

Danish Agricultural Subdivision and the Majorats

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Abstract

According to an Act dealing with the conversion of feudal estates into fee simple the 75 Danish majorats were partly parcelled out, into 2.300 tenant farms 1919-1932. As an example showing a total parcelling-out of a manor a subdivision plan for Hvedholm is commented.

For more than four millenniums agriculture has been the leading industry of Denmark, and through the ages the farm has been the predominant form of exploitation; however, as long as the Danish soil has been under cultivation the size of the farms has, no doubt, been varying. The prehistoric finds do not seem to indicate that Denmark had landowners of any importance (*Hatt, 1935, 128-129*); it may be that in some cases one farmer owned several farms; however, there is nothing which points to profound social distinctions within the prehistoric village.

Later, the distinction became more accentuated between the farms, on one side, and, on the other side, the manors, whose owners in return for war duty enjoyed various privileges, first of all tax-free ownership of big areas (*Steenstrup, 1874, 112; Erslev, 1898, 202*). It is probable that the development of the army in the first half of the Middle Ages was the principal cause of the separation of a group of the population to form a class of squires (»herremænd«). The squires are first mentioned in »Jutland Law« (*Jyske Lov 1241, 3rd volume, XIII, XV*). In the Middle Ages the manors were »just common, sometimes double farms« (*Christensen, 1886, 18*). However, *Nørlund (1927, 167)* has shown that there were exceptions.

An ordinance of 14th May, 1523, decided that a copyholder who had fulfilled his obligations could not be expelled from his farm.

In its application this recess proved to imply a considerable restriction of the squires' liberty to include farmland in the domaine of the manor and, on the whole, contributed to rendering difficult the amalgamation of land to form big estates (*Jensen*, 1943, 15—16). Rather big parts of the country were Crown land and had but few manors (*Mathiassen*, 1931, 11).

However, during the first half of the seventeenth century the number of manors was increasing, and after the introduction of the absolute monarchy in 1660 they included in their domaine land of farms which had been abandoned after the devastations of long-lasting wars. Sometimes, whole villages were absorbed; for instance, in 1696, Nislevgaard included in its land a village which came to life again after a total parcelling-out of Nislevgaard in 1925 (45 holdings and 11 supplementary allotments (see later). Lindersvold, which was founded in the seventeenth century, issued from two abandoned villages and was parcelled out, in 1922, into 44 holdings and 12 additional allotments. In the years around 1680 Denmark had about 2.700 derelict farms (*Pedersen*, 1913, 125). However, the political power of the nobility was submitted to restrictions; so was their exemption from taxation and their special obligation to do war service (*Clausager*, 1943, 195). The Crown sold half of its landed property (*Jensen*, 1943, 23), and in order to secure to the King a rich and high-born nobility at the Court, Christian V founded, the 25th May, 1671, the feudalism: when a landowner had acquired as much as 1.000 tdr. htk.¹⁾ he could be granted a barony (»friherreskab«) or a feudal barony (»baroni«) (§§ 1, 17 and 19) and, if being the owner of 2.500 tdr. htk., a larger estate (»grevskab«) (§§ 1, 19 and 21). Further, it is stipulated in »Danske Lov« (1665) that estates of 400 tdr. htk. may be transformed into entailed estates (»stamhuse« and »fideikommisgodser«). Such estates should be majorats, i e. their succession should be undivided. If the family died out such feudal estates should devolve upon the Crown. In the course of time were founded 21 »grevskaber«, 14 baronies, 45 entailed estates (34 »stamhuse« and 11 »fideikommisgodser«).

In 1688 a few hundreds of landed proprietors possessed more than three fourths of the Danish land; the greater part of the remainder was church land and Crown land, and there were only a little more

1) "Td. hartkorn" is a Danish standard of land valuation based on the normal yield of the soil; 3.575 hectares of the most fertile soil constitute 1 "td. hartkorn". In average, however, 1 td. hartkorn requires 5.995 hectares in the islands, 14.630 hectares in Jutland, and 9.900 hectares in the entire country.

