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Dagfinn Skre

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ARTICLE

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The Social Context of Settlement in Norway in the First Millennium AD

DAGFINN SKRE

Institute of Archaeology, Art History and Conservation Studies, University of Oslo, Norway

A comparative approach towards understanding the character of the Scandinavian societies in the First Millennium AD is argued for in this article. A comparison with the other Germanic cultures north of the Alps, with their more diverse source material, allows for a thematically broader and more developed understanding of the specific and varying social formations in Scandinavia. The challenge of involving the archaeological record in this kind of analysis is more readily overcome if the Scandinavian written sources from the 11th century onwards are also included. A study along these lines, an analysis of the social context of settlement history in the region of Romerike, central eastern Norway, is presented. The settlement expansion in the First Millennium AD seems to have taken place in two main waves, one in the Late Roman Iron Age and one in the Viking Age, both of them brought about by the aristocracy whose control of the land was one component in their dominion. The aristocracy set their men, some of whom were slaves, to cultivate new farms on the land that was in their dominion. The rapid growth in the number of these unfree, half-free and free men made manpower abundant, while good arable land at that time was scarce. This situation reduced the need for forced labour, which is probably one of the main reasons why serfdom of the Continental type never developed in Norway.

SCANDINAVIAN IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE 1990s: THE COMPARATIVE APPROACH

The theoretical and methodological tools for analysing Scandinavian societies in the First Millennium AD have undergone a marked change during the last decade. While the application of anthropological parallels and general theories about human societies was the main tool until the mid-1980s, the main achievements thereafter have been the result of thorough empirical studies conducted in a comparative perspective, taking into account the main structural developments and cultural features in the North Germanic areas. The first substantial effort in this line was 'From Tribe to State in Denmark' (Mortensen & Rasmussen 1988, 1991). Since then Frands Herschend (1993, 1997) has described cultural, ideological and ritual aspects of the Scandinavian aristocracy's dominion, indicating that these aspects form a substantial part of the basis of this dominion. Several works from Charlotte Fabech (1991, 1994) point to the religious foundation of the aristocratic dominion. Lotte Hedeager (1996, 1997, in press) also points to the religious legitimization of the aristocratic power, depicting Woden as the shaman god for the Germanic warrior aristocracy, which invaded the Roman Empire and established the early Germanic kingdoms. Heiko Steuer (1987 and 1989) characterizes the Merovingian society, with some bearing on Scan-

dinavia, as a 'Personenverbandstaat', with personal ties between the military leader and his men being the main coherent force in society. Per Ramqvist (1992:226) considers the aristocrats buried with prestigious objects in the Roman Iron Age and Migration Period grave field at Högom, Northern Sweden, to be connected to Continental nobles by this type of relationship.

This discussion of the Scandinavian societies in a Northern European perspective has proved very fertile, the main fruits springing from the introduction of cultural, religious and ideological themes in the interpretation of archaeological material. This introduction is permitted by the theoretical development from the late 1980s onwards, and by the broad Northern European perspective, since the wider range of sources in Britain and on the Continent gives access to these immaterial aspects of society. Fundamental aspects of society, also economy, may now be discussed within a cultural and ideological framework, enabling archaeologists to lay aside the depressing burden of generalizing and all-encompassing theories. The potential of this approach is far from exhausted. As the understanding of the so-called 'feudal' societies of the Continent is deepened, as the concept of 'feudalism' is proved anachronistic and dogmatic (Rosenwein 1989:xii, Reynolds 1994) and as the whole idea of the Nordic countries being basically different from the Continental ones is abandoned (Gelting 1988, Iversen 1994, Skre 1998a), the ground is laid for students of Scandinavian Early Medieval societies (5th–11th centuries) to conduct further ventures into this fertile landscape of comparative research.

There are certainly differences between the Northern Germanic societies, and there can be no question of transferring models and structures from the Germanic societies in England and on the Continent to Scandinavia. But numerous thematic studies demonstrate that rather than seeing Continental societies as more or less feudal, and the Nordic societies as dominated by a majority of more or less equal odal farmers who became tenants when feudal structures were imposed by Church and aristocracy in the 11th and 12th century society, it is more productive to see all Northern European societies in the latter half of the first Millennium AD as sharing several characteristic traits. The most prominent traces are the great importance of personal ties within the aristocracy, the fragility and instability of power structures in both kingdoms and chieftain-type societies (Dumville 1977:72, Wood 1977:7–8, Arrhenius 1985:194–195, Sigurdsson 1993), the central role of the rivalry for honour in the social dynamics (Schlesinger 1956:119, Wenskus 1961:35–38, Wallace-Hadrill 1962, Wolfram 1994, Miller 1990, Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, Sigurdsson 1993), the multifaceted power of the aristocracy ranging from control of land and men (Theuws 1990, Sigurdsson 1993, Samson 1994, Jørgensen 1995, Skre 1998a) to considering themselves as the descendants of the gods, or — in the Christian version — as God's anointed (Loyn 1962:230, Dumville 1977:77ff, Staubach 1983, Wallace-Hadrill 1983, Steuer 1987: 393–400, Steinsland 1990, 1991, Wolfram 1990:42 and 114ff., Fabech 1991, Schjødt 1991), and the importance of slavery in agrarian production (Duby 1977, Bonassie 1991, Iversen 1994, Skre 1998a, Widgren 1998).

