

RESEARCH

The Struggle for Agrarian Resources in Danish Towns since c. 1500

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The article sums up and synthesizes research concerning the ownership of and access rights to fields and common land belonging to Danish towns from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, but especially during the period c. 1750–1850. The analysis shows many common features, for instance a large-scale ‘reclamation and tilling movement’ in the 16th and 17th centuries, when arable land was often divided into hundreds of small strips, which were apportioned to each of the houses in a particular town. Conversely, the enclosure movement, beginning c. 1750, followed different courses in individual towns, and in some places the process stretched over a very long period, consisting of several, distinct phases. Among other things, this was due to the fact that the enclosure process in the towns was often very turbulent, causing intense conflicts between different parts of the local population. This is evidence of the great importance of the access to urban plots of land.

Keywords: Commons; Fields; Reclamation; Tilling; Enclosure; Agrarian reforms

Introduction

When talking about urban occupations we primarily think of trade, craft, industry and service. However, in former times, agriculture played an important role in many cities and towns in both Europe and other parts of the world. This article is about urban cultivation and pastoralism in Danish towns from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, especially the period c. 1750–1850. In particular I will consider the right to use and ownership of both tilled and untilled land, and how the property structure changed over the course of time. The analysis shows that the natural resources of towns were a contentious issue in Danish pre-industrial urban communities. The numerous conflicts in this area are an indication of the great importance of access to plots of land in towns.

The article sums up and synthesizes research stemming from a great number of local historical studies as well as articles from periodicals and anthologies concerning urban or agrarian history. Moreover, it includes analyses of reports from local officials to the central authorities about the state of agriculture in different parts of Denmark at various times during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Many aspects of Danish urban agriculture are described in detail in books and articles about local history, but there are only a few studies about this topic on a national level (Hertz 1989; Elkjær 1991; Degn 1998), and Elkjær (2008) is until now the only one in English. Hertz is mainly interested in the distribution of flax, tobacco and other

unusual crops, whereas Degn in particular deals with the correlation between the population figures and the agricultural areas of the towns. Elkjær, however, investigates the property structure, but most of her analyses include only a few of the Danish towns.

There is also a lack of international syntheses on urban agriculture, and I have only found a few references to this topic, when, some years ago, I consulted a considerable number of syntheses and anthologies in order to write an introduction in Danish about European urban history before 1800. However, Cowan (1998), Epstein (2001) and Clark (2009) give some information about different aspects of urban agriculture. There is also rather extensive literature on the so-called agro-towns—a peculiar type of conurbation, where agriculture was the predominant occupation. Agro-towns have been rather common in Hungary and southern Spain and Italy (cf. Hofer 1987; Bácskai 1989).

The Agricultural Production and Food Supplies in Towns

‘The lands of a town were its common reserves, which all its people might draw on. They were a resort in bad times, when all other trades failed’. With these words the historian J.O. Bro-Jørgensen summarized, what urban agriculture meant to the c. 2000 inhabitants in Svendborg in the 18th century (Bro-Jørgensen 1959: 115).

This characterization could be employed with reference to many other Danish towns at that time, when many tradesmen, artisans and public servants performed some work in the fields besides their main occupations. However, in most towns it seems that only a few people had agriculture as their occupational mainstay.

There was, however, much variance in the size of agricultural areas of the individual towns. A set of reports from 1771 illustrates this. In that year, all municipal governments were asked to report the total harvest and consumptions of rye, barley and oats 'in an average year' to the central authorities. Judging from the reports from the 18 towns on Zealand (Denmark's largest island), the degree of self-sufficiency in cereals varied from 1 to 110 per cent, an average of 25 per cent (Mikkelsen 1993: 182–183).

From this, it appears that a great number of towns had to get most of their provisions from elsewhere. Only very few towns however had more than 2000–3000 inhabitants before well into the 19th century (see **Figure 1**). Until that time we may therefore suppose that a town's hinterland (perhaps a radius of 20–30 kilometers) could normally meet the chief part of its needs for foodstuffs.

By contrast, Copenhagen, as the capital, had 100,000 inhabitants according to the census of 1801, and obtained its provisions from a greater part of Denmark. In the 18th century, the central authorities attempted to stimulate the deliveries to the fast-growing capital city by giving licenses to certain travelling hawkers. The smallholders in a village called Valby, a few kilometers from Copenhagen, for example, were allowed, in 1721, to buy up poultry in all parts of Zealand (in some cases more than 100 kilometres from Copenhagen) in order to sell these products in the capital. Apparently, the Valby privilege remained in force throughout 18th century and into the 19th.

