

## The free *bønder* of Scandinavia – who were they?

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The figure of the Scandinavian *bonde* has been essential to the self-understanding of the Scandinavian democracies and the preceding eighteenth century anti-aristocratic thoughts in Denmark and Sweden. From the eighteenth century it was an integrated part of the historical discourse that the Viking Scandinavians were free men, *bønder*, without aristocracy. Each man, each *bonde*, had his farm that he cultivated without much interference from the outside. This was maintained as well by nineteenth Swedish historians like Erik Geijer (1783-1847) as by contemporary Danish scholars like C. F. Allen (1811-1871). The argument was that since the glorious olden days the development had taken a U-formed development as aristocrats depressed the condition of the *bonde* but that now this person was about to be restored to his proper place as the central person of society. The myth lives on in popular mythology as when the Danes sing a still popular song of “The *bonde* of the new Age”.<sup>1</sup> The *bonde* here is the true carrier of democracy.

Such arguments and myths raise a number of questions. Firstly, it may be asked if it is at all right to establish a direct genealogy for the *bonde* from say the tenth century to the eighteenth and nineteenth century (and even to the present day). The social meaning of the word certainly experienced large changes. Secondly, even if this is accepted, the changing situation of the *bonde* calls for explanation. This ideally requires a presentation of the total social structure of the Scandinavian countries through thousand years which evidently can't we given here. In this context I shall limit myself to some remarks on the changing position of the *bonde* in the period 900 to the early sixteenth century and I am going to concentrate on Denmark.

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<sup>1</sup> ”Da står en ny tids bonde på sin toft” – Jeppe Aakjær, 1916: Som dybest brønd gi'r altid klare vand

The word *bonde* (Danish and Norwegian: *bonde/bønder*. Swedish: *bonde/bönder*) which is the same as German *Bauer*<sup>2</sup> is found on Danish runestones from around the year 1000. They include stones like the Dalbystone and the Glemmingestone:

Dalbystone (Torna herred, Malmöhus län).

Thorger erected this stone after his father xxx, a highborn “*bonde*” who will be remembered for long.

Glemmingestone. (Ingelstad herred. Kristianstads län).

Svenne erected this stone after his father, Toste, the ”sharp”, a very highborn “*bonde*”. He who destroys this stone is going to be a “*ræte*”.

Besides there are other stones mentioning several social positions or honorary titles such as “*landmand*” (virtually landed man), “*bomand*” (man with a farm), “*landhyrde*” – probably meaning manager of a region, *bryde*” (steward) and “*thegn*”. This may point towards a rather stratified society but the evidence of the Nordic poetry of the tenth and eleventh century (the *kvad*) together with the later laws of the thirteenth century may also support the general opinion of the older historiography, namely that society was made up a large group of men with farms, *bønder*, on the shoulders of which stood a relatively small elite. In recent years more and more very large farms are found archaeologically but hardly enough to make some kind of manorial system the dominant mode of production. The Old Norse poetry, the *kvad*, which in some way give an ideal picture of society, imagines a society of chieftains, kings and *jarls*, leading the people which consists of *bønder*: *búandi*, *búndmadr*, *búthegn*. In the mythological poem *Rigsthula*, probably to be dated around the year 1000, we are presented with the home of a slave, *thrall*, the farm of the *bonde*, and finally the hall of the lord (*Rigsthula* 1997). A social structure like this is probably not an unlikely scenario in the Scandinavian countries at turn of the first millennium.

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<sup>2</sup> Wort und Begriff ”Bauer”.

Not surprisingly, one of the sons of the figure of the *bonde* in the poem *Rigsthula* is given the name *Bondi*.

The meaning of the word *bonde* was obviously, as it appears from the various sources, broad and signified both a free man, a man with a farm and the head of a household (Skrubbeltrang 1980). The *bónða* on the runestone from Hulterstad, Öland is a husband. The stone thus says: *Ástri\_r had this stone raised in memory of Björn, her bonde/husband*. The original root of the word *búandi* is a man with his own *bú*, his own farm. *Bú* or *bo* originally simply meant to “to reside”/ “to live at a place”, to *bo*, but more specific meanings had certainly been added.

The social structure in the thirteenth century laws of Denmark are not clear but there is no doubt that when the laws were written down, *bonde* meant a free and land owning man who was able to defend himself at court, at the *thing*. He was the person to whom the laws were directed. Most interesting in this connection is the discussion whether a *bonde* originally was the owner of a *bol*, a land unit similar to the English hide and translated into Latin as *mansus*. I shall not go into this matter but it can at least be stated that in some cases a farm simply is termed a *bol* in the laws. A related debate which has been very fierce for years is the problem of the character of Danish military service, *leding*, during the period 1000-1250. Was it a general service for the common man, the *bonde*, or was it restricted to elite collectives?