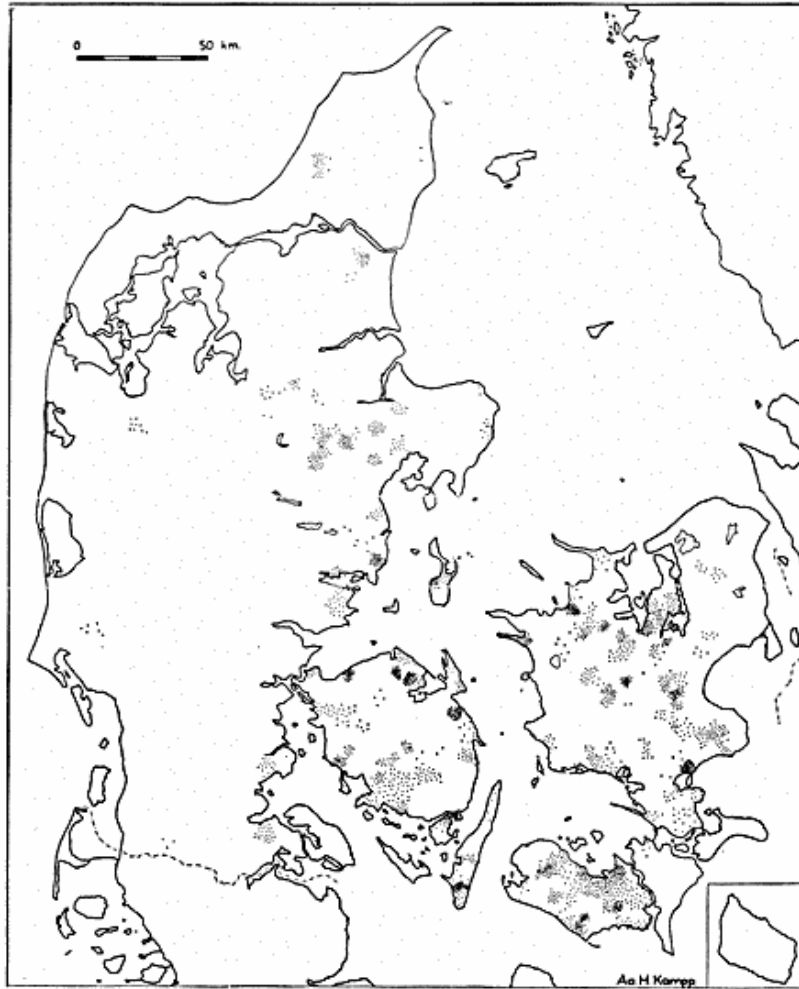


Fig. 1. State-subsidized tenant farms established on former majorats.
Each dot = 1 farm.

than 1,000 freehold farms (*Pedersen*, 1928, 360); the other farmers were copyholders. The taxes increased, and the corn prices decreased (*Falbe-Hansen and Scharling*, 1888—1889, II, 109); therefore, the landed proprietors claimed protection, which they obtained by the introduction of the Adscription (1733-1788). After the cattle plague in the years around 1740 the conditions of the Adscription were tightened.

Since the Iron Age the population of Denmark has to a great extent been domiciled in villages. In the village societies the cultivation was founded on community principles with scattered distribution of the land and regularly alternating rotations of crops. According to an Act of 1769 the farmers were allowed to have their part in the community separated and allotted, and after the abolish-



Fig. 2. Aerial photo, 1939: Centre of the split-up area of the former estate of Spanager. Scale: 1:1.500. Geodetic Institute, copyright (M 3927/8764).

ment of the joined ownership of land in 1781 it became possible for them — thanks to the high corn prices — to become freeholders. During the economic conditions favourable to agriculture in the years around 1800, an extensive transition from copyholding to freeholding took place. When the joined ownership of land, centuries old, was split, the small-holder possessing a little land in the village field lost his grazing rights. Some of the small-holders were allotted small parcels, the placing of which, however, was inconvenient to the farmers; others got a piece of common for new cultivation (*Christensen*, 1891, 17—18). During the subdivisions the land-owners established thousands of small-holdings in order to procure man-power; many of the small-holders paid the copyhold-rent for their house by obligatory service to the squires. The notion »houses with land« is primarily a product of the agrarian reforms (*Jensen*, 1936, 208). Thus, the farmers' »villeinage« was replaced by the small-holders' »villeinage«, which was only brought to an end by the adoption of the Act of 23rd May, 1902.