It is also worth mentioning that some peasants living in the southern part of Zealand in the 18th century sometimes travelled to Copenhagen to sell grain in the market square, because corn prices in the capital were usually much higher than in the provinces, and of course the city had a much larger and more varied supply of goods, too. Some of the travelling peasants passed through many small towns on their way to Copenhagen (Mikkelsen 2001: 166; Mikkelsen 1997).

Exact information about cultivated and untilled land in each of the Danish market towns exists from 1861, 1866, 1871 and 1876, and from these years we also have accurate data concerning the numbers of horses, cattle, pigs and sheep. The data from 1861 is summarized in the tables below. Many observations can be drawn from these figures. One is that nearly all of Denmark's 67 towns had at least 110 hectares of land, and that nine of them had more than 1100 hectares (**Table 1**). Another important point is that arable land made up 50–80 per cent of the land in the overwhelming majority of towns, and in only one town did meadows take up more than 60 per cent of the total area (**Table 2**). It appears, too, that about 45 per cent of the total arable land in the towns was sown with one of the four common cereals (wheat, rye, barley and oats), while another 20 per cent was used to grow clover, and only 25–30 per cent was available for grazing (**Table 3**).

If a similar survey had been made 300–400 years before, the result would have been quite different. At that

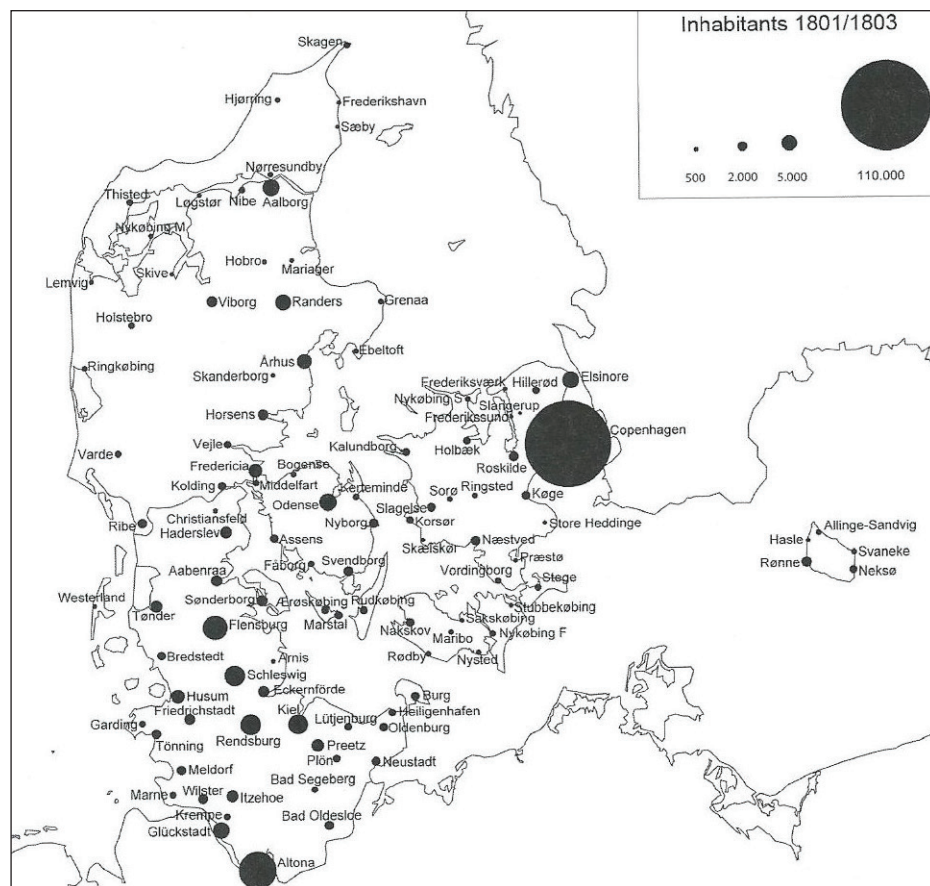


Figure 1: The population figures for towns in the Kingdom of Denmark (1801) and the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein (1803). The frontier between the kingdom and the duchies ran along a river near the towns Ribe and Kolding. (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2008: 20).

