

Economy, Work and Social Roles

Continuity and Change in the Danish Island Community of Læsø, c. 1200–1900

Bjarne Stoklund

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The aim of this article, which presents an outline of the provisional results of several years' study of the Danish island community Læsø in the Kattegat, is to demonstrate what microlevel studies of European communities viewed in the long historical perspective can contribute to the understanding of continuity and change. From an ecological and economic viewpoint the history of the island has taken the form of a number of adaptations to changes, often radical ones, in external and internal conditions. In the period from 1200 until 1900 we can distinguish three main periods, each with its dominant occupation, separated by transitional phases, the latter often periods of crisis. In the first section of the article the main phases in the history of the island are reviewed from this point of view and one of the things emphasized is that the history of the island cannot be seen in isolation, but must be related to structures and market fluctuations at the macro-level. The second section of the article deals with some important aspects of the particular sociocultural system that took form on the island given these conditions of existence. It emerges that this system retained a high degree of permanence and stability throughout radical transformations, although at the same time it was subject to gradual change. In a concluding section I discuss the possibility of understanding and explaining continuity and change in the sociocultural system of the island.

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Introduction

As long as cultural research has existed the question of continuity and change has been an important problem area; yet it is one that has not been given equal priority by all research disciplines.

For older anthropologists, ethnologists and social historians it was a matter of course that a long diachronic perspective should be employed in the study of cultural phenomena, as long as *explaining* a phenomenon was primarily considered to be a question of discovering its *origin* and *development*. Scholars, confident of the universal applicability of evolutionary theory, therefore boldly traced long lines of development back to a distant past, but often on the

basis of a very limited body of empirical material.

With the advent of the functionalist/structuralist paradigm in the second quarter of the 20th century, which directed attention to the study of culture and society as totalities, the value and practicability of diachronic studies of this type were seriously queried. The reaction was strongest within the structural-functional school of anthropology, which distanced itself from what Radcliffe-Brown called "conjectural history", and for a couple of generations concentrated on the study of *cultural systems* in small present-day communities which, it was thought, could be delimited from the larger society surrounding them.

The reverberations of this paradigm shift

reached Scandinavian ethnology later and in a more subdued form, and the historical perspective was preserved here to a greater extent. Yet, as N.-A. Bringéus says in his introduction to ethnology from 1981, it is no longer a prehistorical perspective, "but a perspective often no more than a century long, enough to serve as a contrast for understanding present-day society, or to study processes of change through time" (Bringéus 1981: 46).

This use of the short historical perspective is not without its problems. In the first place, the study of cultural processes thus comes to be concentrated on a restricted segment of western history: the period immediately preceding our modern society. And secondly, there is a tendency for the study of process to be reduced to the juxtaposition of a given culture with an often somewhat simplified "antithesis"; for example, bourgeois culture is brought into relief by contrasting it with or mirroring it in a more or less simplistic image of "the old peasant culture" (see for example Frykman & Löfgren 1979).

The method is a classic one in cultural research. Going back to Jacob Burckhardt, we find him painting his portrait of Italian renaissance culture over a canvas of the middle ages whose contours later research has to a great extent erased (Burckhardt 1860). The main weakness of the method is probably a tendency to overemphasize salient changes and an inability to grasp the complex interweaving of continuity and change that is the very essence of cultural process.

Researchers who have employed the community study methods of the anthropologists have faced related problems. The pictures they have given us of the small communities they have studied have often been too static, and they have not quite come to grips with the processes of change. Some anthropologists have reacted against this by abandoning micro-studies as a dead end, and have instead turned to "world systems" and the like, which are supposed to provide better scope for understanding the dynamics of change. Others have sought to add a historical dimension to local

studies, but not very many of these attempts have been convincing (for a discussion of this, see Christiansen 1983).

Whatever the choice of research strategy, both ethnologists and anthropologists today face in their analyses of culture the methodical problem of combining *synchrony* and *diachrony*, *structure* and *history* (see, for example, Hastrup 1985). This challenge to research has perhaps been most clearly formulated by Marshall Sahlins in the introductory remarks to his little book on cultural *reproduction* and *transformation* in Hawaii during the period before and after James Cook's death in 1779: "The great challenge to an historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?" (Sahlins 1981: 8).