But the differences between the North European societies are still apparent. The conditions for social and political development were very different within this vast area, one of the most important differences existing between those areas that had been most influenced by and still had remains of the Roman Imperial Administration, and those that lay outside its sphere of control. The vast Migrations of the 5th and 6th centuries AD created a social turbulence in the affected areas, which triggered the development of new political structures and social organization on the foundations of the Classical heritage. Although the Norse areas were involved in these events as the homelands of some of the migrating groups and as the

homelands of military units that served in the armies of kings and princes of the Continent, the impact of these developments on the Scandinavian societies was only secondary and delayed, possibly with some exceptions for Denmark. While the Continental societies in the 8th and 9th centuries AD were increasingly more influenced by the Christian ideal of the King as God's prime servant on Earth, promoting the Church, maintaining peace in his Kingdom and defending it against enemies, there is nothing in the sources which indicates that this was the case in the north. The Norse societies seem to have maintained their old structure of tribes, each of them dominated by a numerous aristocracy, and only temporarily ruled by a chieftain. During the Late Viking Age, the 10th and early 11th centuries AD Norwegian warlords, who had been fostered by or had spent years of their life in the armies and courts of Christian kings, returned to their homeland with the intention of attaining the same kind of power they had experienced abroad (Skre 1998b). The people were Christianized, and royal authority was established, possibly more successfully than further south. On the Continent, in England and in some parts of Denmark and Sweden, the aristocracy in the 12th century managed to convert their power based on old ideology and violent repression of the peasantry into the new power structures defined by privileges, documents and laws. But in Norway the power of the aristocracy was to a larger extent broken by the king. And in the late 13th century the Norwegian kings had greater influence on legislation and comparatively larger incomes from taxation than their counterparts in the south.

There can be no such thing as one correct vocabulary and one correct approach for understanding the past. Different approaches demand different vocabularies and focuses, and the comparative approach makes its own particular demands, as it requires its definite sacrifices. The parallels between Scandinavia and the other Northern Germanic areas are strongest in some deeply rooted aspects of culture, and consequently the comparative use of Continental evidence must focus on these aspects.

The methods of comparative research must also take into consideration the kind and amount of source material available. Because of the relative abundance of Early Medieval written evidence on the Continent and in England, these aspects of culture can be traced much further back in time than in Scandinavia. The paucity of written sources dealing with Scandinavia makes the few that do exist all the more important. But the main source of information concerning the Early Middle Ages in Scandinavia is archaeological material. The challenge is to bring this material into a dialogue with the written evidence from other parts of the Northern Germanic area.

These two partners of dialogue are two of the three pillars on which a comparative approach must rest. The third pillar is the Norwegian sources dating from the High Middle Ages (12th–14th centuries). Written evidence from these periods is much more abundant than from earlier periods, and consequently our understanding of the High Medieval Nordic society is better founded than for earlier periods. This material, and the long tradition of research in connection with it, should not be ignored by those working with the preceding centuries. It is best utilized by making sure that it is possible to follow the development from the social and cultural conditions one reconstructs in the Early Middle Ages to those which may be read out of the evidence from the High Middle Ages.

SETTLEMENT HISTORY AS SOCIAL HISTORY: THE NORWEGIAN CASE

This rather long discussion is necessary in order to introduce the reader to the theoretical and methodological considerations behind the main theme of this paper — the social context of settlement in Norway in the First Millennium AD. Settlement history cannot be sufficiently explained by discussing the clearing

and relinquishing of farms within an economic and demographic context. When it comes to interpreting settlement remains, it must be fair to say that settlement history is social history or nothing. The social aspects that are given particular attention in this paper are the ways in which aristocratic dominion over land and men was expressed in the settlement structure and its development.

