



## The Danish Village: Its Age and Form

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## The Danish Village: Its Age and Form

By Viggo Hansen \*

### Abstract

*With the aid of the great Danish land register of 1688 and old maps, the author studies the changing form of two villages in North Jutland. He maintains that the nucleated form of the Danish village immediately prior to the enclosures<sup>1</sup> of the late eighteenth century was the result of two distinct processes operating from premedieval times. The first was a normal process of internal growth of population with an associated extension of arable land; the second was a periodic concentration of population from peripheral settlements onto a central site.*

### BRØDSLEV

The township of *Brødslev*, forming part of the parish of *Ingstrup* in the province of *Vendsyssel*, North Jutland (fig. 1), occupies a gently undulating morainic plateau whose soils are derived from sandy boulder clay (fig. 2). During Late Glacial times most of the present site was an island, and the many short valleys, now dry, that cut into the plateau appear to have originated then. When man settled in the area, his expanding arable fields occupied the level extents of glacial soils, while the steep slopes and somewhat damper bottoms of the small valleys were grazed by livestock. At the junction of these contrasting physical and economic landscapes the settlement, with its loosely grouped farmsteads and associated paddocks, arose.

When the great land register of 1688 was compiled, *Brødslev* township comprised eighteen farmsteads and five cottages. The farms, which were not equal in size or status, fell into three distinct groups (Table I). The first group contained five whole farms

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1. For a description of the Danish village before and after enclosure and of the associated documentary evidence vide *Thorpe, H.*, The influence of enclosure on the form and pattern of rural settlement in Denmark, Institute of British Geographers, Transactions and Papers, No. 17 (1951), London, 1952.

(*Gårde*), the second group five half farms (*Bol*) and, finally, came eight quarter farms (*Halve Bol*). It is interesting to find that although stall-feeding of livestock was essential throughout the winter, only the five whole farms (*Gårde* Nos. 1—5) and the five half farms (*Bol* Nos. 6—10) had specific rights to cut hay in the meadows.

To the east and west of the village lay the common fields divided into 38 shots, each with a distinctive name (Fig. 5). While the shots varied in length according to the nature of the terrain, their width appears to have fallen into certain well-defined groupings. The standard Danish land measure in use at the time was the Zealand *ell*, equivalent to a little over 2 feet, and the widest shot ranged from 450 to 470 *ells* (930—975 feet). Each shot was divided into a number of parallel strips, representing allocations of land to individual farms, and from Table II it will be seen that in a great many shots the number of strips was either 7 or a multiple thereof (e.g. 14 or 21). Taking measurements from the more regularly shaped and subdivided shots it is clear that the original width of a standard strip must have been 21.6 Zealand *ells* or 24 Jutland *ells*, which coincides remarkably with the customary *Dobbeltager* (double-acre) recorded in old Danish provincial laws from 1241 onward. Even more common in *Brødslev* was the single acre of 12 Jutland *ells*, being half the width of the *Dobbeltager*.

On the extreme western edge of the common fields lay three shots with very distinctive names — *Vestervang*, *Søndervang* and *Nordervang* (fig. 5) — suggesting that they were the fossilized remnants of the West Field, South Field and North Field of an ancient threefield system. It is highly significant that the strips in these shots belonged only to the five complete farms, and to *Bol* No. 6 and *Bol* No. 7. Moreover, the land register records that allocations of strips in these shots were measured »from the *Toft* (paddock)«, on the strength of which the author concludes that this is a reference to the former existence of a settlement, probably a village or hamlet, on this site. This settlement probably included only the five whole farmsteads, as the two *Bol* possessed only small strips. It is believed that the three-field system was only introduced into Denmark 1000 A.D., consequently *Old Brødsted's* pattern of common fields cannot be older than that. Yet the place-name ending suggests that the settlement itself may have originated as early as 500 A.D., and there may then have been two or three small farm clusters of which nothing is now known.

