

The *Gods* of Land and Power

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What, Where, Why?

- The word *Gods* can be translated as estate or manor
- A *Gods* is private property with special privileges and is often owned by a nobleman
- There are 738 total estates in rural Denmark. Of those none are on the islands of Bornholm or Amager because those islands were owned by the king, few are in Copenhagen, and Frederiksberg counties, because those two counties were mostly owned by the king, and there are few in central Jutland because the soil was so poor
- Exerted social pressure on our ancestors
- Had authority for probates and military conscription
- Had rights to corporal punishment, and in some cases had its own private court (*birk*)
- Estate records are the main collection used for Danish research 1700-1787 besides church records

Daily Life for the Peasants¹

- The summer workday was 6 AM to 7 PM
- Some peasants had to walk over three miles to get to the Lord's land
- Around 1770-1790 tenant farmers provided approximately 300 days per year of unpaid labor and tenant cottagers provided 52 days per year of unpaid labor
- 1787: "The estate's prison, iron collar and (the now rarely used) wooden horse is banned from being used on peasants."
- 1791: "Since 1791 peasants and their wives could not be subjected to corporal punishment, but cottager folk, grown children and servants could."
- 1848: "it was forbidden to strike married men over 20 and women over 16 years of age."
- 1921: "...exercise of violence was abolished by law in 1921, but actually it continued in most places."

Estate Structure

- The nobleman lived in the manor house (*hovedgaard*)
- The demesne land was for the lord's personal use and profit and was tax exempt

¹ Palle Ove Christiansen, *A Manorial World: Lords, Peasants, and Cultural Distinctions on a Danish Estate 1750-1980*, pages 338-339, and 442.

- 15% of the land was the demesne lands (*sædegaard*)
- The lord's tenants worked the demesne land for free (*hoveri*)
- Of the remaining 85% of the land, most was leased out to the peasants (*fæstegårder*)
- The peasant land was divided into common pasture and farmland
- Farmland was divided into strips until about 1800
- It was illegal for the nobleman to transform the leased land into demesne land
- The leased land was not tax exempt, the peasants were supposed to pay the lord who paid the king
- If the peasants couldn't pay, the lord had to cover them
- An efficient estate could expect to collect about 85% of the taxes owed"
- The lord provided a lifetime lease, a residence, farm equipment, and protection
- The peasant provided rent and unpaid labor²
- The peasant is responsible for upkeep of the buildings and equipment
- As long as the peasant fulfilled his end, he could not be evicted
- Peasant's liked lifetime leases
- A widow could continue the lease if she didn't remarry
- Peasants did not have inheritable tenure
- Politics happened
- Often the farm stayed in the family

Three Types of "Farms"

- The type of farm your ancestor lived on was determined by its productivity. The word *tønder* is a measurement of land and translates to barrels. It is the amount of land that can be sown with one barrel of grain. Depending on the productivity of the land, the physical size of a barrel can vary. Poor land needed more acres to produce one tønder while better land needed less
- *Gaard*: Farm. A self-sustaining farm (3-11 tønder)
- *Boel*: Middle-farm. A mid-sized farm (1-3)
- *Huus*: House. Not enough land to be self-sufficient (0-1 tønder)
- The husmand relied on doing wage work for the gaardmand. Their situation was more precarious in times of want

Jobs on the Estate

- *Skovrider*: Forest bailiff. Makes decisions concerning the forests
- *Skovfoged*: Administers the decisions made by the forest bailiff
- *Ridefoged*: Bailiff. Makes decisions concerning the demesne lands
- *Ladefoged*: Sub-bailiff. Administers the decisions made by the bailiff
- *Bondefoged*: Peasant bailiff. Usually one of the wealthiest peasants. Notified the other peasants when it was time to do unpaid labor. Was exempt himself.

History

² The peasant was completely unpaid for this work. They were neither paid in cash nor kind. The peasant paid for other things by selling their surplus grain in the cities.

- 1000: Farming expands
- 1000-1100: The moldboard plow becomes widespread³
- 1123: Large landowners emerge
- 1200: The bow sickle spreads⁴
- 1250-1350: Denmark is especially violent
- 1300: Tax laws encourage peasants to sell to landowners
- 1350-1400: 85% tenant farmers, 15% freehold
- 1446: *Vornedskab* starts⁵
- 1505: The scythe is first mentioned
- 1550: 90% of the land is owned by the elite
- 1550-1600: forced labor starts
- 1650: Labor obligations become severe
- 1688: Less than 3% freeholders
- 1702: *Vornedskab* ends
- 1733: *Stavnsbåndet* starts.⁶
- 1770: 7% forest
- 1785-1885: Number of cottagers triples
- 1789: *Stavnsbåndet* ends
- 1790-1850: tenant cottager system
- 1800: 4% forest
- 1848-1851: all rent can be paid in cash
- 1850-onward: wage labor cottagers
- 19 Feb 1861: 1 farm incorporated for every 9 farms sold
- 1919: Estates lose their privileges

Copyhold Deeds (Fæsteprotokoller)

- A copyhold deed is a record of the agreements between the lord and the tenant so both sides always knew the terms
- Starting in 1719 estates were required to record copyholds in special lists
- Many estates have earlier ones while others have none

Probate Records (Skifteprotokoller)

- Probates were created to ensure the deceased person's heirs inherited the right amounts
- But they also were used to protect the landowners by making sure the family didn't make off with equipment he had leased to them or left the property in a dilapidated state that would be unusable for the next tenant
- Estates were given the right to probate in 1683

³ The moldboard plow was a better plow that could turn the soil instead of just scratch it.

⁴ The bow sickle had a curved blade as opposed to a mostly straight one. It made farming easier.

⁵ *Vornedskab* prevented males on Sjælland, Lolland, Falster, Møn, and Bogø from leaving the estate on which they were born.

⁶ *Stavnsbåndet* prevented males from leaving the estate on which they were born. It was the same thing as *vornedskab* except it applied in Jutland too.

- Conducted probates for their tenants until 1793, 1817, or 1850

Probates had the following structure:

- Preamble: Genealogical Information
- Assets: Everything your ancestor owned
- Debts: Everyone your ancestor owed money to
- Division: The amount given to each heir
- Signatures

Land Records (Jordebøger)

- List each head of household, the value of the land, and the rent owed
- Compare them to other land lists or other records
- Sporadic

Finding the Right Estate

- No map exists showing the boundaries of different estates
- An estate could own land in multiple parishes, districts, or counties.
- Each individual farm within a hamlet could belong to a different estate
- Maps show where each *hovedgaard* was
- An owner gained privileges if he leased out 200+ *tønder* within 9 miles of the *hovedgaard*
- Most peasant farms were no more than 11 *tønder*
- Check the probates listed for the parish in the FamilySearch catalog
- Look for the nearest estates on www.danskeherregaarde.dk/
- Check the 1688 land survey
- Check the *amtstue* to see if it was owned by the crown⁷
- Figuring out what estate your ancestor leased land from his hard. I often spend up to 4 hours just trying to do this. Once I figure it out, the family usually stays with the same estate for generations

Further Reading

If you would like to learn more about Danish estates I highly recommend reading *A Manorial World: Lords, Peasants, and Cultural Distinctions on a Danish Estate 1750-1970* by Palle Ove Christiansen and also *The Danish Resources c. 1000-1550: Growth and Recession* by Nils Hybel and Bjørn Poulsen.

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⁷ The *amtstue* is a taxation or finance district. The boundaries are usually similar to the regular county boundaries. The *amtstue* was in charge of probates and copyhold deeds for those who leased their land from the king.