In the area of rural settlement structure there are important differences between Northern/Middle Scandinavia as compared to Southern Scandinavia and the Continent. The natural condition for settlement in the most fertile areas on the Continent, with extensive and continuous areas of cultivated land, made it possible for the aristocracy to restructure their landed estates according to what suited them best. In Middle and Northern Scandinavia the cultivated areas are subdivided into farmsteads defined by natural features such as marshes, forests, rivers, brooks and small valleys. The natural conditions in the northern areas made the running of large estates difficult. It was more efficient to maintain the small farms as individual units, and make the farmer pay land rent. For this reason, and because of the scarcity of good land, the basic structure of settlement in the most fertile areas of Norway was established by the end of Migration Period, in the 6th century. Even though it may sound incredible from an English, a Continental or even a Southern Scandinavian point of view, it is a fact that the main structure of settlement in these areas is about 1500 years old, in some areas even several centuries older. But, as I will discuss, even though the settlement structure survived fairly unchanged through the period of fundamental changes in the Norwegian society, the way in which the aristocracy ran their landed estates and the nature of the dominion they exercised over their tenants and serfs changed fundamentally.

The key unit in the political life in the North Germanic societies in the First Millennium AD was the tribe. Some of the written sources from this period mention the names of several of these tribes. The earliest recording of tribes in Norway is found in Jordanes' work *Getica* written around AD 551. Jordanes mentions 28 tribes in Scandza, and one of these is Raumarici, literally 'those who come from Raumarike', present day Romerike, which is the area in which the settlement studies to be presented here were conducted (Fig. 1). Originally the tribe's name must have been Raumi, and the region was called Raumarike, literally 'the area controlled by the Raumi'. When, in the 6th century, the tribe was called after the region's name, one may conclude that the tribe and its control over this area was already ancient, probably several centuries old. The same was probably the case with the tribes in the four other main regions in inland Eastern Norway, and in the other regions in Southern and Middle Norway, several of which were mentioned by Jordanes.

What, then, was a tribe in Early Medieval Northern Germania? The tribe comprised the families, which in the written sources are often called the 'gens'. These families were bound together not by a common biological ancestry, but by their common, invented divine ancestry, stating that they were the offspring of a union between the gods. This group of thought-to-be descendants, constituting the tribe, could be narrowed, broadened or split, according to changing political realities (Wenskus 1961:46ff., Wolfram 1990:17). Accordingly the tribe was a political unit and a social occurrence, not a result of biological descent.

The meaning of the concept 'gens' varies in the sources, and this probably corresponds to a social reality in which the group could not be definitely defined — or rather was defined on the basis of what fitted the situation. This flexibility corresponds to the bilateral Norse kinship system, in which every individual was related both to one's mother and one's father's kin (Odner 1973:103ff., Bagge 1991: 112ff., Vestergaard 1988, Fenger 1971:136, Sawyer 1982:45, Gaunt 1983, Goody 1983: 232 and 234, Murray 1983, Iversen 1994: 211ff.). Therefore, only siblings had an identical

