The Age of Enlightenment

The philosophical and scientific trends in thought that influenced 18th century Europe were the basis for what is now known as the Age of Enlightenment. The top level of society began to question the ideas and concepts of the past and their opinions were critical and unprejudiced. They lived with the conviction, that through knowledge, good sense and experience, they could understand the way the world functioned and bring it’s - and not the least God’s - secrets into the light.

The background for the Age of Enlightenment can already be found in the 16th and 17th centuries when cracks began to appear in the existing structure of society. Centuries of belief in the bible and orthodox opinions were now pushed into the background by a more astronomical and physical understanding of the world. Thus, it was not new ideas the educated preached, but on the contrary, the scientific breakthroughs of the Renaissance and Baroque period. The difference was the way in which the messages were presented. The intellectuals of the time were able to pass on their knowledge to the people in their mother tongue, and not as formerly in Latin, German or French.

The ideas in the Age of Enlightenment originated from the great powers of the time, England and France. The trends in natural science, philosophy, religion and politics spread over a large part of Europe and America and created many of the values of the time. The Age of Enlightenment was marked by intense and lively debate within the newly established middle class, where concepts such as the reasonable, the natural and the beneficial were often points of discussion.

The desire to have a deeper understanding of the world led to many departures from the traditions and authority of former times. The age was influenced to a great extent by these new and unconventional ways of thinking, which also led to discussions on the political and religious structure of society.

The trends emanating from the great powers affected the individual countries in Europe in different ways. However, the age could already see the changes as significant and epoch-making. These trends began to affect Denmark in earnest in the mid-18th century. Questions on the way in which society and the state were organized and the part citizens should play in their relationship to state and monarch were fundamental issues during this period.