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Estate Landscapes in northern Europe

an introduction

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This volume represents the first transnational exploration of the estate landscape in northern Europe. It brings together experts from six countries to explore the character, role and significance of the estate over five hundred years during which the modern landscape took shape. They do so from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, to provide the first critical study of the estate as a distinct cultural landscape. The northern European countries discussed in this volume – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain – have a fascinating and deep shared history of cultural, economic and social exchange and dialogue. Whilst not always a family at peace, they can lay claim to having forged many key aspects of the modern world, including commercial capitalism and industrialization from an overwhelmingly rural base in the early modern period. United around the North Sea, the region was a gateway to the east through the Baltic Sea, and across the Atlantic to the New World in the west. Thus the region holds a strong appeal for scholars in the period after the European reformations, with recent historiography recognizing the benefit of transnational histories, which draw out the similarities and distinctions between the historical trajectories of the various provinces.[1]

The current study takes as its starting point the centrality of the estate landscape – often referred to as the manorial landscape in a continental context – within a nexus of rural relationships and as the agent behind the creation of distinct cultural landscapes throughout northern Europe. One of the many apparent commonalities across the region considered here is the role of the major landowner, and the social significance of the large house and its offices, which served as a home of social distinction, a centre of hospitality, and an economic hub, as well as an arena for local

Harewood House, West Yorkshire, UK *Harewood House was built between 1758 and 1771 for Edwin Lascelles, whose family made their fortune in the West Indies. The parkland was laid out over the same period by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and epitomizes the late-eighteenth century taste for a more informal naturalistic landscape. Small enclosed fields from the seventeenth century were replaced by parkland that could be grazed, just as it is today, although some hedgerow trees were retained to add interest within the park, such as those in the foreground. By the early-nineteenth century all arable cultivation had been removed from the view of the house, which was screened by extensive perimeter plantations. (Photo: Jonathan Finch)* government and jurisdiction. The presence of such a social and economic institution can be seen to create a distinct cultural landscape, made up of the demesne or "home" farm, tenanted holdings, forestry or woodland, and settlements which might share a common architectural grammar.

The landscape of northern Europe was structured by patterns of landownership that evolved from medieval roots into the post-medieval period, and both the process of evolution and the resulting landscape character differed dramatically across northern Europe, despite sharing fundamental similarities. One of the most significant agents which determined the character and structure of landholding across the region was the landed estate – a complex of rural property forming an administrative unity and held by one owner who exercised control over resources and rights across that landscape and benefitted from the associated privileges. Much of the research undertaken on the region relates to the agrarian economy of specific countries, which was dominated by agricultural production well into the nineteenth century, despite early commercial and industrial developments during the late-medieval and early-modern periods. The history of rural life has focused on agricultural regimes and their associated social structures, with the transition from a feudal or seigneurial system to modern market economies being a key concern.[2]

The preference for translating national terms – such as *herregård*, *Gut* or *landgoed* – into the English "manor house" (as opposed to "country house" as used in Britain for the post-medieval period), marks a notable distinction between British and continental experiences, and highlights an important difference. Across the northern German territories, Scandinavia, and into the Baltic region, manorial land was distinguished from around the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries by its exemption from taxes and other associated privileges.[3] The nomenclature of, for instance, *herregård*, was thus used historically in those regions to signify, preserve, and defend the financial and tax privileges that pertained to the landscape and which conferred status upon the owner. In Britain, and more specifically in England, manorial privileges had been steadily eroded since the mid-fourteenth century, and the few that survived were abolished in the 1660s as part of the renegotiation of the relationship between crown and parliament in the wake of the restoration of the monarchy after the civil wars of the 1640s. By the early-eighteenth century, when there was a wave of building and of rebuilding elite residences, the medieval nomenclature of the manor was gradually erased.[4]