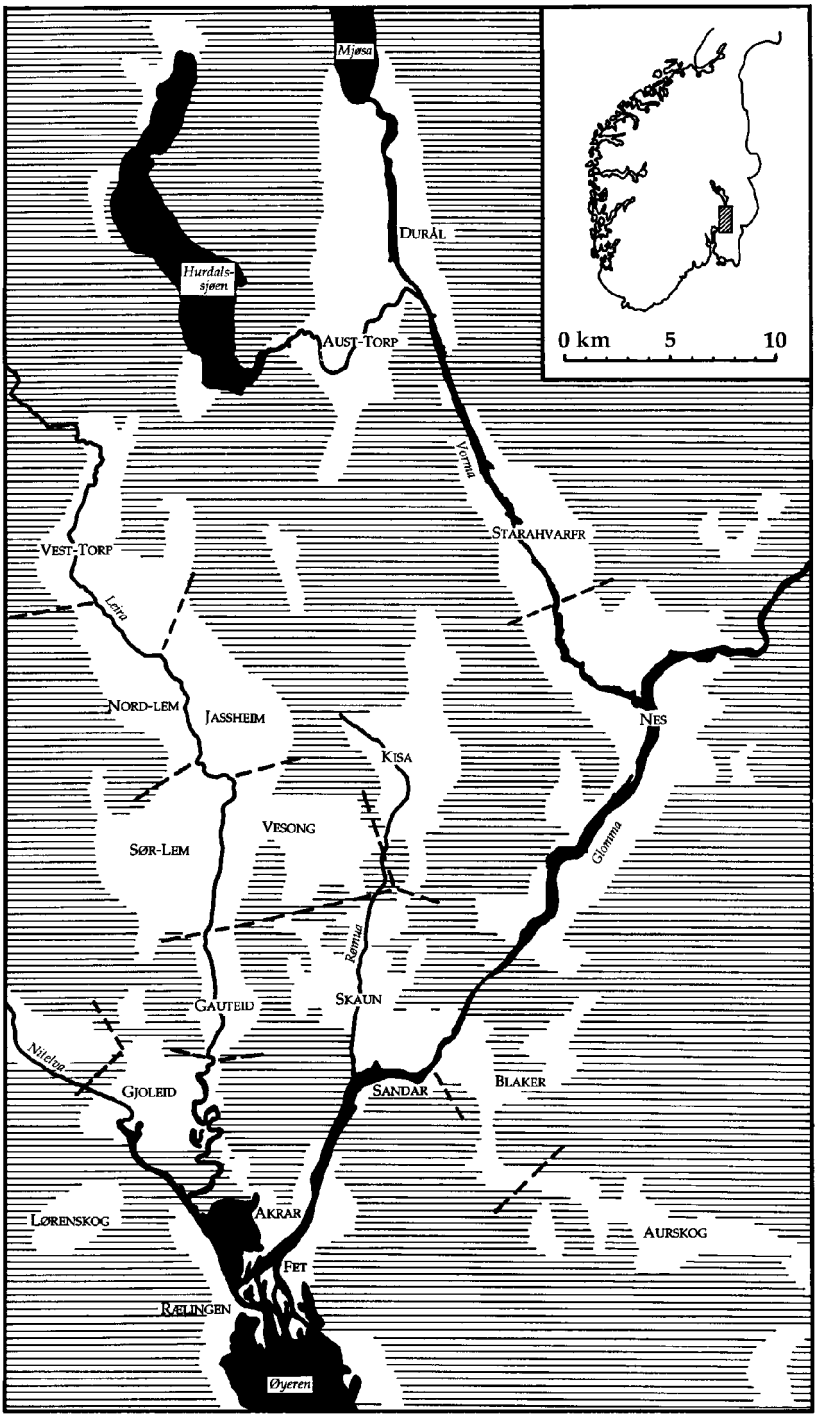

Fig. 1. *Romerike, and its location in Norway. The hatched areas were mainly uninhabited. The Medieval names of the close to 20 lesser districts in the region and the borders between these districts are indicated.*

kinship group, and clan-like groups could not be formed. This understanding of political alliances and divine ancestry being the main coherent forces in the tribe is in accordance with Reinhard Wenskus's research and contrary to what he (1961:14f.) portrays as the romantic concept of the tribe — invented in the 19th century and still very much alive — which describes the tribe as a result of linear biological descent.

In addition, the romantics considered the tribe's males to be political equals, which obviously has not been the case. In the political and social life of the tribe, some of the families were more influential than others, and during the history of the tribe far from all of the families in the tribe were able to practise what one might call an aristocratic lifestyle. Some of them were powerful and well off, while others were powerless and poor and more or less dependent on those in power. The continuing success of a family depended on 'good' marriages, able heirs, and success on the battlefield. Those among the gens who had political influence in the tribe were the ones who had power over land and men, and this aristocratic segment is also what is frequently meant in the sources by the concept 'gens'.

Both the archaeological material and the Old Norse poetry indicate that the character of the Nordic tribe was comparable to that of the Continent. Gold foil figures depicting the romantic encounter between the male God and the female Jotun (a giantess) have been found in the remains of the halls on aristocratic farms from the 7th and 8th centuries (Lidén 1969, Steinsland 1990, Munch 1991, Lundqvist 1997, Herschend 1993, 1997), and several old poems traces the descent of Viking Age aristocrats back to divine sources (Steinsland 1991).

THE POSSESSION OF LAND

An examination of the kind of dominion exercised by the aristocracy among the Raumi and other Norwegian tribes takes its point of departure in the evidence concerning landholding in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. At the end of this period about 40% of the land in Norway was in the possession of the Church, 7% was owned by the king, 20% by the lay aristocracy (nobility and wealthy citizens), and 35% by farmers; 500 years earlier the ownership of the land was radically different, because two of these types of landlords did not exist. The building-up of royal land probably started in the late 9th century when Harald Fairhair started his campaign to gain authority over the whole of Norway. The building-up of ecclesiastical land started in the early 11th century, when the Christian kings in the newly converted land transferred large gifts of land to secure the livelihood of the clergy.

This means that in the Early Medieval Period the land was in possession of the two other types of landholders, the farmers and the aristocracy. No sharp distinctions can be drawn between these two groups; perhaps one can say that the farmers, whose main occupation was in the working of their land, owned their own farms and sometimes one or two smaller ones, while the aristocracy was to a lesser extent engaged in work on the farms, and mainly lived from the outcome of their landed possessions.

It is difficult to assess the proportion of the land that each of these groups possessed during the First Millennium AD, and it probably changed throughout the period. The widely held opinion that the private possession of the farm by the individual farmer was the 'original' form of landholding and that usurpers such as the Church and the nobility introduced the dominion over several farms has no foundation other than romantic ideology from the 19th century (Skre 1999). Nevertheless, it is likely that the rivalry within the aristocracy during the Roman and Early Medieval Period brought an increasingly larger portion of the land into the possession of a gradually stronger and more hierarchical aristocracy. It is also reasonable to assume that the relative distribution

between the two groups varied strongly between the different regions of the country, as it did in the mid-14th century (Bjørkvik 1995). Aristocratic possession was undoubtedly stronger in the most fertile regions.

