



**A journey
through civilisation and
primitiveness**

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En rejse gennem primitivitet og civilisation

I 1845 stævnedes korvetten Galathea ud fra Københavns havn på en 26 måneder lang jordomrejse. Ekspeditionens formål var at foretage videnskabelige undersøgelser og knytte handels- og venskabsaftaler med fremmede lande, især Kina. I Det Indiske Ocean havde ekspeditionen tillige officielle pligter. Danmarks højhedsret over øgruppen Nicobarerne skulle markeres, og der skulle foretages en *"videnskabelig Undersøgelse over denne Øgruppes Naturproducter og anvendelse til Dyrkning og handel."*, som det lød i den kongelige instruks fra kong Chr. VIII, og i Indien skulle de to danske kolonier, Tranquebar i det tamilske Sydindien og Frederiksnagore i Bengalen, officielt overdrages til det britisk-ostindiske kompagni.

Denne slags storstilede og kombinerede videnskabelige og sømilitære ekspeditioner var i samtiden kendte også fra andre nationer, og en af de mest berømte er det engelske togt med skibet HMS Beagle (1831-1836), hvor Charles Darwin indsamlede materiale, der senere lagde grunden til hans skelsættende bog om arternes oprindelse.

Den danske ekspedition, som er gået over i historien som første danske Galathea ekspedition, var ledet af Kaptain Steen Bille, og ombord var godt og vel 200 personer. Blandt disse var en lille skare zoologer, botanikere, geografer med deres assistenter og udpeget af Videnskabernes Selskab. Om bord var ligeledes et par tegnere, som skulle assistere videnskabsfolkene med at registrere og afbilde planter, dyr og genstande fra fremmede egne samt gengive stemninger fra opholdet blandt de forskellige folkeslag, som ekspeditionen besøgte undervejs.

Emnet for Esther Fihls publikation om den første danske Galathea ekspedition er, hvorledes Steen Bille i sin rejseskildring opregnede forskelle og ligheder mellem de fremmede folk, som han stiftede bekendtskab med under jordomsejlingen. Billes rejseskildring med dens historisk-konkrete typologisering af den kulturelle anderledeshed, som europæerne mødte i det fremmede, kan læses som et konkret eksempel på 1800-tallets evolutionære betragtningsmåde, hvor man opregnede forskelle og ligheder mellem europæerne og de fremmede kulturer, inddelte samfundene i mere eller mindre såkaldt primitive eller civiliserede stadier og placerede dem på en linær rangstige med det vestlige samfund i toppen.



Tranquebar Initiativet

In 1845, the corvette Galathea left Copenhagen's harbor for a 26-month circumnavigation of the globe, the first of its kind equipped and organised from Denmark. The purpose was to conduct scientific studies and to secure Danish trade relations and friendship agreements with foreign countries, especially China. This kind of large-scale and combined scientific and naval expeditions had also been conducted by other contemporary nations, and one of the most famous is the British Beagle expedition (1831-1836), where Charles Darwin gathered some of the evidence for his seminal book on the origin of species.

In the Indian Ocean, the Danish expedition had important official duties. Denmark's sovereignty over the Nicobar Islands was to be re-claimed and there should be a "scientific study of this group of islands' natural products and use for cultivation and trade" as it was stated in the royal instructions from King Christian VIII. In India, the two Danish colonies, Tranquebar in the Tamil part of South India and Frederiksnagore in Bengal, were to be officially handed over to the British East India Company.

The voyage came to be known as the first Galathea expedition. It was led by Captain Steen Bille, and on board were well over 200 people. Among these were a small group of zoologists, botanists, geographers with their assistants and nominated by the Danish Royal Academy of Sciences. On board were also a few artists who should assist the scientists to register and depict plants, animals and objects from the visited areas as well as try to capture artistically the atmosphere among the various peoples that the expedition visited en route.

The object of Esther Fihl's publication is Steen Bille's travelogue from the expedition and how he enumerated differences and similarities among the different people he encountered during the circumnavigation of the globe. In his travel account he presents a historically-specific typology of the cultural otherness he identified. His portrayal can be read as a concrete example of the 1800-century evolutionary world view. In his account he listed differences and similarities among the Europeans and the foreign peoples and he divided the different cultures into more or less primitive and civilised stages which he placed on a linear social ladder with the Western civilisation at the top.