In the period with joined ownership of land more than 90% of Danish farmers had their home in villages of varying size, a fact which was one of the very conditions for this form of ownership. Between the villages the open land was covered with bushy or

swampy fields, heaths, bogs, meadows and common, with dying wood at all stages of ruin. In a country with an agricultural area as big as that of Denmark the topographical consequences of the subdivision affected inevitably the character of the landscape, to such a degree that it seems justified to speak of a metamorphosis. Normally, the fields of the villages grew together on top of the former common. The outlying farms came to occupy an outstanding role in the landscape, and at many places houses and villas became predominant in the former villages, whose economic life changed considerably. No doubt, the landscape has rarely undergone so conspicuous an alteration as in the years when the rural habitation from the former villages was scattered over the land. Swamps and morasses were drained off in order to be transformed into meadows, and in the fields resulting from the parcelling-out the soil was cultivated as never before; in growing number the small-holdings appeared in the previously open land, now scattered, now in small colonies.

The lack of man-power in the rural districts in the years about 1890 after the big oversea emigration gave rise to the adoption of the first »Act of State Small-Holdings« of 24th March, 1899 — a result of the work executed in the Land Commission of 13th April, 1894. In this »Act for the purpose of procuring parcels for agricultural workers« the size of the holdings was fixed at 1-4½ hectares according to the quality of the soil. This Act was renewed in 1904 and again in 1909; the purpose of the latter was the independent small-holding. To this effect it was made possible for already existing small-holdings to obtain additional loans. In these years the small-holders' associations came to life and grew to become strong. The small-holders' movement reflected a prevailing need for economic and social independence and aimed at bigger holdings, on the assumption that the holdings which gave full occupation offered the possibilities of the most intensive exploitation. The Act of 24th March, 1899, with later additional laws remained in force jointly with the Acts of 4th October, 1919 (cf. fig. 4), which entitled the government to purchase land and to convey it to the user as copy-holding, against the payment of a special duty, the rent, fixed on the basis of periodical reassessments for land.

The Acts of 4th October, 1919, contained regulations about the sale of glebe for parcelling-out, about the conversion of the majorats into absolute property against cession of certain areas of land for subdivision (the Act dealing with the conversion of feudal estates



Fig. 3. Aerial photo, 1939, of the estate of Gaunø. Scale: 1:1.500. Geodetic Institute, copyright (M 3925/8120).

into fee simple) and about the conditions for sale of land owned by the State. Already the Constitution of 1849 held out the prospect of the abolition of the privileges attached to part of the Danish land. The October Acts established that the farms should be big enough to assure a family their livelihood. The 25th March, 1933, an Act was voted according to which holders of rented land were allowed to have their rent converted into duties conditioned by the economic fluctuations. The »Act of State Small-Holdings« of 1948, united about 40 older land-laws into one Act, comprising the principles of both the 1899-Acts and the 1919-Acts. It was a question of two different main principles, which, though amalgamated into one law, could not form a synthesis.

Out of the approximately 8.000 state-subsidized tenant holdings which were established until 1958, a number of 2.300 are distributed on 18.000 hectares of majorat land, giving an average size of 7,2 hectares. The subdivision resulting from the Act dealing with the conversion of feudal estates especially took place in 1921-24 and came to an end in 1932 (fig. 4).

A few majorats avoided, totally or partly, to cede land during the conversion, either by buying compensation land in other locality, their landed property thus remaining undivided, or by being exempt