It is possible that this three-field system, based on a rotation of winter seed (rye), spring seed (barley or oats) and fallow, may not have been successful for more than a few centuries. There are good grounds for supposing that the climate deteriorated in late medieval times (from 1300 A.D. onward) and subsequent records describe the non-existing of a winter seed in North Jutland. Accordingly the farmers in *Old Brødslev* may have been driven to extend their arable land, the only opportunity for such expansion being to the east as shifting sand handicapped activity on the west. As population continued to increase, more and more land was taken in on the east until some time in late medieval times it became desirable for the settlement, now boasting seven farmsteads, to move to a new site more central to its fields. Thus, *New Brødslev* was created (Fig. 3). Shortly after this event, two additional farmsteads, represented by *Bol* No. 10 and No. 12 whose land lies mainly to the west of the new settlement, are believed to have been incorporated into the community. The new village now had nine farmsteads, of which all but one had the right to cut hay in the meadow, while No. 12, which was only small, had probably been fashioned out of No. 10.

This still omits us two more farmsteads (Nos. 8 and 9) with meadow rights to be explained. But an old record of 1553 confirms that there were two additional settlements, called *Hauenbye* and *Hauen Torp*, in the parish of *Ingstrup*. The place name ending *-bye* would date the former to Viking times (800—1000 A. D.), while *-torp* is considered medieval (1000—1200 A.D.). A search for further information about these two hamlets has been unsuccessful, but on the enclosure map there are two shots with the significant names of *Hauen* (*Haugen* or *Hoven*) and *Gammeljord* (Old Land) (Fig. 5). Reference to the land register shows that only farmsteads Nos. 8, 9 and 14 participated in *Gammeljord* which lay on the eastern periphery of the common fields in 1688. Perusal of the air photograph provides unmistakable evidence of the existence of a »lost« village or hamlet to the south of *Gammeljord*, which might conceivably be the *Hauenbye* of 1553. If this assumption is correct, it would appear that the deliberate destruction of *Hauenbye* and the incorporation of its farmsteads and its land in *Brødslev* probably occurred soon after 1553.

So far we have accounted for the five *Gårde*, the five primary *Bol* and *Halve Bol* Nos. 12 and 14, leaving six small *Bol* to be explained. Of these, No. 18, which held land only in a few of the more recent

shots, was certainly a very late addition to the community, while the remainder (Nos. 11, 13, 15, 16 and 17) were clearly the same five *Halve Bol* to which reference was made in the record of 1553. The latter affirms that shortly before 1553 five *Bol* were built from a farm in *Brødslev* that had belonged to the priest in *Ingstrup*. Consequently, at the end of the sixteenth century at least 17 farmsteads were to be found in *Brødslev*, while by 1688 the addition of No. 18 had increased this by one.

### GRINDSTED

The hamlet and township of *Grindsted* in *Hammer* parish is bordered on the south by the steep hill slopes of *Hammer Bakker* and on the north by low-lying Late Glacial plains whose surface is waterlogged in many places (Fig. 6). The intermediate area, which forms a platform of sandy boulder clay, is of relatively high fertility and intensive arable land-use. The oval village green, around which the farmsteads are grouped, is a common feature in eastern Denmark and closely resembles the German *Rundling* (Fig. 7). When the great Danish land register was prepared in 1688 the settlement comprised five whole farms (*Gårde*), seven half farms (*Bol*), four quarter farms (*Halve Bol*) and thirteen cottages (Table III). Four whole farms and three *Bol* had rights to cut hay in the meadow, while all farms could cut grass and reeds in the bogs.