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Introduction

In comparison with other nations, Denmark has a fairly long tradition of intermittently sending out large-scale scientific expeditions to remote parts of the world with research teams of scientists, humanists and various types of artists to study the nature and culture of unknown countries.¹

Scarcely 100 years after Carsten Niebuhr had returned from a journey to Arabia Felix (lit. 'Happy Arabia') as the sole surviving member, yet another major Danish expedition was organised in 1845 that from the very outset was surrounded by at least as many expectations – and considerable prestige – as this former so tragic but epoch-making expedition.²

This time, the plan was no less than to circumnavigate the globe. For this purpose, the corvette 'Galathea' was chosen – the name often subsequently used to refer to the expedition itself, which lasted from 1845-1847.³ The aim of the voyage was both commercial and scientific. In addition, there were various official state assignments, including attempts to establish colonies.⁴

On the Nicobar Islands, a small group of islands in the Indian Ocean, those on board were to initiate a more comprehensive colonisation than that which had characterised earlier Danish attempts.⁵ The possibilities of taking over Bali and Lombok in Indonesia were to be investigated more closely, and Danish trade was to be promoted in various ports in the Far East by the conclusion of treaties and the appointment of consuls. In India, the official assignment of the expedition was to be responsible for the handing over of the Danish possessions in Tranquebar and Serampore after their sale to the British. During the journey, ethnographical accounts were also

¹ Expeditions to the Arctic comprise a larger number of these. For the Danish expedition history, see Fihl 2010: 78-108.

² For a description of the expedition 1761-1767 to Arabia Felix, see Niebuhr 2004.

³ The expedition is later known as Galathea 1 expedition. It was followed in 1950-1952 by Galathea 2 (Wolff 2005; Nielsen 2009) and in 2006-2007 by Galathea 3 (Jørgensen 2008).

⁴ This kind of large-scale and combined scientific and naval expeditions had also been conducted by other contemporary nations, and one of the most famous is the British Beagle expedition (1831-1836), where Charles Darwin gathered some of the evidence for his seminal book on the origin of species.

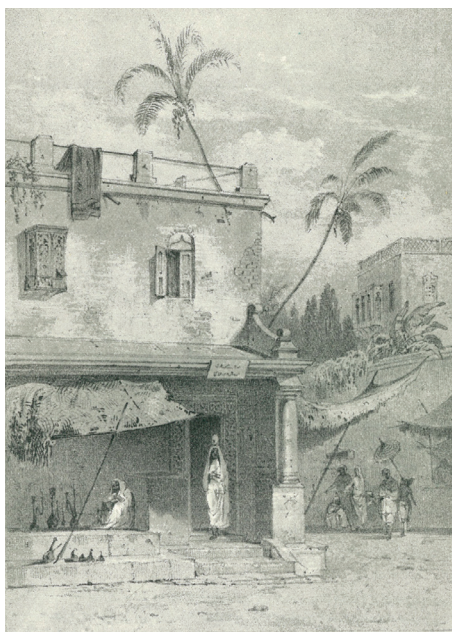
⁵ For failed Danish attempts to colonise the Nicobar Islands and to christianise its population, see Larsen 1907; Rasch 1966; Struwe 1967; Ruhland 2006; Weihe 2006.

to be kept as well as collections of item to be taken home to the Ethnographical Museum in Copenhagen. Also descriptions of the natural conditions of the various localities and a series of hydrographical measurements were to be made.⁶

It fell to Captain Steen Bille's lot to lead this multifarious expedition. In the preceding years, he had made a career for himself within military shipping and court service. Useful experiences from sailing on the seven seas and from foreign diplomacy had been gained during his former service in the French fleet and on various Danish voyages to the West Indies and South America.

With copious collections of nature-historical and ethnographic artefacts in its hold, the *Galathea* returned to Denmark in 1847. Shortly afterwards, Steen Bille's account of the expedition of the Corvette 'Galathea' around the World appeared in 1849–51.⁷ The work was in three volumes and compiled in such a way that it is possible to follow the expedition day by day – almost hour by hour. The route went from Copenhagen, round the Cape of Good Hope to India, continuing via South East Asia and the Pacific Islands to South America, and returning across the Atlantic.