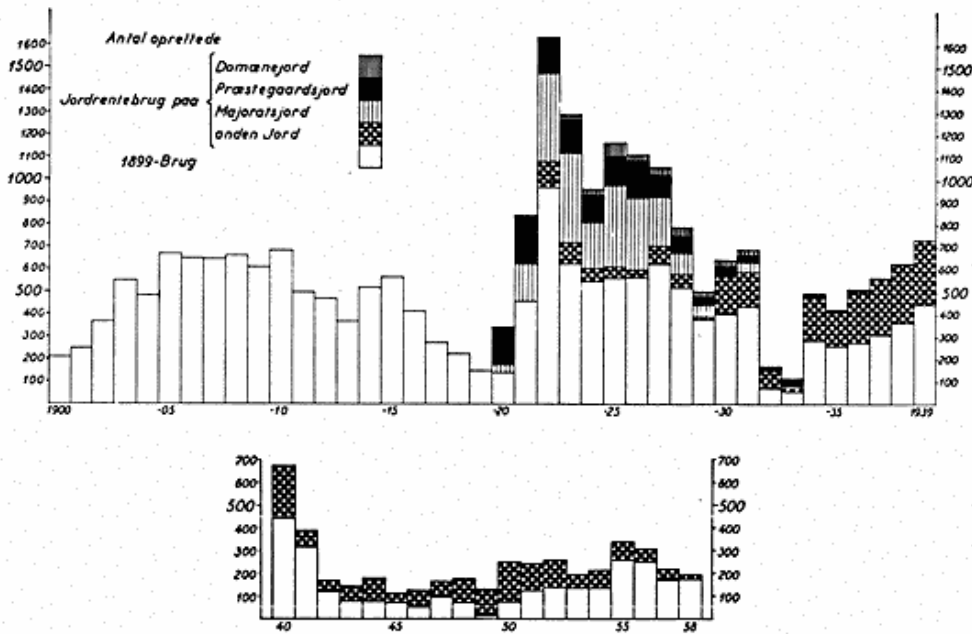


Fig. 4. Chart showing the establishment of state-subsidized tenant farms and holdings 1900—1958: state-subsidized tenant farms on state land, church properties, majorats and other areas; also farms established under the 1899-Act. Since 1899, 27,000 state-subsidized tenant farms have been established (1 eighth of all existing Danish agricultural properties). A small number of them have been demolished (or amalgamated with other holdings). On the other side, additional parcels have been allotted to thousands of small-holders, who have thus become independant farmers (during the period 1940—1958 more than 6,000). Increased prices and lack of material hampered the parcelling-out, which reached its minimum in the financial year 1945—46. During the period 1940—1958 a number of 1,600 state-subsidized tenant farms were established and about 2,700 farms under the 1899-Act.

from ceding land on condition that they paid a sum to the Central Land Board (»Statens Jordlovsudvalg«), enabling this to buy substitute land. On the other hand, other majorats have been compelled to sell land in excess of the land which they had to cede for the conversion. The development of the majorats existing in 1919 is as follows: 18 have been completely parcelled out; 18 have ceded more than the statutory area, while 22 only have ceded the stipulated land, and 17 have remained almost unaltered since 1919.

The majorats were situated primarily in the most fertile regions of the country, and generally they comprised some of the best soil of the parish, either because this soil was originally of a better quality than the rest of the parish, or because a better cultivation and increased manuring had improved the quality of the soil. Consequently, as appears from fig. 1, the majorat subdivision has especially taken place in agricultural region VII (*Kampp*, 1959), where, formerly, it was difficult to purchase land for subdivision, and where

the parcelling-out was so strongly counteracted by amalgamations and discontinuations that in numerous regions the total number of farms has undergone a not inconsiderable decrease; thus, as far as Lolland is concerned, the number of state subsidized holdings established on former majorat land alone is 427, while the total increase of agricultural properties only amounts to 382.

The average size of these state-subsidized tenant holdings was: 1920-30: 7 hectares; 1930-40: a little more than 10 hectares; 1940-58: 17 hectares. Within the individual colony the differences of the sizes of the holdings are essentially caused by the different qualities of the soil; they are less caused by the shape which it has been necessary to give the parcels with a view to the terrain conditions, big water courses, roads, the transformation of which would be too expensive, and the orientation of the limits of woods and parishes.

It is attempted to give these holdings, as far as possible, a regular rectangular shape (fig. 2). When, at the conversion, the farmers divided the land of the villages they found it most practical, in view of the labour traffic across their fields, to place the buildings in an almost central position on the farm, while the roads were of secondary importance. In the colonies of state-subsidized tenant holdings the roads were first projected, and then the situation of the buildings in proximity to the road (here are left out of consideration the lanes serving the local labour traffic between the buildings and the field).

The small-holders which were considered as being in greatest need of additional land had occasion to buy a supplementary allotment, or they could obtain it on land-rent conditions; thus, it was not a question of parcelling-out in the sense that the number of farms was augmented, but of an increase of the so-called »dwarf-holdings« (»dværgbrug«); this made the holdings more remunerative and enabled the holders to become independent (fig. 5). Sometimes, these additional parcels were conveyed to already existing holdings on the same majorat land; in other cases to small-holders outside the colony. They served for increasing the rotation area in cases where this was smaller than usual in that period; however, the efforts often tended to supplementing the land by a meadow-parcel, provided that the holding did not already comprise such a parcel. During a very long time the meadows have played a primordial role to the Danish farmer, not least in regions with poor soil, where, especially in dry summers (as 1959), there is a risk of lack of grass.