Area in hectares	0–110	111–220	221–330	331–440	441–550	551–1100	More than 1100
Number of towns: Total agricultural area	2	6	11	11	7	21	9
Number of towns: Area tilled	7	19	11	9	10	9	2

Table 1: Urban land in 1861.

Based on: The Danish National Archives, Danmarks Statistik, Lists concerning area under tillage 1861 + Lists concerning livestock 1861.

'Cultivation percent'	30.1–40%	40.1–50%	50.1–60%	60.1–70%	70.1–80%	More than 80%
Number of towns	1	14	14	27	9	2

Table 2: The tilled area as a percent of total urban land in 1861.

Based on: The Danish National Archives, Danmarks Statistik, Lists concerning area under tillage 1861 + Lists concerning livestock 1861.

Crop/use	Total area in hectares	Share of the total urban land
Wheat	1717	4%
Rye	3829	9%
Barley	5706	14%
Oats	6693	16%
Clover	8227	20%
Mixed crops (grain)	792	2%
Potatoes	896	2%
Peas, rape, buckwheat, beans etc.	1115	3%
Meadows	2523	6%
Commons for grazing	1093	3%
Plough land, this year used for grazing	6879	17%
Fallow (totally)	2192	5%
In total	41,662	100%

Table 3: The distribution of crops in 1861 (67 sample towns).

Based on: The Danish National Archives, Danmarks Statistik, Lists concerning area under tillage 1861 + Lists concerning livestock 1861.

time the urban land mainly consisted of woods, meadows, bogs and moors. Even though many of these areas were brought under cultivation in the 16th through 18th centuries, grazing was still more important than tillage in many towns during much of the 19th century, and yet in 1861 a large number of towns had several hundred head of cattle and sheep (**Table 4**).

Phases of Danish Urban Agricultural History until c. 1750

In the Middle Ages most of urban land was held in common by a town's inhabitants. But during the 'reclamation and tilling movement' of the 16th and 17th centuries it was apparently normal procedure that the land in question was divided into hundreds of small strips, after which a number of these plots were apportioned to each of the houses. A corresponding system had been used in the villages since the Middle Ages (see **Figure 2**), the motive

presumably being to ensure that each of the peasants had a share in both the rich and the barren soils.

However, in many towns the plots soon turned to be popular articles of commerce. To judge from several studies about specific towns, it was quite common that some of the greater tradesmen in the town eventually acquired a considerable part of the plots (e.g. Hoff 2000: 222f., 231; Johansen 1997: 207; Degn 1981, 1: 90). Such a person might hold more than hundred strips in total. In some towns a few of these citizens also managed to establish enclosures, i.e. bigger continuous plots, which could be fenced in. In other towns, however, the municipal corporations succeeded in keeping a great part of the land in the common ownership of the town (Elkjær, 2008: 272). This meant that the local government was in a position to lease out much of the land, and the ensuing rents could be a good source of income for the communal treasury. Land could be farmed out for only one year at a time, but

Number of animals	Number of towns:			
	Cattle (bullocks, cows, young cattle)	Horses	Sheep	Pigs
0–50	0	6	14	10
51–100	3	21	8	13
101–200	19	23	17	19
201–300	14	9	10	13
301–400	10	4	7	9
401–500	5	3	3	1
501–750	12	1	4	1
751–1000	4	0	2	1
More than 1000	0	0	2	0

Table 4: Animals in the towns in 1861.

Based on: The Danish National Archives, Danmarks Statistik, Lists concerning area under tillage 1861 + Lists concerning livestock 1861.

in many cases users held the land on a six- to eight-year lease or even for life (Begtrup 1806 (1978): 157; Begtrup 1810 (1978): 146f., 321; Begtrup 1812 (1978): 130, 134).

It was also quite common that certain parts of the urban land were laid out as plots for public servants. This meant that some officials—most often mayors—as a part of their salary were awarded the right to use specific enclosures or strips of land for the duration of their posts. Odense provides an example of this practice (see **Figure 3**). Poor-law authorities, charitable institutions and schools also had shares in the land in many towns (e.g. Christensen 1985: 226; Frandsen 1998: 103f.).

Before the Lutheran Reformation in the 1530s, churches and monasteries were in possession of large holdings in the towns, as well as in the countryside; afterwards, however, the ecclesiastical landholdings were very modest. Some glebe land was attached to many benefices, and in the towns it often consisted of a close.