These debates are then again related to the general discussion of the character of the social structure of twelfth and thirteenth century Denmark. Whereas still in the 1960s it could be maintained that it was normal “that every Danish *bonde* had one farm and was free and independent in his possession of this” (Hal Koch 1963), such positions were challenged more and more from the mid-twentieth century. It was now generally maintained that manorial systems prevailed in Denmark, even back in the Iron Age. In 1988 Peter Sawyer in his volume on the Viking Age in the general

Danish History told us that in medieval Denmark we had land lords and servants (*fæstebønder* – or in Latin *coloni*) and that we could safely rely on the fact that this was also the case in the Viking Age (Sawyer 1988). Up to around 2000 generally in Denmark the thirteenth century social structure was seen by historians as heavily dominated by large manors, partly run by their owners, partly farmed with the help of stewards (*bryder*). It was also clear to everybody that tenants, termed *landboer*, were numerous. Rightly, the weak position of these *landboer* according to the laws was stressed. Here, both in Danish and other contemporary Nordic laws it was stated that a period of legal tenancy lasted for only a year. There was certainly little place for the independent owner of his farm, the *bonde*, in this system and, scholars as Niels Lund also stepped forward and denied the *bonde* much place in military service (Lund 1996).

Recently, the strong *bonde* of Viking Age and thirteenth century has experienced a revival. I and Carsten Porskrog have both noticed how numerous these freeholders were in the early modern duchy of Schleswig, this situation being most likely of medieval origin, and, most important, my colleague Anders Bøgh has undertaken calculations of the percentage of *bønder*, freeholders, in fifteenth century Denmark (Bøgh 2006). From Bøgh's investigation it seems clear that very high percentages of *bønder* were preserved in areas with pronounced royal or episcopal presence. Here the process of turning farmers or peasants into tenants, *landboer* (Latin: *coloni*) was evidently not successful as the strong lords worked against it. Also, the Danish historian Michael Gelting has recently made an attempt to interpret the creation of a nobility in the thirteenth century in the light of a predominant class of *bønder*. And finally, the discussion of the character of the military service has been taken up in a collection of articles by Rikke Malmros that appeared this year (Malmros 2010). She defends the position that the free *bønder* constituted the backbone of the Viking Age fleet, the *leding*.

So at the present moment it can be maintained that the rural population of Denmark, as most probably in all the Nordic Countries from the Viking Age and up to the thirteenth century to a relatively high degree was composed of relatively large farms run by farmers, freeholders, termed *bønder* / *bönder*.

In the Viking Age most men were thus probably termed either slaves, *trælle*, or *bønder*. Around the year 1000 less than one percent lived in towns and it is a fair assumption that it was only the urbanization of Denmark in the High Middle Ages which made the percentage of Danes in towns grow to *c.* 10 percent (Poulsen 2009). Only this development created a need for new terminologies, a need for a name for the persons living in towns as opposed to inhabitants of the countryside. Everything here points to the fact, that in the beginning, in the emerging towns, the inhabitants were simply termed either *bønder* (Latin: *bondones*) or given the newly coined social status of *landbo* / *colonus*, tenants. There was thus still made no difference between town and country. But during the thirteenth century new terms were coined that of the “townsmen”, the “*bymænd*”, (*uillani*, *ciues*). This became the general word for people living in towns in Denmark up to the year 1400 when it was replaced by the word burgher, *borger*. In the town law of Schleswig from around 1200 we have on the one hand the townsman, the “*ciuis*” and on the other hand the “*ruricola*”. In a translation into Danish of the Flensburg townlaw from around 1300 this term is translated as “*landmand*” – literally: land man.

Generally the town laws apparently have an early phase where we have the pair of terms *bymand* opposed to *landmand* (townsman to land man). It was so to say neutral and equal terms. But things changed. In the town law of Ribe from 1268 again we met the townsman (*ciuis*) but now he opposed to the bonde (*bundonis*). The word bonde had changed from characterizing all people with full rights to being a term for a man living in the countryside. This change from

## 1) LANDMAND – BYMAND

to

## 2) BONDE - BORGER .

became the rule in the late medieval town laws.

At the same time fundamental social changes occurred in the countryside which eased the fusion of all rural farmers/tenants into one terminological group, termed *bønder*. Firstly, we must imagine a large-scale transformation of the old group of *bønder*, the freeholders, into the tenants, *landboer* or *bryder* as they came to be termed during the fifteenth century. The farms owned by *bønder*, by the freeholders, hereafter and until the early sixteenth century only constituted some 15 percent of the total peasant owned farms. Later this percentage should drop even more. Secondly, the situation of the freeholders was depressed as their taxes rose. The gap between freeholders and tenants was not very large and the freeholders were now often called “*bundones regis*”, the king’s *bønder*, stressing their dependency on the crown’s land. This promoted the cooperation within villages and we see the first written bylaws, used and obeyed by both freeholders and tenants. Thirdly, and connected to this development, many manors were farmed out around 1400 onwards, just as in England (Hybel & Poulsen 2008). This created the material basis for the large tenant farms which became the normal type of farm in Denmark. The tenants on these farms generally achieved very secure and long-lasting tenancies, often for life-time.