Steen Bille's travel account is interesting from a historical mentality perspective, since the way he perceives the various different peoples encounte-



“A shop in Serampore.” (From Steen Bille's travel account, vol. I, p. 65).

⁶ For descriptions of the ethnographical items brought back to Denmark, see Lundbæk 1992; Lillelund 2009.

⁷ In 1930, Bille's account was re-published by the ethnographer Kaj Birket-Smith in a shorter edition. All citations in the following have been translated from the 1930 edition. For further publications on the *Galathea 1* expedition, see also Thorman (1852) and Koustrup (2006).

red during the voyage is a clear example of the evolutionary cultural viewpoint of his age. In his descriptions, he implicitly places the foreign peoples and that of his own on a hierarchical scale, with civilisation at the top end, and primitiveness at the lower end.⁸

The bearers of civilisation

Bille sees clear manifestations of civilisation in the European quarter of the capital city of the Anglo-Indian Empire, Calcutta. The finely laid-out city, the magnificent buildings and the well-organised conditions appeal to him:

“The quarter behind Government House is the most beautiful part of the city itself, with very large, well-constructed squares, invigorated by lovely, walled water tanks, the green banks of which are most pleasing to the eye.” (Bille, vol. I, p. 60).⁹

When Bille reaches Tranquebar, the oldest Danish trading station in India, there is, however, something sad in his descriptions of the place. His assignment was to strike the Danish colours, the Dannebrog, from the mast at Fort Dansborg – the symbol of the power and presence of the Danish state in the area. For here, he finds that Denmark had carried out a civilising mission among the Indians for 225 years and “with just hand dispensed law and justice among them”.¹⁰ Many Indians in the colony partook in Danish activities such as an Indian soldier in Danish service, a so-called:

“Pion, whose red turban and red, silver-studded shoulder belt and wea-

⁸ For nineteenth-century evolutionism in colonial practice and social theory, see McGee & Warms (eds.) 1996, p. 5ff; Barnard 2000, p. 27ff.

⁹ In his account, Bille states that he has only short time for exploring the town Calcutta and its surrounding. He is busy on his official errand, on behalf of the Danish state, to prepare a re-occupation of the Nicobar Islands in order to maintain sovereignty over this group of islands. Bille justifies this as only being possible by either effectively colonising or by leaving at least a military force on the islands, or on ships near to them. By order from home, the Danish colonial government in Serampore on the Hugli River had prepared for this before Bille’s arrival by investing in a British-Indian steam warship. Bille equipped the ship with Chinese workers, since he would not risk his own Galathea crew on this venture. Earlier attempts in the late 18th and early 19th century to make a Danish plantation colony out of the Nicobar Islands had all ended in failure because of unfamiliar diseases. Bille states: “On no condition I would provide my own crew; it would have been the same as voluntarily giving them over to sickness and death” (Bille 1930, vol. I, p. 59).

¹⁰ For Tranquebar, see Fihl and Ventakachalapathy 2009.

pon belt bore witness to the fact that he was a royal official, also forming a striking contrast to the rest of his snow-white uniform and lending his upright figure a military air that became him extremely well.” (Bille vol. I, p. 41)

Also in other regions of Asia, Steen Bille identifies signs of a high level of cultural development outside the area of European dominance, as with the Japanese officials, who hold back Bille’s ship at sea and deny him access to the land. From the Chinese city of Canton he gives a lengthy account of the relationship between his own European culture and their – in his eyes – somewhat reversed form of civilisation:

“If a European wishes to read a Chinese book, he must open it at the back, and when a Chinese person writes, he starts on the right.... As far as chairs and sofas were concerned, I once more experienced one of the amusing contrasts between Chinese and European conceptions regarding comfort and elegance. While we, especially in recent years, have found it impossible to make our sofas and armchairs soft enough, and have therefore begun to make use of elastic springs where curled horsehair stuffing and wool proved insufficient, with the less prosperous classes having to make do with hay mattresses, and only the extremely poor being obliged to sit on wooden chairs and benches, the Chinese have found it impossible to make their seating appliances hard enough, and it would seem that the insistence on hard seating increases with prosperity.” (Bille, vol. II, p. 37 and 24).