The reclamation of moors and meadows and so on during the 16th and 17th centuries included only part of urban land. In some towns, it applied to perhaps approximately 75 per cent; in other places the quota was much lower. The remainder continued to be used for common grazing. Moreover, in many towns the citizens were also licensed to turn some of their cattle to grass in the meadows of neighbouring manors or villages. However, some of these rights were disputed, and in Danish urban histories we find descriptions of several conflicts between town and manor, lasting for decades or even centuries and including several cases sometimes progressing to the High Court.

Næstved provides an excellent example of such a prolonged conflict (Nielsen 1929). In the Middle Ages the common land of the town was owned by the adjacent monastery Skovkloster (see **Figure 4**), but the citizens in Næstved were given grazing rights on the common as long as they paid a fee. This settlement continued after the Lutheran Reformation, when the monastery with all its properties was seized by the Crown. When Skovkloster was transferred by exchange of property to the nobleman

Herluf Trolle (after whom the new manor of Herlufsholm was named) in 1561, the new owner confirmed that the citizens had the right to use the common forever. However, Trolle's letter did not specify the exact limits of the common. Neither were there any stipulations about how to use the land. During the following 200 years these oversights resulted in many controversies about grazing, peat-digging and the erection of mills and enclosure of fields and gardens. The most important lawsuit concerning the common took place in 1753–1762, when a special commission, consisting of two of the most prominent lawyers at that time, established that Herlufsholm always had been regarded as the owner of the common and that the inhabitants in Næstved were not allowed to fence in any part of the common without consent from the landowner. But if an enclosure was made by one or several citizens, and this establishment had not been challenged by the landowner for 20 years or more, the citizens were entitled to keep this land.

The Age of the Agrarian Reforms

A recurrent problem in Danish towns was that the town dwellers often grazed more cattle than was reasonable. In a famous work about the state of Danish agriculture c. 1800, Gregers Begtrup, a professor in economics, wrote these lines: 'The town dwellers who neither make beer nor spirits and who are not in a position to buy mash from tradesmen, are forced to let their cattle starve in the harvest time, when the quantity of grass is poor. And in the small market towns you often see cattle walking in the streets all summer, lowing because of hunger' [translation from Danish by the author] (Begtrup 1803 (1978): 255).

When Begtrup wrote this, Danish agriculture was at the height of one of the most far-reaching restructuring processes in its history. In Danish historiography the period from c. 1750 to the beginning of the 19th century is often labelled 'the age of the agrarian reforms'. Increases in the price of corn and other farm products during the second half of the 18th century encouraged improvements in



Figure 2: Starreklinte – a typical village in eastern Denmark before and after enclosure. In the drawing of the structure in 1682 the black stripes (D) indicate the fields belonging to a particular farm, while A marks the meadows, B the fences, C and F the certain and probable siting of the farms and E the bog. The 1798 map shows that the farms were now moved with their new concentrated holdings, while some small holdings were established on the place where the village had been until then. Drawing by Karl-Erik Frandsen. (Dombernowsky 1988: 72, 322).



Figure 3: Odense on a map from 1717, when the city had approx. 5,000 inhabitants. Odense was surrounded by several fields, each with a certain name. 'The enclosure of the carters' was undoubtedly used for grazing the cart horses. In total about 300–400 cows and approx. 100 horses grazed on the meadows and fields in the Summer. (The National Archives, Ingeniørkorpset, Feignets kortsamling, box 1).



Figure 4: Næstved and Herlufsholm (to the left) on a drawing from the 1760s. As many other Danish towns, at that time, Næstved had between 1500 and 2000 inhabitants. (Pontoppidan 1767: 93).

agricultural productivity. The process was also stimulated by several laws, which were aimed at making Danish agriculture more efficient.

The most outstanding reform was the abandonment of strip farming. In countless villages all the small plots belonging to a farm was replaced by one compact holding, after which the farmstead often was removed

from the village itself and rebuilt out in the field (see **Figure 2**).

Many citizens and municipal governments in the towns took inspiration from what was going on in the countryside. This resulted inter alia in a new wave of cultivation of common land in the towns. However, the process took rather different courses in individual towns. In some

places it stretched over a very long period, consisting of several, distinct phases. In a few towns the reforms began already between 1750 and 1780, but in general the process started and finished rather late, compared with rural areas, and in some towns a final solution was not reached until about 1850. Below I will deal in some detail with the chain of events in three towns, which carried out enclosure processes in different decades. The selected cases throw light upon some typical conflicts in connection with the enclosure movement.