The chapters in this volume will use English terms to explain nationally specific circumstances. As the histories and meanings of key terms vary between the six countries covered, however, the national term for "manor", "country house" and "estate" will also be given to avoid confusion through translation. "Nobility" and "aristocracy" are also sometimes used differently across the region. In a British context, the nobility refers only to peers and the immediate families of hereditary peers, whereas "aristocracy" encompasses the peerage, junior descendants in the male line, and non-hereditary titles such as baronet and knight. Below them were the gentry, who were untitled. On the continent, however, the terms are used differently. In Scandinavia, "aristocracy" is the term used to describe the most powerful families at the very top of the elite, whilst "nobility" signifies a wider group encompassing the titled aristocracy of counts and barons, as well as the untitled majority of the *adel* (nobility), who shared hereditary privileges through forms of partible inheritance. The root of this difference lies in the inheritance systems: in Britain, primogeniture restricted the title and the bulk of the landed inheritance to the singular male head of families, whereas across much of continental northern Europe, forms of partible inheritance meant that these privileges and resources were held by all members of noble families.

This complex mosaic of rights and practices was written into the landscape, and means that it is important to identify notable national and regional similarities and differences across the five hundred-year time span covered by the chapters. An overview of the two main forms of demesne economies is followed by a brief description of developments in landownership and inheritance regulations after 1500, as these are fundamental to the manorial system and the role of estates across northern Europe.

Structuring the landscape: Demesne economy, *Gutsherrschaft* and *Grundherrschaft*

Landowners in northern Europe held feudal responsibilities that were rooted in medieval estate management. These included rights held over land and tenants, and manorial rights such as that to collect quit-rents, fees for renewing a tenancy, and fines from court cases. In medieval England the term "manor" referred to the lord's demesne and the land worked by tenants, the lord's jurisdiction exercised through a court which regulated labour services – known as corvée on the continent – and involved oversight of the local community, as well as the lands and tenure of the villeins or peasants.[5] Parallels to these rights are found across northern Europe, leading to the choice of "manor" and "manorial" to describe the agrarian landscape. However, the relationships between lord, tenants and peasants differed within the manorial systems that developed in different parts of northern Europe, and those relationships changed over time.

Historians have attempted to map the broad regions where different forms of manorialism evolved over the late- and post-medieval periods. The *Gutsherrschaft* and *Grundherrschaft* model, for example, was first pioneered by the German historian F. G. Knapp, and forms the classical framework for understanding the manorial regimes of early-modern estates in northern and eastern Europe. *Gutsherrschaft* and *Grundherrschaft* categorize estate economies based on the relationship between the corvée, or unpaid labour service performed by tenants on demesne land, and the annual rent paid by tenants. In areas with *Gutsherrschaft* (*Gut*: "demesne"), farming the demesne land was given precedence over tenanted land within the manorial economy, whereas estates with *Grundherrschaft* (*Grund*: "land"), placed emphasis on rental income from tenants over a reliance on unpaid labour services.[6] In the classical understanding of the two concepts, *Gutsherrschaft* was the model followed on estates in eastern Europe, with a strong determination to maintain an unfree peasant workforce, while *Grundherrschaft* prevailed in western Europe, with an emphasis on rental income. However, as Kirsten Sundberg has recently argued for Scandinavia and the Baltic area, the realities of demesne economy, and thus the landscape created on estates across northern Europe, was much more varied and complicated than a simple east/west dichotomy implies. Most estates were in fact managed by a mixture of the two regimes, locating them on the continuum between *Gutsherrschaft* and *Grundherrschaft*. However, the picture is further complicated by the fact that the model does not map convincingly onto developments in England, the Netherlands or northern France.[7]

In eastern Europe, including eastern German and Baltic states such as Mecklenburg and Prussia, where a high proportion of land was owned by the nobility, manorial rights and responsibilities grew over the late-medieval and early-modern period, so that *Gutsherrschaft* was the more pronounced form of demesne economy.[8] In Scandinavia, however, organizing an estate around a demesne or capital farm also became the model followed by noble landlords during the sixteenth century, but *Gutsherrschaft* and the

use of unpaid labour services was less pronounced and much weaker than in the Baltic area. Two key tenets of feudalism – feudal tenures and personal servile status – were both in decline in England from the period immediately after the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century.[9] The weakening of feudal relationships binding the aristocracy to the crown was paralleled by a decline in manorial relationships between local lords and peasants. The demesne was often rented out, as there were no economic or