It lasted some time before this new social situation of a united rural group of farmers/peasant was totally accepted. The recognition of it was, as just mentioned, introduced into the town laws quite early but it came later into royal administration. Still in 1360 the king issued a charter to townsmen, *bønder/bundones* (that is freeholders) and *rustici* which in a somewhat later Danish version of the charter was translated with “*vornede*”, that is tenants. More exactly the word “*vornede*” designates

a person under personal protection of a lord. This distinction between *bonde*, the freeholder, and the dependent *vorned* was also used in a proclamation from 1446, and in other contemporary sources the pair of words *bonde* and *bryde* became common, where the term *bryde*, the steward known since the Viking Age, was now reserved for the new created relatively free and rich tenant. Further in 1473, we find a royal proclamation using the word *tjener*, servant, for these tenants; in 1483 they were termed “*landboer*” or “*tjenere*”. Here, as in other areas of society the fifteenth century was marked by an unclear terminology, presumably mirroring a transforming society.

Already from the late 1460s, however, all farmers in the countryside were collectively named “*almue*” which can be translated with “common man”. An in 1481 a royal proclamation to Scania uses the word “*bønder*” on all men with family farms in the countryside. This became normal under the reign of King Christian II in the 1510s. His large law complex for the countryside which he edited in 1522 generally used “*bønder*” for all members of rural society, even if it sometimes has the expression “*fri bønder*” and in the case of Scania “*skattebønder*” (taxpaying *bønder*) for freeholders. One of its most famous paragraphs is the one forbidding lords to “sell” their tenants. The headline of it is explicitly termed: “*Bønder skulle icke hereffter selgis*”. *Bønder* should not be sold hereafter. Here the word which not long ago used to be reserved for freeholders designates a tenant farmer. This became the rule. The ordinance which in 1539 after the reformation organized church life, *kirkeordinansen*, very tellingly speaks of people in countryside as “*bønderfolket*”, the *bønder* people.

What we are seeing is in fact the practical creation of an estate, *bondestanden*, which we may – remembering Carsten’s remarks – translate into an estate of peasants or farmers. This estate in fact gained political influence almost at the same time as it appeared in the sources. In Denmark there were different kind of royal assemblies

through the middle ages, but these were mainly meetings between the king and his magnates. But in 1468, for the first time, a meeting of the estates was summoned. Clergy, nobles, town men and “*almue*”, meaning farmers/tenants (both freeholders and tenants) met in the town of Kalundborg. Such meetings were called in 1482, 1494, 1510 and 1536 always with a representation of *almuen*, the peasants’ (or farmer’s) estate. After the reformation the meetings of the estates became rare until the seventeenth century, when they were reactivated for some time but now without members of the rural population present.

The political importance of the united *bondestand* in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century was admittedly limited but it should not be forgotten in the history of the Danish rural population. It should be connected to the impression that the large-scale peasant rebellions of the period 1438-1441 and 1535-1536 made on the upper levels of society and it also reflects a period of economic progress for the rural population. This was the period when peasant trade and peasant sailing flourished, when the rural population built new houses and paraded in Dutch cloth and silver brooches. Most important, however, this fusion of all rural farm holders into group and its political institutionalization clearly signifies important terminological and social changes.

A long way of radical transformations thus connects the situation of the early modern peasant with his Viking Age forefather. Where the *bonde* originally was practically every respectable man, it became reserved for rural farmers owning their own farm, and then at the turn of the sixteenth century began to be used for all men with a rural farm, regardless if they were freeholders or tenants, which by the way now mattered much less than it had one or two centuries ago. It can be argued that the *bønder* were very politically and militarily important in the two first centuries after the year 1000 and that the estate of *bønder* gained some influence again in the late fifteenth century. But it should be remembered that the meaning of the word *bønder* between these two points

in time had changed so much that it makes little sense to see here a group of people experiencing changing conditions. It certainly makes even less sense to construct a direct lineage from the old Viking Age farmers to the *bønder* who are believed to be the pioneers of modern Danish democracy. The picture of a U-formed development is misleading and I must ask for more structural approaches to the history of the *bonde*. This, however, should not distract us from making Danish rural history over long periods, especially I must plead for an even more active cooperation between the medievalist, including the archaeologist, and the early modern historians working on rural history.

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