The Enclosure Process in Svendborg, Kalundborg and Viborg

Our journey begins in Svendborg (see **Figure 5**). Here the first initiative in reforming the structure was taken in 1769, when a vicar asked for a royal order to carve up the common (Bro-Jørgensen 1959: 311–319). His argument was that the large herds of cattle on the common played an important role in dissemination of cattle plague that killed thousands of Danish cows in the 1740s and 1760s. However, few people in the town seem to have agreed with the vicar about the necessity of agrarian reform, and this is probably why the central authorities did not support him.

In the 1780s the situation was quite different. In this decade a group of citizens who owned a great part of urban land sent four petitions to *Rentekammeret* (the predecessor of the Ministry of Finance). In these letters they applied for separation of their plots from the rest of the urban land. They referred to a law from 1781, which maintained that every plot owner from now on

had the right to claim such separation. But as the law only applied to rural parishes and not towns, the central authorities left it to the applicants to negotiate with the other citizens in Svendborg. Most of these rejected the idea of such a reform. They pointed out, among other things, that it would be difficult to obtain the necessary fence pickets and hedge-stakes and pointed out the possibility that no one would be interested in getting an integral holding in the most remote fields, which were insufficiently manured and where there were many trees.

The third phase of Svendborg's reform history began in the middle of the 1790s, when most of these trees were cut down. The town bailiff (mayor, judge and local police authority in one person) and a few other citizens now advocated a solution, where all land belonging to a certain person was put together in one place, and it was up to each land owner to use the land for his own convenience. As in other Danish towns and rural parishes before the agrarian reforms in the end of the 18th century, the people in Svendborg had always grown the same crop in adjacent fields, and the complex field structure with so many narrow strips made it necessary to sow and harvest at the same time. This structure demanded a close co-operation between the land users.

Apparently it was difficult for most of the citizens in Svendborg to depart from this old tradition for cultivation. In any case a great majority rejected the town bailiff's proposal, even if they accepted the idea of making fewer, but larger, plots. They still thought it reasonable that each person had several plots—plots in 'good' as well as 'bad' parts