1.1 | **The northern European region** *covered in this volume, with the key sites referred to in the chapters.*

fiscal advantages to retaining it in hand as was the case on the continent. By the end of the sixteenth century, the manor's legal functions had largely been moved to other institutions such as the parish. Although it retained some sense of identity as a unit of sale and purchase, the manor came to be defined solely by the right to hold a court, although its remit was limited to local administration and petty crimes. The remaining feudal rights or "incidents" were abolished on the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and although vestiges of the manorial system survived into the eighteenth century, they held little power, prestige or privilege.[10] A similar situation developed in southern and western parts of Germany, where some feudal institutions survived at least in name, but in a severely weakened form. Over the same period landownership accrued status as a qualification for political and judicial roles of state, as well as being a secure form of investment, augmented by rental income from tenants, and so remained a critical determinant of elite status.

Nobility and Inheritance

The early-sixteenth century saw a series of religious reformations and political changes across northern Europe which initiated realignments and shifts in power, leading to radical changes of government in some places over the seventeenth century, which inevitably had an impact on the landed elite. The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) wrought havoc on the continent, particularly in the German territories, and it was followed by wars within Scandinavia. Britain also entered a new political situation after the strife of the English Civil Wars (1642-1651), the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and the subsequent "Glorious Revolution" of 1689 which saw the protestant House of Orange ascend to the throne. However, both the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution enshrined the importance of property and secured the position of the landowning class as independent from royal power. As the link between landownership and political power became more closely articulated and distanced from the crown, a raft of legal and economic measures was developed which acted to keep patrimonial assets together as a coherent and sustainable entity. This was a very different development to that of the Danish and German territories, where the landowning nobility was weakened after the wars of the seventeenth century, and in the Danish case, where they were weakened after the king's assumption of absolutist power in the 1660s.

The political and societal reforms occasioned by the reformations of the 1530s brought new practices of inheritance law to Denmark and Norway; these decreed that members of the nobility could no longer marry non-nobles, and that new ennoblements were linked exclusively to military success. This resulted in a decline of numbers among the Danish and Norwegian nobility during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century, but they were able to increase their influence, as certain high-ranking administrative posts could only be filled by members of the nobility. The Thirty Years' War affected the economies of both Sweden-Finland and Denmark-Norway, but the two states responded with different strategies relating to the nobility. In Sweden the "Great Reduction" of 1683 saw the nobility reduced in number and some of the land previously donated to them by the crown reclaimed, reducing the share of land owned by nobles and their relative power. In Denmark, however, after the Danish king assumed absolutist power in 1660, the crown gave land to the nobles in order to pay off its war debts, thus increasing the share of land owned by the Danish nobility, although the crown retained more power as an absolutist monarchy.[11] It is clear that the renegotiation of power between monarchs, nobility and freeholders over the early-modern period had considerable ramifications for the size and power of elites, the structure of landownership, and the significance of the estate landscape at the beginning of the modern era.

In Sweden, the ranks of the nobility expanded in the seventeenth century, from around 450 males in 1600 to around 2,500 by 1700. The crown donated land to new members of the Swedish nobility, and Sweden's position as a great power in the Baltic area also created roles for administrators, which proved to be remunerative positions for many noble families. The result was a flourishing nobility with strong links to the administration of the state, who were also owners of small rural estates. The rise in numbers amongst the Swedish nobility contrasted with the relatively constant number of Danish manor owners (*herremænd*), whose numbers were roughly equivalent to those in Sweden at the end of the sixteenth century, but had not increased by the 1680s. Within this burgeoning group, however, a fraction of the nobility, dominated by members of the Swedish royal Council of the Realm and by members of established noble families, continued to hold large estates.[12] This small elite, consisting of just 5% of the nobility, owned the majority of the land, while 95% of the nobility lived on small estates.