As I see it, there must still be a wealth of unexplored possibilities for such a research objective in micro-level studies of Western European societies, if only because the source material, often existing in continuous series covering long periods of time, enables us to a great extent to work at the level of the village and the individual. In England, where material of this kind goes all the way back to the middle ages, a systematic combing of the archive material for certain localities is in progress (Macfarlane 1977). Other long-perspective historical studies are being carried out in several places in Europe. As examples it is enough to mention here David Sabeau's investigations of a South German village over 500 years (Sabeau 1976) and Palle O. Christiansen's studies of a Danish manorial area from the 18th century until the present day (Christiansen 1978).

In the following study I have endeavoured to analyse continuity and change – or, if one prefers, reproduction and transformation – in a Danish island community, Læsø, over a 700-year period. With this example I hope to point out some of the avenues that a diachronic analysis at the micro-level opens up for the study of cultural processes.

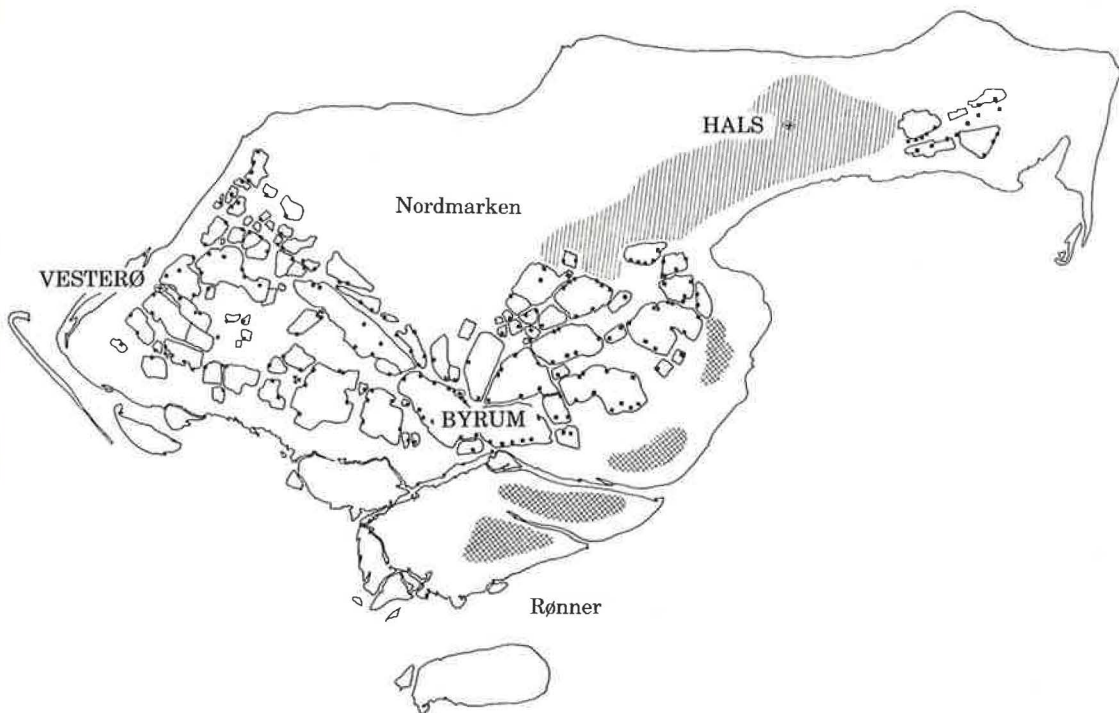


Fig. 1. Map of Læsø. The map shows settlement in about 1800 (the enclosed "allotments" with farm-houses placed near the boundaries between home and outlying fields). The vertically shaded area was settled before it was devastated by sand drift. In the hatched areas the ruins can be found of the medieval salterns. *Vesterø*, *Byrum* and *Hals* are the names of

three parishes. *Nordmarken* (the Northern Common) was in about 1800 covered by heath and dunes caused by sand drift. Like the low islands to the south, *Rønner*, it was used for grazing and turf-digging. Part of *Nordmarken* was covered by pine forest in the middle ages.