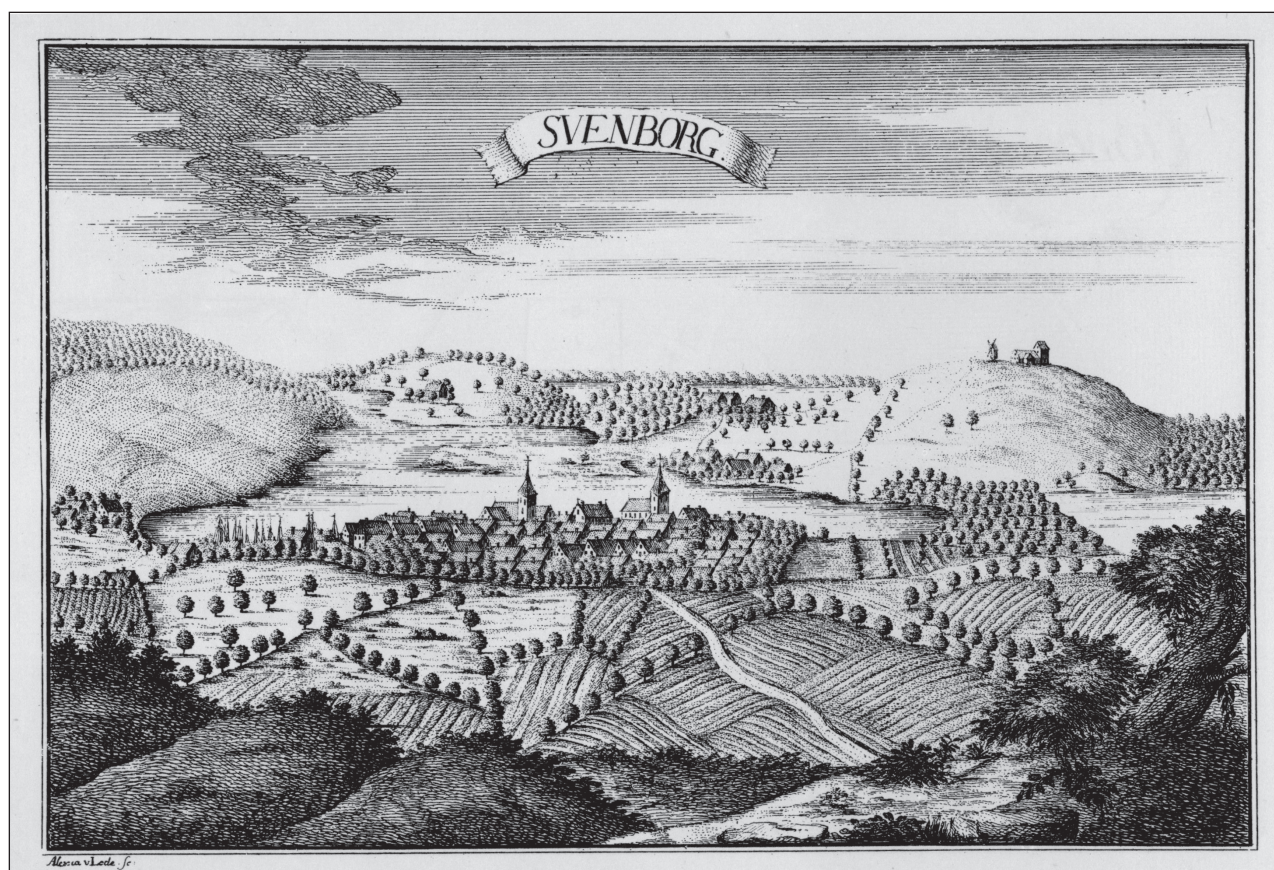


Figure 5: Svendborg, drawing from the 1760s. (Pontoppidan 1767: 531).

of the urban land. Besides, the majority preferred to keep the co-operative cultivation and grazing. They argued that the grazing on the common was very important for the poor who had just one or two cows, which provided them with milk.

However, soon after the retirement of the town bailiff in 1804, the citizens reached a compromise, and it had in fact many similarities to his original proposal. It was decided, though, to set aside a given area for the lots of the 89 small-plot owners. It was up to them to cultivate these lots in common, if they wished to do so.

Even more bitter conflicts took place in Kalundborg (Krogh 1985: 273–277). In this town with about 1300 inhabitants, the restructuring process began in 1771, when one of the commons was divided in two parts. One of them was henceforth to belong to a neighbouring manor, while the other was to be held by the town's inhabitants in common. Four citizens—all from the upper levels of society—took inspiration from this division and petitioned the central authorities in Copenhagen and the regional governor to carve up the remaining common land between the houseowners. They argued that it would improve the utilization of the land. The proposal was supported by the municipal corporation, but rejected by the majority of the citizens during a meeting about the subject. They held that, among other things, it would be expensive to set up so many fences between plots. So the reform movement petered out for a time. Twenty-eight years went by before an agrarian reform in Kalundborg was again placed on the agenda.

In 1799, however, a new structuring was carried out. The initiators were ten citizens who wanted to combine their lands. The proposal was sharply criticized by many other inhabitants, in particular the poor, who were afraid of losing their grazing rights and thereby perhaps also their access to milk from their own cows. Nonetheless, the central administration in Copenhagen forced through an enclosure. By this process, the area which could be used for common grazing was greatly reduced. In fact, the number of stockbreeders in Kalundborg went down drastically. And a roll of cattle-owners in 1837 reveals a remarkable change in the composition of this group. Most of the stockbreeders were now tradesmen, distillers, millers and other citizens who were able to combine husbandry with their main occupation. In contrast, the group of minor artisans and other people of humble means with only one cow had nearly disappeared.

The last case study concerns Viborg (see **Figure 6**). This town, which had approximately 2400 inhabitants at the census in 1801, was one of the most important regional centres for administration and trade in Jutland (the peninsula in western Denmark). But the surrounding area of Viborg was very thinly populated up to the second half of the 19th century, when a large part of the enormous Jutish moorland was brought under cultivation. And in fact a substantial part of Viborg's large urban landholdings (approximately 3300 hectares) consisted of heath and bog throughout most of the 19th century. Viborg was—as the historian Birgit Logstrup puts it—surrounded by a 'collar of heather' (1993: 42).

