

Tore Iversen, John Ragnar Myking & Stefan Sonderegger (eds.), *Peasants, Lords, and State. Comparing Peasant Conditions in Scandinavia and the Eastern Alpine Region, 1000–1750* (The Northern world 89), Leiden: Brill 2020, ISBN 9789004429703, 375 pp.

The present book is the final report of a major research project entitled “Peasants’ control over land and resources from the High Middle Ages to the end of the early modern period—Norway, Scandinavia, and the eastern Alpine region 1000–1750” which was completed several years ago. The project received funding from the Research Council of Norway in 2004–2007 which financed three major and three smaller seminars.

As the editors themselves acknowledge, this closing volume of the project is long overdue. Admittedly, the publication of the findings of such a major research project will always take a few years after funding has ended. Nor is history a subject where research findings expire in the sense that may be the case in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, the book’s value would probably have been even greater, and its content more professionally fruitful, if it had been published a few years earlier. Some of the project’s participants have died, and several others have retired. Even though retired historians participate to a large extent in research debates, the potential academic discussion based on the project’s conclusions might nevertheless turn out to be somewhat less fruitful than it could have been if the results had been presented to the academic community earlier. In the extensive bibliography, I count nine titles younger than 2014. Of course, this may primarily reflect the research situation, but it probably also shows that the book is not completely updated on the “Stand der Forschung.” However, what has been said above must not overshadow the project’s and thus the book’s, valuable aspects. There is reason to congratulate the editors on finally having published this final report.

The project’s overall aim was comparison, partly to counteract the tendency to study agrarian societies only within national or regional frameworks, and partly to challenge and assess the widespread perception of a Scandinavian “Sonderweg” regarding farmers’ independence and self-determination compared to their European counterparts. According to the editors, the latter applies in particular to Norwegian historical research. I agree with this, but I would say that Swedish historical research also often emphasises such a specific peasant independence in Sweden. The project aimed to assess the degree of peasant control over land and resources in Scandinavia and in the eastern Alpine region from around 1000 up to 1750. The researchers wanted to understand better the development of peasant control and influence in institutions dealing with social and agrarian issues in rural society and conflicts within peasant society in these two regions. The original inspiration for choosing to compare the eastern Alpine region with Scandinavia came from an unfinished project in the interwar period related to the Norwegian Institute for Comparative Cultural Research initiated by the renowned Norwegian historian Edvard Bull Sr. (1881–1932). Bull wanted to find “valid laws” and “objective correlations” in the development of peasant societies in Scandinavia and the Alpine regions. The project was never completed due

to the international situation that developed toward the Second World War.

Any attempts to find objective historical laws today seem futile. However, the project's initiators, Tore Iversen and Jan Ragnar Myking, were still inspired by the concrete studies carried out in the framework of the institute in their attempt to compare peasant control over land and resources in the two regions. The reason for choosing to compare the eastern Alpine region with Scandinavia is the marked topographical resemblance between the two areas. In the mountainous areas of Norway, northern Scandinavia, and the eastern Alpine regions, not much land is suited for cultivation, while ample space is available for grazing and foresting. On the other hand, in Bavaria, Denmark, and southern Sweden, we find wide, fertile valleys and large, continuous plains with moraine soil. According to Iversen and Myking, this variation in topography offers an opportunity to analyse the effect of topographical factors on peasant control over land and resources without neglecting the impact of hierarchical power structures involving ecclesiastical and aristocratic landlords, territorial lords and emerging territorial states. The research was concentrated on Norway and Denmark in Scandinavia, and Bavaria and Tyrol in the eastern Alpine region, as these territories turned out to be the most rewarding ones for contrasting topography and territorial and manorial dominion. Contrasting is central in comparisons of this kind. Other territories, like Sweden and Switzerland, are commented on only in so far as they shed light on similarities and differences between the eastern Alpine region and Scandinavia.

The research project was focused on "slavery and unfreedom," "leasehold and freehold," and "peasant participation in thing and local assemblies." The volume presents these three topics in three main chapters in Part 2. Part 1 is an introduction presenting historiographical and methodological reflections, and Part 3 is historiographical, dealing with how peasants have been portrayed in Norwegian, Austrian, German, and Swiss historiography. The last part of the volume, titled "Appendix," consists of two articles, one discussing the sub-peasant strata in the late Medieval and early Modern eastern Alpine region, the other presenting new Swiss and German research concerning active manorial lords and peasant farmers in the economic life of the late Middle Ages. While not explicitly stated, it is reasonable to conclude that these last two articles were written specifically for the present book, i.e., after the original project had ended.

