of information.

Only a close inspection and interpretation of these sources can render a distinct picture of the

role that the Wadden Sea Area played in modern history of mentality and the development of western thought. Its importance is not immediately rendered by an observation of monuments or landscape elements, it does not show itself in empirical findings. It is much more rewarding to seek cultural heritage through soft factors like common attitudes, general opinions, mindsets, values and convictions, which are all of enormous social importance. One should, however, be careful not to mistake these soft factors as subjectively biased opinions, for example when talking about the 'beauty' of the Wadden Sea.

Talking about the 'beauty' of the Wadden Sea – a common saying even among scientists – one can conclude that the beauty of this landscape is not only based on a subjective feeling, which would not allow a scientific approach and analysis. Nowadays the special and unique beauty of the Wadden Sea is frequently talked about and accepted as a fact. This is the result of a long and continuous historical discussion, documented by various reliable and traceable sources.

A lot of aspects regarding the aesthetic value of the Wadden Sea are not yet fully explored, especially when it comes to recent changes of value of this Shallow Water Zone and wet lands. These changes are most apparent considering the touristic value and usage of the region. That there are quite a few unexplored aspects in the history of mentality regarding this region is especially obvious when looking at the recent efforts to declare it a Natural World Heritage Site. Other regions, such as the Alps, have sparked an enormous quantity of research and analysis on their cultural heritage and history of mentality. If we had only a similar output of articles on the Wadden Sea, it would be impossible not to acknowledge the many reasons for its protection. In this short contribution, I will only be able to hint at the many unexplored venues in the research of the history of mentality of the Wadden Sea Region in a European context. Until now, there have been a few explorations into the ecological importance of this region; partly due to political initiatives, this field of study has expanded considerably in the last decade. We now have to broaden our studies further and explore the social history and cultural heritage of the region. I would now like to talk about a subject, which I consider to be central in this field of study. It concerns the importance of dike construction in the Netherlands, the cultivation of the wet lands and marshes, and the impact this had on European history of mentality of the 16th and 17th century. However, the main focus does not lie on the 'export' and spreading of the Dutch art of embankment building and agricultural production methods to other regions of the Wadden Sea. I think it is just as important to analyze the psy-

chological impact that the so-called ‘defeat of the sea’ had on our modern understanding of nature. By looking at the few historical sources available, we can conclude that it was a widely accepted fact in the late 17th and in the 18th century that by constructing their dikes the Dutch have managed to control and subdue the forces of nature, using them for their own prosperity and gain. Until now the concept of using nature for human profit lies at the very center of our relationship to the natural world. Alain Corbin describes in his book *The Lure of the Sea* how already in the 18th century the Dutch wet lands were attracting people for touristic reasons. Most of them undertook so-called educational journeys in order to learn about the way the Dutch used this region to build their financial success. Tales and documents by these travelers often focus on the awe that the ingenious construction of the embankments had on them. Being directly confronted with the restrained forces of nature provoked an elemental fear, as well as an euphoric sense of triumph. The Swiss doctor and writer Albrecht von Haller, who lived and studied in Leyden, tells enthusiastically about his travels through the Dutch wet lands. He was not so much impressed by the beauty of the landscape, but focused instead on the prosperity and the complete domination of a ‘hostile’ nature for human profit. This is just one example of a common and widespread experience, that is not only applicable to Middle Europe: the joy of making a ‘wild’ area usable for human habitation and commerce, thus defeating nature and claiming it for human purposes. The only cause for insecurity were the terrible storm floods, that occasionally threatened the human sense of security and assurance of winning this fight against nature. This human feeling of superiority when confronted with the forces of nature is central in modern man and our thinking. There has been quite a lot of research on the psychological impact of the big storm floods in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in the affected areas, in particular the writings by Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen. Unfortunately none of these studies mention the effects that the storm floods had on the conviction that by building and securing embankments, drainage and cultivation of the Wadden Sea regions, humans were winning an unprecedented war against nature. I think that when one tries to see the storm floods of 1717 or 1825 in the greater context of European history of mentality, these events were seen only as regional catastrophes. They cannot be compared, for example, with the great earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, that shook not only the foundations of the theological worldview at the time.

I will be bold and propose the thesis that the success story of land-securing and cultivation in the Wadden Sea area since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that was initiated in the Netherlands, was one of the factors that led to a change in mentality regarding our modern concept of nature. 15 years

ago I have already hinted at the possibility that our modern concept of the sublime and its aesthetic implications could not have developed without the 'victory over the sea' exemplified in the vulnerable coastal region of the Wadden Sea. As Immanuel Kant astutely observed: In order to feel the 'terrible joy' and the 'delightful horror' of a sublime experience in nature, the assurance of one's own security is essential. There have been numerous studies during the last decades regarding these aesthetics for the Alps, like Marjorie H. Nicolson's 'Mountain Doom and Mountain Glory' (1959), Jacek Wozniakowski's 'The Wilderness' (1974) and the writings of Ruth and Dieter Groh (1991/96), just to mention a few. All of them stress the importance of the modern Alp experience and its impact on our modern conscience. Now we have to extend the research in order to include the significance that the history of Wadden Sea area has had on our modern western thinking.

I would like to end my speech with a short episode taken from my special field of study: In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's masterpiece '*Faust*', perhaps one of the greatest works in German literature, his attempt in achieving 'the Highest Good of All' ends with the vision of a landscape secured by dikes for 'millions' of people. The securing of farm land, exemplified in the usage of the wet lands of the Northern Sea, seems to be culmination in the human search for happiness and fulfillment. Faust – who has made a deal with the devil – is able to die (and to be saved at the same time!) in a supreme moment, in which he observes a crowd of people on the newly won land. Our old friend Goethe thus attests in his literary legacy the enormous significance that the cultivation of the Wadden Sea had in a European context.

I was only able to talk about *one* research goal for the analysis of the history of mentality and cultural consciousness of the Wadden Sea region, which I deem very important, even though there are of course other studies that need to be pursued. We are still at the beginning of analyzing the 'immaterial heritage' connected to the Wadden Sea, which is just as important as the 'cultural heritage' that now has been officially acknowledged by the UNESCO.