In no other place of the country the noblemen's estates were

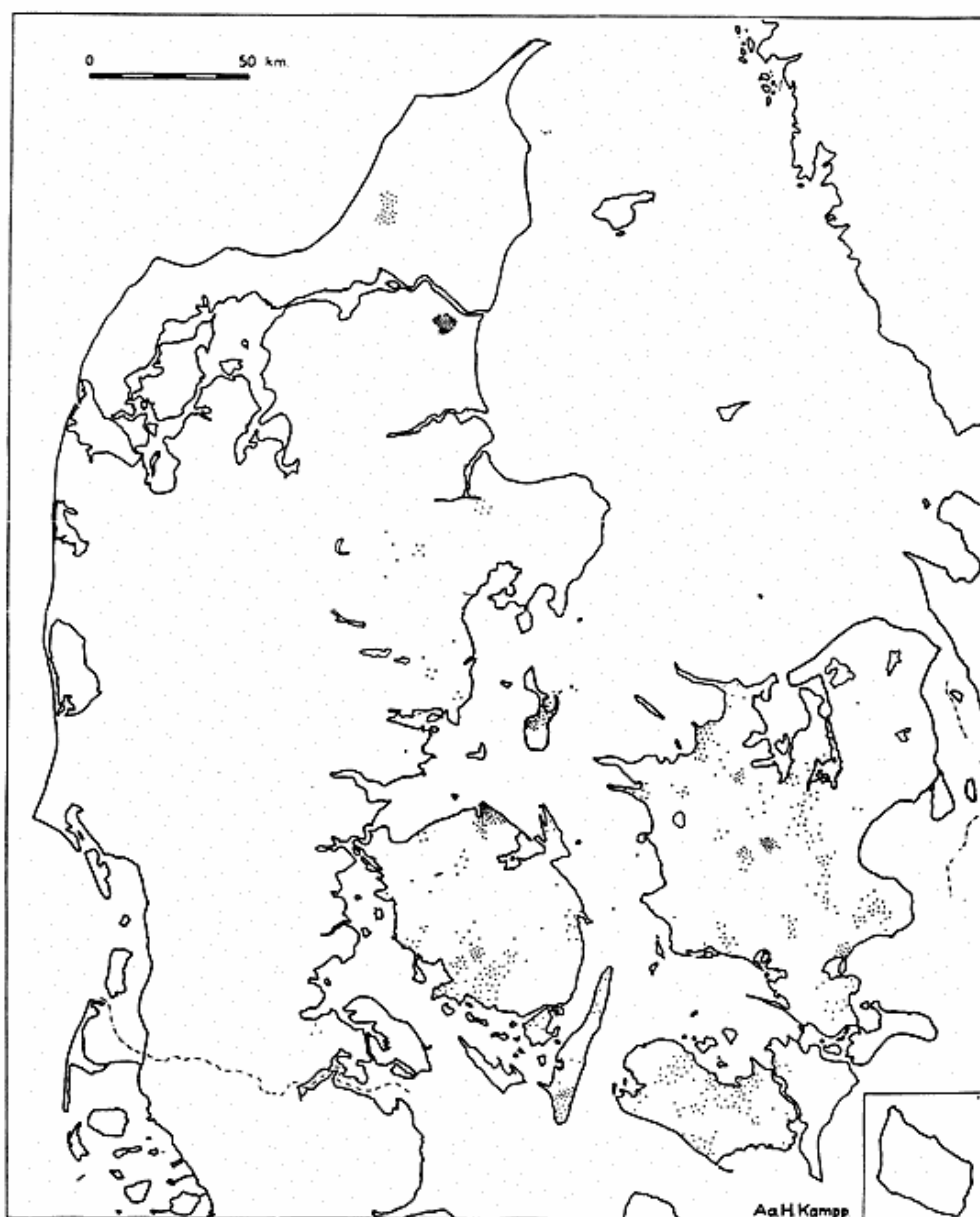


Fig. 5. The number of allotments established on former majorats as a supplement to the farms shown in map 1. Each dot = 1 allotment.

situated so densely as in the southern part of Funen. At the time of the conversion, the Svendborg county had no less than 15 majorat properties; therefore, in the ordnance survey map no. 4014 (measured in 1922, corrected in 1925) has been sketched, as an example, a subdivision plan for the Hvedholm manor under the estates Brahesminde, situated in Horne parish, Salling district, Svendborg county (fig. 6). (The existence of Hvedholm is first mentioned in