Bille’s understanding of Chinese aesthetics and cosmology seems rather sparse and he tends in particular to notice only outer and immediately observable features of this foreign civilisation. Describing a visit to a distinguished Chinese family, Bille writes:

“In none of these rooms did I discern any consideration whatsoever of a symmetrical division or organisation of decoration. The doors were sometimes in one corner, at other times in another, as were the windows – it is evidently not in this direction that one is to look for Chinese taste.” (Bille, vol. II, p. 23).¹¹

¹¹ For Danish trade on China in the late 18th and early 19 century, see Eilstrup & Boesgaard 1974; Clemmesen & Mackeprang 1980; Feldbæk & Justesen 1980.



Street in Shanghai.
(From Steen Bille's travel account, vol. II, p. 57)



"Catching oxen. (South America)"
(From Steen Bille's travel account, vol. II, p. 153)

The less civilised

During his circumnavigation of the globe, Steen Bille also encounters cultures which he does not feel can measure themselves with European civilisation as regards their stage of cultural development. Even so, he finds signs among such peoples of considerable ingenuity and proficiency. Childlike and superstitious elements, however, are stressed by him at various points in his account.

On the west coast of South America, visits are paid to, among other places, Valparaiso, Cobia, the Chincha islands, Callao and Lima. Not much about the peoples here is to the author's taste. What he characterises as their uncivilised nature features in his account and in particular what he perceives as common eating habits are something that Steen Bille takes exception to:

“...we also wish to look more closely at the people who inhabit this country and the customs which they observe. Regarding the latter, there are here, as everywhere, many things that are reasonably based on a natural state of affairs, but also many things that only have their root in fancies and inclinations... on the other hand, the Chilean would seldom refrain – at least once a day – from going to a confectioner's and, while smoking his ‘cigarillo’ and playing his game of dominoes, consuming deep plates full of ice or drinking one portion of water after the other. For lunch he could well devour two, three or even four water melons and for dinner he would stuff himself with ‘Cazula’ and ‘Puchero’: two dishes, both a mixture of meat, rice, potatoes, peppers, pumpkins, tomatoes, carrots, cabbage and sweet corn – and both equally little venerated by the European. The common man eats ‘Charque’, a kind of dried meat which, at least when hanging in the shops, has a most unappetising appearance;...” (Bille, vol. II, p. 153).

Great attention, however, is paid in his description of these regions to women, and he does not disguise the fact that he finds their outward appearance attractive – at least among a part of the population:

“The commonest women here are ugly. So much more beautiful, on the other hand, are the Chilean ladies, although it may well be that as far as some of them are concerned it is their own natural grace that can be placed on beauty’s account – their gait and dancing are light, their hands and feet are small and elegant, the latter being further enhanced by their tasteful footwear. They have if not fiery then friendly, lively eyes and a graceful mouth around which a smile often hovers. The European is held in veneration... .. they joke and laugh with him like children...”
(Bille, vol. II, p. 153f).

One of the most interesting moments of the entire voyage, according to Steen Bille, was the stay in Java, the cornerstone of the Dutch colonial



“Bailadeira– Java.” (from Portuguese: Indian temple dancer)
(From Steen Bille’s travel account, vol. I, p. 153).

empire. Their host for the expedition was no less than the Dutch governor general. In the – relatively – cool climate of the city of Bogor (called Buytenzog by Bille) and the surrounding area, the governor organised various excursions for his visitors, also holding concerts with Javanese dancing and music. The following remarks concerning such activities can be seen as a typical expression of Steen Bille's conception of the Javanese culture as being less civilised:

“The orchestra consisted of a kind of xylophone – long, horizontally laid out metal plates – which were played with wooden sticks – and this music was accompanied by incessant drumming and by a violin with only two strings. Although far from beautiful, and exceptionally monotonous, this music was nevertheless far more harmonious than that presented by the Hindus on a similar occasion. The singing and dancing, on the other hand, were scarcely any better. Some small, ugly womenfolk, naked until below the waist, draped with many-coloured rags, with flowers in their hair, a fan in their hand, continually dragged their feet in lascivious movements, flinging their arm above their head and singing a nasal, squalling song.” (Bille, vol. I, p. 166).