In the High Middle Ages the possession of land was in reality the possession of the right to landrent. In the oldest sources, which are laws dating from the mid-12th century, the relation between the landlord and his tenant seems to have been that between two free individuals. But Continental parallels strongly indicate that these kinds of laws and contracts that were more preoccupied with the economic and practical arrangements and less with the personal ties between the two parties grew more common at this time. But the social realities behind the contracts varied. Accordingly, little can be deduced from these laws concerning the social recruitment of the class of tenants and the historical background for tenancy.

From Frankish sources, it seems that the development of tenancy in the Early Middle Ages was closely linked with the development of the settlement structure, with the organization of landed estates, and with slavery (Schmitt 1977). The large, landed estates were not run like the Roman latifundia, which had large numbers of slaves to cultivate the one large farm. In the Northern Germanic areas, the estate was subdivided into several smaller farms (*mansi*), each run by a tenant and his household. The tenants on the different *mansi* on the estate could be free men, they could be former slaves who had been granted freedom by their landlord, or some farms could be run by a slave and his household. The obligations and conditions for the different kinds of tenants differed considerably. The free tenant could have his own slaves to help work his *mansi*.

There were several avenues into tenancy, also for free men, but the most common seems to have been that of the slave who was set by his lord on a *mansi*, or on some uncultivated land to clear and cultivate, with the prospect of being given freedom. In this way the landlord increased his number of *mansi*, he kept his slaves reasonably satisfied by giving them the hope of attaining freedom, and he created for himself and his heirs loyal peasants through several generations. It is a common trait of Germanic laws that the freed slave and one or more generations of his descendants were not totally free, but had obligations of service and loyalty to his former owner and his heirs. And even if the freed slave's descendants when having attained full freedom should leave the estate, the value of the estate was increased by the new *mansi* that had been cleared. The few sources from the 6th and 7th centuries indicate that the estates were run in the same way back to the time of the Roman Empire. This is evident both in Gaul and in other Merovingian areas (Wood 1994:211–212).

Some written sources describing events in the Viking Age, mainly sagas written down in the 13th century but based on an older oral tradition, indicate that the historical background for tenancy may have been much the same in the Norse areas. In several contexts, both on the mainland and in the newly colonized areas on Iceland, slaves were utilized in the same manner as in the Continental estates. One well-known example is Snorre's (St. Olav's saga ch. 22, 23, 117, 120) account of Erling Skjalgsson at the farm of Sola in Rogaland on the southwestern coast of present-day Norway. Erling, who lived in the early 11th century, gave his slaves land to cultivate so they could harvest crops to sell, and in three years time a slave's savings sufficed for him to buy his freedom.

Tore Iversen (1994:213–240) has analysed a number of farms with names indicating that their first inhabitants were unfree or half free. Their names indicate that such farms were established throughout the First Millennium AD, and their borders indicate that they were established on a piece of land formerly belonging to a larger farm. Iversen's finds indicate that slaves in the Norse areas have been set by their lord on his land to cultivate new farms, and that this was the case not only

in the highest aristocratic households like Erling's, but also on the normal-sized farm.

The number of examples in the sagas is still few and there are problems about their validity as sources for the social conditions in the Viking Age. The number of farm names indicating the use of slaves in the cultivation of new farms is also very low. Even though these sources clearly indicate the active use of slaves in the agrarian production as well as in the taking up of new farms in Early Medieval Norway, it is unclear how common this was, and how important this practice was in the running and expansion of landed estates. To get a firmer grip on these problems, we must turn to the largest source category from this period, the archaeological record.

LANDLORDS AND PEASANTS AT ROMERIKE

I have studied these kinds of problems in Romerike (Fig. 1), which is one of the five main settlement regions of inland Eastern Norway, the others being Ringerike, Hadeland, Toten and Hedmark. The region, which has its southern limit about 20 km northeast of the northernmost part of the Oslo fjord, measures about 60 km from south to north, and 30 km from east to west. The land is very fertile, and varies from rich pastures on clayish soil, to easily tilled sandy soil. The region is divided into about 20 more or less distinct settlement areas separated by rivers, forests and infertile bogs, forests, cliffs and heath.

I have carried out intensive settlement studies on an area of seven farms in Kisa, a rather poor and marginal part of this settlement area, situated in the middle of Romerike (see Skre 1998a). The studies of gravefields, all of them from the Viking Age and Late Merovingian Period, of settlement remains, and pollen analysis reveal that the area was extensively used as pasture with occasional fields from the Late Bronze Age. But there are no traces of settlements from this period. Probably the area was utilized from settlements in more fertile areas near by. In the vicinity there are a couple of large farms that indicate very old age, Ås, Algarheim and Støvre. One or more of these farms probably had this area as a part of their land in this period.

