

Joachim Koester / Matthew Buckingham
Sandra of the Tuliphouse or How to Live in a Free State
2001

Section 3/11

The flag of Christiania, three yellow dots on a red ground, represented The Free City to me the way, I suppose, a flag is intended to. Whenever I saw it, I thought about Christiania as a geographic place. But the symbol is so abstract that it also reminded me of a flag an art-director or a set designer might invent for a science fiction story on TV or in the movies. Occasionally I even imagined myself as a character in such a movie—whatever it might be—a citizen of ‘The Three-Dot Place,’ which, I would remind myself, I temporarily was.

Captain Jan Janz, a Dutch-born seafarer-turned-pirate of the Barbary Coast who converted to Islam and became the Governor of the pirate republic, Saltee, waged war on the ships of all Christian nations alike. When he did so he flew the flag known as the ‘Red Half-Moon’. This flag—officially the mark of Ottoman privateers consisted of three gold crescent moons on a red ground.

By 1971 the tenets of Anarchy were quite familiar—especially the type that Sven, Kim, Kim, Ole and Jakob referred to. It closely resembles the mid-nineteenth-century ‘contractual anarchy’ of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon, the first self-proclaimed anarchist, opposed all forms of government, suggesting that it be replaced with contracts between individuals in society. He theorized contractual anarchy, in part, as a criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract which Proudhon attacked as an agreement between the individual and the state securing rights through private property.

Beowulf told me that the ‘Jacob’ who signed the declaration founding Christiania was named Jacob Ludvigsen. He was living in a collective in Copenhagen and writing for Ekstra Bladet, one of the city newspapers, when he and some friends snuck into the empty Boatman Street Barracks for the first time. After quitting the paper and starting to edit Hovedbladet, an anarchist weekly, he snuck into the Barracks again, this time with a photographer, and declared the area to be a free city. He moved in sometime after the first rush of squatters—a little too late to find a good space. His sleep was constantly interrupted by quarrelling neighbors and the makeshift auto races, held nightly in the old horse stable next door. So this ‘Moses of chaos’ was one of the first to leave the Free City, relocating to the Island of Bornholm where he lives today, once again working for Ekstra Bladet, writing advertizing copy, and working in the secessionist movement he founded there to free Bornholm from a thousand years of Danish rule.

Beowulf explained that Ludvigsen had lived in Christiania in what he called “the time of the Kangaroos.” Although I never found any photographs, there were supposedly two kangaroos residing at Christiania shortly after its beginnings. Beowulf didn’t know very much about them either, because, as he said “that was a bit before my time.” This is probably why he divided his anecdotes into two groups—those from the time of the kangaroos, and after.

In the epic poem, Beowulf lives after the time of the giants, but there are still a few monsters and a recently-awoken dragon he must contend with. As monsters, Grendel and his mother are a challenge to imagine—they live underwater in the haunted mere, but are also quite capable of wreaking havoc on dry land. The dragon, on the other hand, suffers the opposite fate. It is somehow difficult to reinvest him with the terror he must have possessed for

Beowulf’s original audience.

And even though the time of the dragon has passed, Copenhagen today is still a city of dragons. But do they live on as fearsome guardians protecting the occupants of these houses from unknown intruders, or are they kept as trophies of man’s domination over all things, including his own imagination—a once-powerful beast now reduced to functioning subserviently as a hand-railing?

In Minnesota I remember discovering that the time of the owl had also passed, or it had at least suffered a fate similar to the dragons of Copenhagen. Once taken to be the feathered incarnation of Athena, protectress of fortifications, and cities, the owl, or rather its form, has been relegated to the task of warding off pigeons and other unwanted fowl from private property like the home of Mary and Richard Bowman in Valley Hill. There, Athena was stored in the basement during the long winter intervals between her periods of duty atop the garage each summer.

Beowulf told me that if I wanted to know more about the time of the kangaroos I should try to meet a man named Thorkil who lived in the red house. Beowulf said he would arrange such a meeting...

Byens Lys, Christiania
August 25th - September 15th 2019
thursday - sunday 3pm-7pm