Children of nature

On the Nicobar Islands and on the islands in the Pacific, the Galathea expedition met peoples who, according to Steen Bille, possessed qualities which indicated their continued existence in a state of childlike innocence. As he saw it, they still lived practically untouched by the vices that could arise from dealings with more civilised nations. For Steen Bille, however, the racial distinctiveness of these peoples was extremely striking, something he attempted to describe and classify very closely for each area. In his time, there was considerable discussion about the origins and inter-connections of races. Steen Bille seems to have been influenced by the theories which postulated a connection between a given race and a given cultural level:

“The inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands are not a noble race either physically or mentally; although somewhat different from the other South East Asian peoples, they are nevertheless most closely related to the Malays. The colour of their skin is somewhat lighter than that of the

Hindus, considerably darker than that of the Chinese, differing from both by having a strong red-brown tinge. The back of the head is conspicuously flat, the crown of the head quite pointed and the width between the nodes of the parietal bone unusually large; the sides of the head are also very flat; the forehead is not high, but narrow, and has neither any particular elevation or inclination. The eyes are wide apart, the nose is flat and broad, the jaws extremely prominent. The mouth is broad and coarse with thick lips. The chin pointed; the ears are usually pierced to such an extent that they could accommodate a cigar. Generally speaking, the beard is plucked and sparse and there is little bodily hair. The hair on the head is always black, smooth and shiny; it is sometimes worn long, and then frequently tied up with a piece of bast or the like, sometimes cut short, normally with one or more tufts of hair, and sometimes, especially among the women, whose ugliness exceeds anything one could possibly conceive, shaved off completely.” (Bille, vol. I, p. 96f).

These racial characteristics Steen Bille links to their ‘primitive’ cultural level which he ascribes to such characteristics as their laziness, their indifference and indolence. No form of social order appears to exist. Also the population of the Hawaiian islands he places at the same low level of culture, although



“Children eating Poi – Hawaiian Islands”
(From Steen Bille’s travel account, vol. II, p. 105).

here he finds that the Christian missionaries had been successful in raising the culture from what he designates as its animal-like state,

”where cannibalism and human sacrifices were part of the order of the day, where parents murdered their children, and the children, having grown up, themselves mishandled, chased away, or – when they were less cruel – killed their old, decrepit parents, where women lived in isolation and humiliation, where slavery and despotism oppressed the people, where ownership was dubious and personal safety simply not guaranteed, where incest was sanctioned by law, where indolence competed with drunkenness and carnal lust, and where people’s innate good nature lay smothered beneath falsity and lies; - that they, I say, had raised themselves from this humiliating, almost animal-like state to a continent, upright and partially well-informed people, with a caring government and mild domestic customs.” (Bille, vol. II, p. 98).



As we have seen, Steen Bille scrupulously refers the particular characteristics of various peoples to more or less differing rungs of ‘uncivilised’ cultural levels. He also manages during his journey through his mental construction of civilisation and primitiveness to meet representatives of something approximating to the concept of ‘the noble savage’. On the Pacific island of Borra-Borra, close to Tahiti, he finds a population the main characteristic of which he in a sort of erotic wonder describes as being cheerfully

“Primeval forest on the Nicobar Islands” (from Steen Bille’s travel account, vol. I, p. 121).

good-natured:

“Everywhere there was a beautiful race of people living on this island. When in the evening we strolled along the beach and saw these womenfolk standing in their garden doors, or sitting in their canoes, which would rock gently on the gentle swell, we could not do otherwise than to admire the beautiful physical appearance of these children of nature, which, to be quite truthful, they were not at any pains to conceal. A thin shirt, like that also worn by many of the men, only scantily covered them from the hips down. Always, though, they had fresh flowers plaited in their black hair, which they knew how to arrange in a particularly becoming fashion, and in all positions they had a certain grace which, combined with the beautiful natural scenery and the deepening twilight, with the mysterious silence that reigned over forest and sea – with their entire surroundings, in short – radiated what I might call an aura of beauty over them.” (Bille, vol. II, p. 145).

In Bille’s travel account of his encounter with peoples of a foreign world on his circumnavigation of the globe, he represents cultural “otherness” in a way which illustrates the evolutionary thinking budding within social thinking in Europe at his time. The cultural differences are interpreted as evidences of a longer or shorter historical distance between the Europeans and the people of the rest of the world. In that sense Bille’s journey through civilisation and primitiveness is at the same time a travel in time. The cultural others were assimilated in his world view as already known steps or stages in an evolutionary development from the most primitives to the highest civilisations.

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