Some time in the Roman Period, probably around AD 200, a definite change took place in the agricultural exploitation of the area. Five settlements were established within a short period, perhaps less than a century. Then no changes in the settlement pattern occurred until the Viking Age, when two more farms were established.

All of these seven farms seem to have been in continuous use until they were deserted after the Black Death in the 14th century. Three of them were never taken up again, and the name is lost for one of them. The second of the farms established in the Roman Iron Age was called Flatner, and the third was called Kvernås. The last two of the five farms were taken up again in the 17th century, and they kept their old names, Habberstad and Ukuset. The two Viking Age farms were called Vågstad and Vågen.

From these results, and from intensive pollen analysis elsewhere in the region, a general pattern can be deduced (Fig. 2). In the millennium preceding the Middle Ages only the most fertile areas in the region were intensively exploited with settlements and continuously cultivated fields. The less fertile areas near by were extensively exploited, probably with grazing cattle and temporary fields. In the mid- or Late Roman Period several settlements were established in the areas which in the preceding centuries had been extensively exploited. At the same time, hitherto unexploited and more marginal areas were taken into extensive use.

An indication as to how the Early Medieval settlement expansion should be characterized in more social terms is found in the distribution pattern of small and large farms in the region. The sizes of farms, which as a general rule have been fairly constant through the centuries, can, with a high degree of reliability, be reconstructed from medieval and

17th century sources. The relevant dividing line between what may be considered as small and large farms can be deduced from the remains of the system of *mansi* and manors found in the written sources from the High and Late Middle Ages in these areas. From this evidence manors appear to have had the size of 4 markebol and more (Vigerust 1991:76f.). Markebol is the main High Medieval unit for measuring the size of farms. It must be emphasised that many of the farms above this limit were not manors, and many of the ones below the limit were not *mansi*. But the majority of each is certainly to be found on either side of this dividing line.

In densely settled areas the pattern in the distribution of small and large farms is clouded, but in areas bordering on infertile ground it is clearer. The pattern seems to be that of large farms being surrounded by one, two or more smaller farms, the largest number found in the region being the eight small farms surrounding the large farm of Elstad in Jassheim, central Romerike.

It seems likely that these smaller farms were established from the large farm near by, on a hitherto extensively exploited part of the farm. But the social character of this settlement expansion is impossible to deduce from this evidence alone. Probably the small farms were cultivated by peasants who in some way or another were dependent on the owner of the large farm. Probably there were many kinds of dependence, from being the owner's slave, to being his poor relative or friend. Only one of these varieties of relations can be discerned in the archaeological record, and that is slavery.

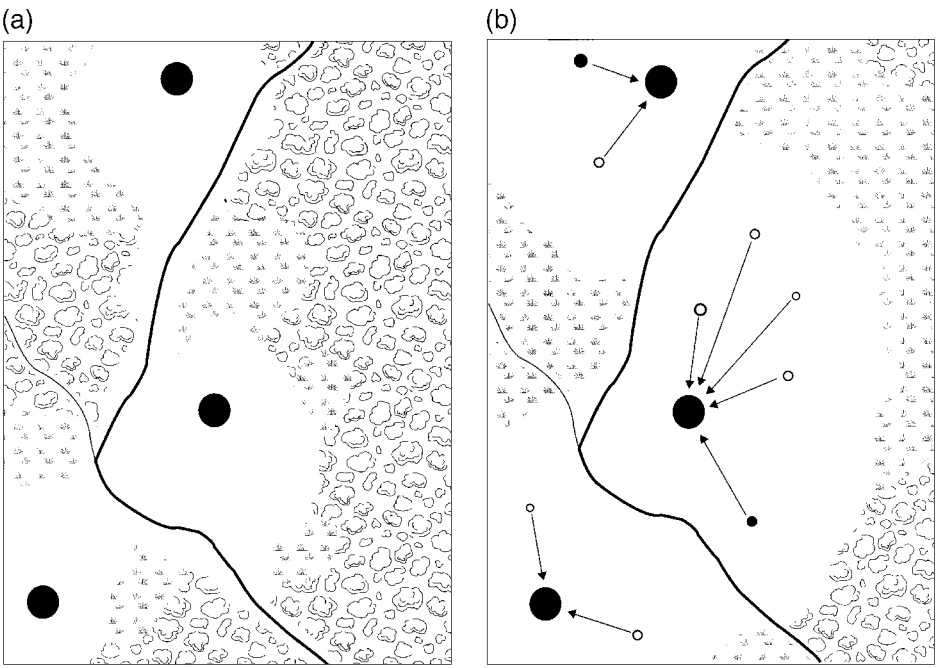

Fig. 2. *Schematic and hypothetical representation of the marked change in the exploitation of the landscape around AD 200. Prior to the change (left), the landscape was probably utilized from some large settlements, the land nearby intensively, with permanent and fertilized fields, the more distant areas ('grass') extensively, with grazing and temporary fields. Around AD 200 (right) several small settlements were established in the areas that earlier on had been extensively utilized, and the extensive mode of exploitation was introduced into areas which hitherto had been forest.*