In 1801 and 1833 two proposals were put forward to sell off parts of the moorland. The first plan was made by the municipal corporation who suggested a reclamation of a particular bog in order to carve it up into 100 lots and sell them by auction. The other proposal was submitted by a board of citizens. They found it reasonable, if the municipal government sold off the land bit by bit, when potential buyers should apply for specific areas. In both situations, however, the regional governor adopted a more comprehensive point of view. He stated that before selling off any plot it was necessary to carry out a measuring and valuation of all urban land, even if such a survey would be quite time-consuming. The argument was that the untilled land belonged to the town and not to particular citizens. Moreover, the regional governor in the 1830s pointed out that the well-to-do town-dwellers should pay heed to the poorer ones, who often provided themselves with free heather and peat from the moorland.

In 1844, after a number of years, marked by disagreement between different groups of citizens, the municipal corporation appointed a committee with the task of writing a report with recommendations for an agrarian reform in Viborg. The committee obtained information from other towns, which had been through similar processes. From this it learned that it was problematic to use the traditional method—apportioning the new plots to each of the houses in the town according to the amount of taxes paid by individual citizens. There were two reasons for that, viz.:

- Some of the house-owners had no or little experience of—or interest in—agriculture and therefore couldn't use the new plots efficiently.
- Some of the plots were so small that it was hardly worthwhile cultivating them.

Therefore the proposal from the committee included these points:

- Each of the new plots in Viborg ought to be a minimum of 20 *tønder land* (about 11 hectares).
- New plots which were not cultivated over a given period should revert to the town.

By and large the municipal corporation agreed with the recommendations, which implied that presumably only a rather small, but interested, group of citizens would be engaged in the purchase of land. Consequently a total survey of the urban lands was made. After that there followed a series of controversies between the municipal government and the central authorities, but in 1852 the Ministry of the Interior gave permission for the parcelling out of the first 400 *tønder land* (about 220 hectares). Over the following ten years, about 80 deeds were registered concerning plots of moorland.

The End of Agriculture in Danish Towns

Although many Danish towns went through enclosure processes between c. 1770 and 1850, some towns still had hundreds of small strips of land by the middle of the



Figure 6: The lake on the outskirts of Viborg was in former times an important watering place for farm animals, as is indicated in this drawing by Hans Smith, c.1850. (The museum of the diocese of Viborg).

19th century. One of them was Skælskør, where the common land was carved up in the traditional way in 1795–1797, so that each of the house-owners got a share in different areas. This division created 211 new fields. Some of them were approximately 750 metres long, but only 6 metres wide! According to an article written by the local vicar in 1845, the yield of the most remote fields was quite small (Brasen 1845: 586ff.).

Like the enclosure process, the phasing out of urban agriculture in Denmark consisted of a long chain of events. In contrast to the villages only a very few urban houses were moved from the town streets to the surrounding fields. As the 19th century progressed, however, many buildings were erected in the fields. Many of these were just farm buildings without living quarters. In other cases, a house was built for labourers who worked in the fields or looked after the grazing animals, whilst the owner lived in the town, where he went about his other business.

From the end of the 19th century, urban agriculture was gradually separated from other professions. It meant that the fields from now on were owned and tilled by people who had agriculture as their primary occupation. These professional farmers usually settled outside the town, but in some places, such as Viborg, several farmsteads were situated in central parts of the town until about 1940–1950 (Lauridsen 1999: 274). As late as 1984, two active farmers lived in Hasle, one of Denmark's smallest and most rural towns (Ipsen & Lind 1984: 84). **Figure 7** shows a snapshot from another town—Ribe—which preserved its rural character for a very long time.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to conflate current research into the right of use and ownership of fields and common land in Danish towns. The analysis has brought to light many common features. There can be no doubt that the urban

land in the Middle Ages mainly consisted of woods, meadows, bogs and moors. In the 16th through 18th centuries many of these areas were brought under cultivation. But even during much of the 19th century, grazing of cattle, horses, sheep and other animals was still more important than tillage in many towns.

During the first wave of cultivation, much of the arable land was divided into hundreds of small strips, and typically a number of such strips were apportioned to each of the households. In most towns, presumably, this arrangement was originally considered as a leasing of land belonging to the town. However, this right of use soon changed to ownership, and in some towns certain persons—often the most successful and active merchants—gradually became owners of a great number of plots.