The common fields were divided into three great fields (*Vange*), called *Stokbro Mark*, *Vestermark* (West Field) and *Søndermark* (South Field); each of these contained a varying number of shots, which in turn were subdivided into many parallel strips (Fig. 7). The strips contiguous with the eastern edge of the settlement belonged to *Gårde* 2, 3 and 4 and to *Bol* 1 and 5, while those on the western outskirts of the village belonged to *Gårde* 6 and 7 and to *Bol* 8, 9, 10 and 12 (Fig. 8). At some time past these strips had clearly served as paddocks (*Tofter*) until a subsequent redistribution of strips led to their incorporation in the common fields. In *Stokbro Mark* and *Vestermark* the allocation of strips to individual farms appears to have been quite haphazard and many farms held two or more contiguous strips, apparently the result of careful exchange of property over many years. Only in *Søndermark* do we find shots whose strips reveal an orderly allocation to individual farms. For example, in *Bløshøys Agre*, the largest and oldest of the shots in *Søndermark*, one finds a remarkable regularity of distribution; making allowances for a few exchanges of property,

one arrives at the following succession, reckoned from east to west — farms 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 6, (9), 12, 10 and 8 (Table V). Both the farmsteads in the village and the paddocks had the same succession, with the single exception that *Bol* 5 is represented here, but not in *Bløshøys* shot (compare Fig. 8). Reference to this practice of *Solskifte*, or the sun-distribution of strips from east to west within a shot, has been found in Danish provincial laws of the thirteenth century.

As there is no firm evidence of *Solskifte* in the other ancient fields, it would appear that the redistribution of strips in *Bløshøys* shot took place at a later date than in the other old fields. It may also follow that *Bløshøys* shot is younger than the others. One is then tempted to ask at what time and for what reason did this late redistribution of *Bløshøys* shot take place? Could it be that we have here evidence of the extension of *Grindsted's* field system as a result of common agreement between all farmers?

From an investigation of the relationship between *Gård* property and *Bol* property in each shot, it is clear that the *Gårde* were allocated three to four times as much land as the *Bol*. But at *Grindsted* a striking exception to this rule could be seen in *Hammerdam Agre*, the most westerly of the shots, where the *Bol* owned no less than 60 % and the *Gårde* only 40 % (Table VI). One can discount the suggestion that this was a compensation for remoteness from the village. The most reasonable assumption would be that the *Bol* had a priority to this part of the arable land, possibly because an earlier settlement had existed on this site. Unfortunately, there are no precise records of a village having disappeared here, but there is strong circumstantial evidence that a settlement called *Hammer* once stood on this site. *Grindsted* lies in *Hammer* parish, but although there is an isolated church called *Hammer Kirke*, a hilly area called *Hammer Bakker* and a pond called *Hammerdam*, there is no village of that name. It is not unlikely that such a village did exist in medieval times (1000—1200 A.D.), when the church was built, but subsequently disappeared. The reason for its disappearance might lie in the general deterioration of climate at the beginning of Late Medieval times c. 1300 A.D., when more stormy conditions prevailed. A rise in the level of ground water in and around *Hammer pond* might easily have made tillage very difficult, or even impossible, for the *Hammer* folk, and induced them to move the village to a more favourable site. Rather than establish an entirely new site, it was decided to extend the existing hamlet

of *Grindsted* by establishing a western row of farmsteads facing the older eastern row (fig. 8-2). As a compensation for the loss of *Hammerdam* shot, agreement was reached with the *Grindsted* folk, whereas all farmers tilled the *Bløshøys* shot in common.

While these changes were taking place, another *Bol* (No. 1) had been added on the eastern side of the settlement, so that by the end of the fourteenth century the enlarged village of *Grindsted* had ten farmsteads (in order Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 6, 9, 12, 10 and 8, in order to their place in the village). At a later date *Bol* 5 was built, and the settlement now consisted of eleven farmsteads as stated in the record of 1553 (fig. 8-3). Since then the fields have continually been extended by the addition of more strips, usually by individual activity. Especially has this been so in the steeper and less fertile parts of *Hammer Bakker*, once all the level land of the plateau had been pressed into cultivation. Finally between 1553 and 1688 growth of population resulted in the formation of one more *Bol* (No. 14) and four more *Halve Bol* (11, 13, 15 and 16) (fig. 8-4).

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