Through archaeological finds slavery can be traced back at least to the Roman Iron Age. The role of slaves in the settlement expansion can be determined by examining the archaeological record. The difference, which it is possible to exploit in this connection, is the difference in the burial practices of free men as opposed to those of slaves. In a Christian society, every dead person is obliged to have a burial, but this was obviously not the case in the pagan Early Medieval Scandinavia. The number of graves usually found in connection with a farm is much lower than that of persons who must have died on the farm in the pagan period. Of those who were buried, some had a gravemound built over their grave, and some were put to rest in an existing mound built over the grave of some other person.

The first thing to explore is what it is that distinguishes those who had grave mounds built over their graves from those who did not. The average time intervals between the building of a mound on a farm indicate that a new mound was built every generation, and it is a reasonable assumption that the mound was built over the grave of the deceased owner, and that the building of his mound was a part of the ritual performed by his heir. Both runic inscriptions and literary sources indicate this to be the case (Skre 1997a). The background for this practice is easy to understand. The legitimacy of possessing land was founded in the owner's position as heir — that is his blood ties to the former owner, and that owner's ties to the former, and so on. The mounds on the farm made this line of earlier owners, and consequently the present owner's right to his farm, visible in the landscape.

As a result of this practice only a fraction of the free population — only those who left land to their heirs — had a mound built over their remains. Those who did not own anything had no chance of having a grave mound. Among these were the slaves. The slave had no right to possession — he was himself the possession of his lord. Germanic laws dealing with slavery imply that the slave was only allowed to have very limited possessions, for example his knife, or the savings he was making to buy his freedom. Consequently, no one would be his heir and build a mound to commemorate him. The same probably goes for the released slave and his half-free descendants, who had limited legal rights.

The mental image of the slave in this period also made the burial of a slave unthinkable. The slave was not a member of society. He was more a creature than a human being. When he died his remains were probably handled like those of a dead horse or cow. The practice recorded among the Vikings by the Arab merchant Ibn Fadlan — that the dead slave's body was left for the dogs and birds of prey to eat (Birkeland 1954:20) — might have been common.

The distribution of grave mounds on small and large farms, respectively, reveals an interesting pattern. In the Late Roman and the Migration Period, that is the 3rd to the mid-6th century, 69% of the grave finds from Romerike came from large farms. The number of large farms is much lower than small ones, and when this is taken into consideration it turns out that graves on Romerike are four times more common on large farms than on small farms. There are few graves from this period in the region, and they are far more numerous in a neighbouring region to the north-west, Hadeland. The trend in Hadeland is even more explicit — 85% of the graves come from large farms.

One could imagine that the marked difference in the frequency of graves between small and large farms in the early period could purely be the result of social differences — that the graves on small farms were so poorly equipped that few of them have been found. But from the surviving evidence, this is clearly not the case. The few graves that have been found on small farms have the same kind and number of objects as those found on large farms.

In the Viking Age, the 9th and 10th centuries, the number of grave finds increased greatly in Romerike. The distribution of these graves on small versus large farms differs

distinctly from the preceding period. In the Viking Age, graves are only 1.3 times more common on large farms than on small ones. Owing to changes in the internal structure of large farms, this figure should be reduced. In this period many of the large farms were split up between several households. The number of grave mounds on the large farms would therefore be higher, and consequently these farms have a better chance of being represented in the lists of finds. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the Viking Age grave mounds are as common on small farms as on large farms.

This difference in the frequency of graves must have been the result of a considerable change in the legal status of a fair share of the persons occupying small farms. In the Late Roman and Migration Periods several of these farms must have been occupied by slaves or the half-free descendants of slaves. These peasants were legally dependent on their lord, and they had no rights over the farm they occupied. Consequently, they could not have a mound built over their graves. But graves are also found on small farms in this period, so probably the landlords engaged free men to run some of the small farms which they had established in the outskirts of their dominion.