The enclosure movement took different courses in individual towns. In some places the process stretched over a very long period, comprising several, distinct phases. In a few towns the reform began already between 1750 and 1780, but in general the process started and finished rather late, compared with rural areas. Among other things this was due to the fact that the enclosure process was often very turbulent causing intense conflicts between different sections of the local population. The typical conflict was between well-to-do citizens, who owned many plots and wanted to bring them together in order to raise productivity, and poor people, who feared losing their grazing rights. A lack of specific legislation concerning agrarian reforms in towns made the process even more difficult and problematic.

The Danish Experience in a European Perspective

My article may be considered as a pioneer work, as there are apparently no other studies on a national level about the right to use urban land. But Denmark is undoubtedly



Figure 7: Cows walking through the main streets of Ribe, c. 1910. Presumably they were on their way between the meadows and the stables, where they were milked. (The city archives of Ribe).

not the only country with a great number of detailed local historical studies concerning urban agriculture, the results of which could be combined and contrasted. So I hope that my article might inspire other researchers to make similar syntheses on a national or international level.

By contrast, there is a rather comprehensive literature on the rural land tenure rights. In 2002 Martina De Moor, Leigh Shaw-Taylor and Paul Warde published their anthology *The management of common land in north west Europe, c. 1500–1850*, in which a number of researchers from Sweden, England, Holland, Belgium, Germany and France collected and discussed research results from their respective countries. Despite problems comparing land use in towns and villages (for example, agriculture was normally only a sideline in the towns), it is worthwhile to mention some main points from this anthology.

One of the points concerns the decrease in the areas in common use for tilling or grazing. This reduction process had its genesis in the Middle Ages and continued throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. But it accelerated after c. 1750, when increasing prices of grain made it profitable to cultivate new soil—a development stimulated by legislation in several countries—and many prominent politicians and officials in western Europe took the view that common property and cultivation obstructed enterprise and restricted the productivity and efficiency of agriculture (De Moor et al. 2002: 20f.; De Moor 2002: 125).

In many countries there was, however, a considerable variance in the extent of common areas, reflecting differences in landscape, fertility, size and structure of villages.

For instance about 25 per cent of the area in some *departements* in north-eastern and southern France was used in common as late as 1846, while it was just 0–5 per cent in many other parts of France at the same time (Vivier 2002: 146).

We also find a wide variance chronologically and spatially, concerning the management of common lands. Thus, several researchers have observed a tendency towards stricter regulation of the access to common areas during the 16th and 18th centuries, when the European population was growing and the pressure on the agrarian resources may have been increasing, too (De Moor 2002: 123; De Moor et al. 2002: 253). In England, for instance, it seems that ‘stinting’ was introduced in most of the lowland commons during the 16th century. ‘Stinting’ means that a person was allowed to graze a specified number of cows, horses or other animals, and this number often depended on the size of his arable plots (Shaw-Taylor 2002: 70f.). The large-scale reductions of forests, which many countries experienced from the Middle Ages to c. 1800, also resulted in numerous restrictions on the number of animals grazing in woodlands (e.g. De Moor 2002: 119).

Common rights were in fact an ambiguous phenomenon. Thus, in a lot of European villages the poor inhabitants were allowed to glean (in this case, to pick up remaining ears from corn) in the fields after harvest and gather fuel on the moors, whereas grazing rights in certain regions were almost without exception reserved for people who had plots of land at their disposal. Such exclusivity was found in many parts of lowland England (at least after

c. 1750), Drenthe (in the Netherlands), Normandy, Brittany and Anjou (Shaw-Taylor 2002: 74; Hoppenbrouwers 2002: 104ff.; Vivier 2002: 153). However, different patterns can be seen in other parts of the Netherlands and France. In northern Brabant, for example, all the inhabitants of a village were entitled to use the common lands, and in many villages in Flanders immigrants were allowed to avail themselves of these rights after a few years of residence (De Moor 2002: 129).

During the early modern period it became standard practice in Danish towns to sell plots, which originally had been attached to each of the houses. A similar development can be observed in rural parts of England and northern Brabant—and perhaps in many other parts of Europe (Shaw-Taylor 2002: 74; Hoppenbrouwers 2002: 102). To judge from the studies of rural areas in northern and western Europe it seems that the Danish towns followed general European development processes in many other ways. However, not until we have thorough studies of the situation in cities and towns in other countries, will it be possible to draw more precise conclusions about this subject.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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