Inheritance law and tradition impacted on the size of estates, and thus the character of the landscape they created. In areas of partible inheritance, large landowners had to divide their estates to create holdings for their offspring, whereas in regions where primogeniture was prevalent, the eldest son would inherit the estate intact, albeit encumbered with responsibilities and provisions for other family members. Differences in inheritance law and practice can be seen in the distinct manorial landscapes that developed from the sixteenth century. Three very basic models can be distinguished within the northern European region – in the Scandinavian countries land was shared between all offspring; in the northern Germanic regions the land was shared between all sons; and finally, Britain followed a system of primogeniture, where only the eldest son inherited. However, these models should be taken only as archetypes that were subject to local variation and change over time.

In England, despite primogeniture protecting the patrimonial lands, a form of entail called "strict settlement" was devised in the late-seventeenth century which made the landowner's heir a tenant for life and settled the estate on trustees for the "contingent remainders" – in most cases the heir's first son. The system preserved the family estate intact by preventing it from being alienated at will and strengthened the principles of primogeniture, whilst providing separately for daughters and younger sons. It was rapidly adopted amongst landed families after the Restoration in 1660 and marked a major step towards securing the prominence and growth of the estate within the modern landscape.[13] A similar development was evident in northern Germany and Scandinavia, where many large estates were entailed in *fideikommisse* over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thus also strengthening primogeniture in these areas, but elsewhere in the region variations in practice were apparent. Although entails grew more popular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in south-western Germany, for instance, local inheritance traditions continued to make it difficult for property owners to keep estates as large cohesive units.

Just as inheritance practices could fracture landholding at each generation, so estates could be brought together by judicious marriage alliances. In regions of primogeniture, marriage to an eldest son could bring substantial territorial expansion or strategic enlargement of the local estate through marriage to a neighbour, something that was evident amongst English landowners.[14] In the case of the Netherlands a strong preference for marriages between noble families combined with the lack of new ennoblements and demographic decline reduced the group significantly, although the remaining core families grew very wealthy. In Scandinavian and Nordic regions with forms of partible inheritance, the landscape was in continual dynamic change, as holdings were shared between each generation, and gathered together again in new but often smaller constellations through marriage. Such eternal dynamism led to considerable and regular fluctuations in a family's wealth and status.

It is therefore difficult to generalize about the fortunes of the landed elite across northern Europe over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In some areas alliances through advantageous marriages, together with strict settlement, served to consolidate and enlarge the holdings of wealthy families. A greater reliance on mortgages also granted flexibility in financial affairs; however, the underlying financial wherewithal to invest in land was equally important for the growth and sustenance of estates.[15] Elsewhere, however, traditions of partible inheritance could compromise the integrity of estates across generations, and the relationship with the monarchy as a source of power could work both for and against the consolidation of landholding into the hands of the few. Where noble privilege was inherited across the family, or where the monarch allied with freeholders in parliament against the power of the nobility, as was the case in Denmark, landholding could be fragmented. However, the expression of social distinction through the ownership of land, through the management of estate land, and the way of life performed within the landscape, as well as through its architectural expression, were all shared attributes across northern Europe.

The Challenge of Urban Commerce

The creation of estates across northern Europe was contemporaneous with the growth of colonialism, early industrialization and the development of global trade. New streams of commodities fed the consumer revolution, and wealth flowed into the banking and commercial sectors as well as through the government and state. New avenues and opportunities for personal enrichment opened up and, by the eighteenth century, an entirely new scale of private wealth was apparent, particularly in Britain and the Netherlands, and to some degree in Sweden and Denmark.[16] In the eighteenth century, the cultural representation of landownership as the foundation of modern society remained a strong justification for the privileged political position