The markedly higher proportion of small farms having grave mounds in the Viking Age indicates that a much larger proportion of the tenants were free men. Evidence from the High and Late Middle Ages indicates that the normal procedure was that a son became a tenant after his father, and judging from the continuity in the use of gravefields on the Viking-Age farms, this was probably the case in the Viking Age as well. The inheritance an heir received from the former tenant was the right to run the farm. It may seem alien from a modern point of view that tenancy could be an object for inheritance. But the Medieval concept of property differed from the modern in the sense that exclusive rights over land were uncommon. The norm was that different persons had different rights to the same piece of land, and the relation between these rights reflected the social relationship between the persons. The relation between the tenant and his lord in the Early Middle Ages seems to have been much more diverse than what is known in later time — more like a relationship between a patron and his client. Concerning the rights in the land which the tenant held, the lordship was probably expressed in the lord's right to land rent, probably a fixed share in the crop, while the tenant had the right to hold the farm. In all likelihood, this was a right that could be inherited. In the High Middle Ages, and probably earlier, the lordship also included the right to send the tenant off the land, but this was hardly a common situation. As long as the tenant ran the farm well, it was not in the lord's own interests to send him away. Moreover, this would have damaged the lord's reputation. The good lord treated his loyal men and supporters well.

THE CONTROL OF LAND AND MEN

The strict aristocratic control over the agrarian production in Romerike was not necessarily a phenomenon that can be applied to all of Early Medieval Norway. As mentioned earlier, the Church and the aristocracy in the Late Medieval Period had most of their landed possessions in the most fertile regions. In the less fertile regions, and in landscapes where the fertile land was more dispersed, the peasantry were the main owners. This is partly due to the Church being most interesting in attaining farms in these regions, since they gave the highest yield for the landlords. But probably this situation also to some degree mirrors regional differences in the character of the Early Medieval settlement expansion. In the Roman Iron Age the aristocracy were probably well settled in the fertile regions, and they could therefore exercise a strict control over the use of the land in the expansion phase. In these densely settled areas it was possible to exercise control over slaves who were left to cultivate land in the vicinity. This would have been much more difficult in the marginal regions

where the distance to the next plot suitable for a farm could be a kilometre or more.

The possible regional differences in this respect are certainly an area for future research. I have made a case study of a region which must be characterized as marginal — Høyland Fjellbygd in Rogaland, south-western Norway. The cultivated soil in this area is poor, and the cultivable plots are separated by areas of heath and rock. The settlement expansion in the Late Roman Iron Age is very well documented in this area by Bjørn Myhre (1972). From his material it is clear that nearly all the 58 farms that were taken up in this region had grave mounds from their first two or three centuries. It is a reasonable assumption that this area was settled by free men who took land which no one else claimed.

The marked change towards having free men as tenants in the later part of the period should probably not be interpreted as a reduction of the aristocracy's control over the agrarian production. Rather, it is an indication that the needs of the aristocracy had changed, and that their control took new forms. In the Migration Period, the hall and the battlefield probably were the most important political arenas (Herschend 1993, 1998). Well-trained, well-equipped, and well-organized armed men were the key to political power, and politics was an activity for a narrow elite (Olausson 1997, Skre 1998a:259–289). The need to feed this military and political elite was probably the background for the establishment of new settlements and the intensification of the agricultural exploitation of the land in the Late Roman Iron Age.

The increase in the number of free tenants in the Viking Age may have been caused by problems in controlling the slaves when the estates became increasingly larger as a result of increasing rivalry towards the end of the First Millennium AD. This development is also connected to fundamental social and political alterations. The release of slaves, which followed the settlement expansion, contributed to the growing class of free men who had limited or no possessions. The Viking raids gave these men an opportunity to win wealth and reputation, and social mobility must have been much greater in the Viking Age than in the preceding period. Support from this growing group of free men became increasingly important in the political life of the tribe, and consequently the Thing was now the central political arena.

The legal status of tenants in Norway in the High Medieval Period, being characterized by a greater degree of personal and political freedom than on the Continent and in England, may result from this development. In the Roman Iron Age, the aristocracy were probably well established in the fertile regions, and were therefore able to exercise strict control over the use of the land in the expansion phase. In Norway, the landscape was more or less fully settled by the end of the Migration Period, and available good land was scarce. It is possible, therefore, that control over the access to land in this period was stricter in Norway than in Southern Scandinavia, where the cultivation of vast areas of new land continued throughout the Middle Ages. As a result of the scarcity of land and the growing class of free but poor men, the access to labour improved during the 10th and 11th centuries. Forced labour in the form of slavery was less necessary for the running of large farms and estates. This may be one of the reasons why serfdom of the Continental type never developed in High Medieval Norway.

The repressive character of the lordship revealed in this early period should not surprise us. The aristocratic character of Early Medieval society is thoroughly testified in the archaeological material from the period. The development of animal art, the high-quality goldsmith works, the enormous grave mounds, the development of the hall, and the organization of war bands with costly equipment found in Danish bogs (Ilkjær 1990–1996) — all of this could only take place in a society dominated by a strong aristocracy which had access to rich resources. And the main resource, which was land, was of fundamental importance to aristocratic dominion.