Social groups are difficult to delimit as there are always gradations within such groups and, not least, grey areas *between* groups. This holds especially true of the Middle Ages, where a large proportion of the population did not belong to the ruling elite but constituted the "producers," habitually called "peasants." Tore Iversen and Jan Ragnar Myking are fully aware of this, and one of the great merits of this book is that it reveals how the social, economic, and political position of people below the aristocracy is graded in time and space. Operating with a distinction between "free" and "unfree" for large parts of the Middle Ages is too crude. The three main topics of the project correlate with three different types of dominion over peasants in ancient European societies. In German, Austrian, and Swiss historiography, these types of dominion are labelled *Leibherrschaft* (dominion over body and person), *Grundherrschaft* (dominion over land) and *Gerichtsherrschaft* (legal dominion). These three forms of dominion were not clearly separated from each other. In brief, they indicate

that peasant control over land and resources was circumscribed by hierarchical structures, although depending to a varying degree on the historical development of the different regions and countries.

However, the social differentiation and analysis sometimes appear somewhat unclear and unsatisfactory. Iversen and Myking point out that from the High Middle Ages and into the early modern period, a social group was established below, but linked to, the peasant class. In the Alpine region, they are called *unterbäuerliche Schichten*; in Scandinavia, they are called *husmenn*. Here, the authors use the term “class” to refer to the peasants. Later, they talk about “estates,” where they distinguish a peasant estate from other estates of the clergy, the aristocracy, and a town-dwelling class of merchants and craftsmen. In reality, the contemporary medieval ideology of estates divided the population into the clergy, the aristocracy and “the rest” (i.e. peasants and townsmen). Only after the distinction between “free” and “unfree” had disappeared, does it become meaningful, according to the authors, to operate with a uniform concept of “farmers” in the sense of farmers who worked the land. However, such a definition is, in my opinion, too crude to understand medieval society in the High and Late Middle Ages. Iversen and Myking should have been as aware of the social grey areas *upward* in society, between the aristocracy and the rest of the population, as they have been regarding the grey ones downward in society. As far as I can see, they do not define “aristocracy,” which is unfortunate considering the project’s issues and analyses.

For Iversen and Myking, the relationship between the aristocracy and the prince (whether a king or a duke) is essential for understanding the position of the peasants in society. The balance of power between the prince and the aristocracy influences the relationship between aristocracy and peasants and between the prince and the peasants. In such a context, it is important to remember that “aristocracy” is an analytical term with several criteria to delimit aristocrats in medieval Europe. Using these criteria, the European aristocracy in the Middle Ages appears to have had different layers based on position, power, and wealth. However, a key point is that the aristocracy was built on horizontal and vertical networks. This point is not least important for assessing the analysis of Iversen and Myking. Some of the authors’ statements and assessments of political conditions can be criticised or elaborated. The claim that Norway and Denmark had the same king *and government* after 1380 is wrong. Only the first is correct, until 1537 when Norway was subjugated to Danish rule. Nor should it come as a surprise that the central authorities of this Oldenburg conglomerate state after 1537 were aware of the differences between Danish and Norwegian conditions. As long as control was maintained, such a differentiated system of governance was typical of the European conglomerate states of the early modern era.

The project’s main findings are that some characteristics relating to exclusive “peasant freedom” may be found in all four investigated territories, not just in Norway. The dividing line does not seem to run between Norway and the other areas of investigation, but rather between Norway and Tyrol on the one hand, and Denmark and Bavaria on the other: topography and territorial and manorial power constructed based on topography led to a comparable development. Norway and Tyrol display an early and permanent dissolution of unfreedom, a significant and increasing number of freeholders, increasingly better tenures and control over succession on tenant hold-

ings, and a high degree of peasant control over resources. On the other hand, peasants in Bavaria and Denmark enjoyed more insecure tenures and were to a greater extent subjected to some form of limitation of their personal freedom. However, the differences between the regions were insignificant as regards self-administration and self-determination in agrarian and social affairs.

Iversen and Myking conclude that no such exclusive Norwegian or Scandinavian “peasant freedom” existed in the Middle Ages or the early modern period. Scandinavian characteristics are recognisable in Tyrol and Bavaria. In this sense, the project can be said to have once again demonstrated the value of comparison, namely to place a country or region’s historical development in a larger context to understand better how and why history has developed the way it has. Therefore, Tore Iversen and Jan Ragnar Myking should be thanked and honoured for initiating, leading, and concluding the project.

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