1475). This area has not been parcelled out at a time; at the subdivision of the estates Brahesminde in 1928 (according to the 1919-Act), 12 state-subsidized holdings were established with a total area of 74.4 hectares (11 tdr. 4 skp. htk.) and 7 additional allotments of 25.0 hectares (4 tdr. 2 skp. htk.). Later, the government acquired the total rest of the manor, and in 1939 eight independent state-subsidized holdings with a total of 60.5 hectares (12 tdr. 4 skp. htk.) were established, and 17 additional allotments (first of all supplementing the small-holdings founded in 1928 under the manor of Hvedholm), totalling 43.7 hectares (9 td. htk.). The central part of the estates remaining after the subdivision, 153.5 hectares, was sold against cash as one of the biggest properties ever sold by the Central Land Board; the farm buildings were in such a good condition that it was considered absurd not to make use of them. However, the manor-house itself had been sold in advance to the government, together with 19 hectares of park, and serves as a hospital.

The Hvedholm land is a strongly undulated, principally loamy moraine land from the last Glaciation (Würm); however, on the whole, the relief of the terrain has had no influence on the shape of the holdings; only towards south steep hill-sides have necessitated a deviation from the otherwise regular, rectangular form.

During this subdivision an unexpected problem presented itself: the individual state-subsidized holdings were able to satisfy, it is true, their water-supply from the superior, water-carrying earth-layers; however, this made it difficult for the central part of the estate to procure water enough to the relatively big stock.

18 of the state-small-holders are born in Horne parish, 13 in neighbouring parishes. Only two of them have been workers in Hvedholm before the subdivision; 5 are farmers' sons, 12 are small-holders' children, 9 are sons of farm-workers, 2 are children of artisans, 1 is a fisherman's son and 1 is originating from a town.

The new constructed road is a private lane. All the holders of government land supply milk to the dairy at Horne. All of them have land enough (1-1½ d. htk.) to secure them a livelihood. These holdings do not comprise any special poultry farm; however, the number of hens is, of course, considerably bigger than before the subdivision. Further, the rotation of crops has developed on the basis of an augmented production of domestic animals; for instance, the root-crop areas and the grass-areas have increased at the expense of the grain areas. No meadow-parcels are found. The children go



Fig. 6. Part of the ordnance survey map 4014 showing the splitting-up of the former feudal estate Hvedholm. (Geodetic Institute, copyright).

to school in Horne and Bjerne, and, consequently, have a distance to school of a few kilometres, at most. There is a bus from Nyborg to Bøjden; thus, the southern colony is most out-of-the-way.

Other development plans have previously been published (*Kampp*, 1956, and 1959).

The immediate effect of the parcelling-out has been subjected to a statistical examination of 8 manors, comprising the utilization of the area and the size of the animal husbandry before and after the subdivision, compared with surrounding, undivided areas in the same parishes during the same period; the grain areas in the subdivided land are those which have undergone the greatest reduction, whereas the root-crop areas show the greatest increase in the subdivided areas, where the grass-areas in the rotation have doubled, in contrast to a very small progress in the remaining properties of the parishes in question. The opposite is the case of the grass outside the rotation. The number of milch-cows has been quadrupled, the number of pigs has doubled, whereas, in this respect, the other

properties of these parishes are in regression; as for the poultry, it has been trebled or quadrupled, whereas in the remaining properties it has only been doubled.

In consequence of the abolition of the communal property system most of the land-holders, as mentioned, left the villages. However, as the majorat subdivision generally comprised continuous areas the parcelled-out holdings came, in many cases, to form colonies, which, in many parts of the country, as a modern form of village, left their stamp on the cultivated landscape, not only as a distinct element from a point of view of habitational geography, but also topographically, resulting from an increased division of the farms; thereby, the whole landscape acquired a new aspect (figs. 2-3). The last traces of the finer structure of the natural landscape often disappeared totally or partly as a consequence of the levelling effect of the intensive cultivation on the surface relief. Thus, the subdivision has influenced not least the micro-topographical conditions: small pools have been filled out, fences have been demolished and small hills have been levelled. Denmark is tending to become a country with a trimmed nature; for instance, numerous relics of antiquity have been »changed into bread«, until and Act put an end to this vandalism.

The ancient castles of the parcelled-out majorats and the woods are still contributing to characterizing the landscape. Generally speaking, the woods have remained unaltered, either undivided in private property or transferred to the state forestry, while the main buildings principally have been used for social institutions, schools or museums.

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