The locality and the historical process

Læsø, situated in the Kattegat, about 20 km from Jutland and about 40 km from the west coast of Sweden, is a small low-lying island with sandy soil, 21 km long and 12 wide. Geologically, it is the product of late glacial marine deposits and the subsequent postglacial upheavals. The oldest and highest part of the island is a triangular plateau to the north that is now covered with plantations and natural woods. During the middle ages the plateau supported a pine forest, but throughout most of the post-medieval centuries the area was treeless, with heathland and shifting sand dunes. The cultivated fields form a broad belt in the lower, southern part of the island, where they merge into littoral meadows and some small is-

lands, *Rønner*, which are now almost completely joined to the main island. To the south of the island the sea is very shallow: one can wade out for kilometres, and at low tide there can be dry land as far as the eye can see.

The earliest sources mentioning inhabitants on Læsø are from about 1200. The combined evidence of place-names and archaeology indicates that it was not until then that there was any real permanent settlement on the island. But the population must have quickly grown to quite a considerable size, as evidenced by the fact that the island was divided into three parishes in the middle ages.

The background for the island's rapid demographic growth was not that it offered particularly favourable conditions for primary occupations like agriculture and fishing. On the contrary, apart from a short interval in the 20th



Fig. 2. View of Nordmarken with wheel tracks and heather stacks. Author's photograph, 1950.

century, these occupations have only been able to meet part of the population's own consumption needs, and the economy of the islanders has therefore been based on other activities. During the middle ages it was the extraction of salt from seawater, and in the post-medieval centuries various types of seafaring, that were the most important elements in the economy – the Læsø islanders' "cash crop", so to speak.

The relatively dense population, the excessive strain on local resources, and the ever-pressing necessity of finding new economic niches on or off the island are key factors for the understanding of the history of Læsø, which is a continuing story of constant adaptation, both to altered ecological conditions on the island itself and to fluctuating economic and political factors exerting influence from the outside. The changes in the Læsø islanders' conditions of existence throughout this long period make the island a natural point of departure for a study of the interplay between "la longue du-

rée" and the processes of change forced on the population by internal and external circumstances.

In what follows I will present some provisional results from the many years of study I have devoted to the culture and society of Læsø. The article is arranged in two main sections: first, an outline will be sketched of the most important periods in the history of the island from about 1200 until the present day; and then one central aspect – the social organization of work and the norms and values attached to it – will be singled out for more detailed treatment in terms of the division into periods made in the first section.

The first section, then, operates – on the basis of ecological and economic criteria – with a division of the history of the island into four periods with three intermediate intervals that I have chosen to call *readjustment phases*. Periodization is a classic device for coming to grips with a diachronic process, and can of course be

Fig. 3. Sheep grazing on the littoral meadows on the south coast of the island. In the background a view of one of the flat islands to the south, the so-called *Rønner*. Author's photograph, 1950.



criticized, inasmuch as it cannot avoid doing some violence to reality by chopping up a long, continuous chain of reproduction and transformation into more or less arbitrary units.

In defence of the periodization employed I will, however, make two points. In the first place, I have come to the conclusion that using the present division based on ecological-economic criteria allows me, despite any disadvantages, to operate with periods that are relatively static – in other words, that maintain the same structural characteristics over a reasonably long span of years – and to distinguish them, if only roughly, from phases where the processes of change are more immediately apparent and where one can speak of decided symptoms of crisis.

Secondly, I believe that a division into periods is essential if one is to *describe* these lengthy passages of time at all, and if one aims to isolate by means of these descriptions the systematic features that differentiate one part

of the process from another. The boundaries between the periods cannot of course be drawn as cleanly in reality as, for the sake of argument, they are drawn here. To underscore this I have given dates in round figures. The interpolation of the three readjustment phases is a further mark of the fluidity of the boundaries: these are transitional zones, where structural features typical of two periods co-exist, and where the actual processes of change are more visible than in the main periods. Finally, I have tried in a diagram (Fig. 4) to show the duration of the most important phenomena underlying the division into periods. The overlapping shown in the diagram may help to soften the over-sharp dividing-lines between periods.

A few general remarks on the empirical material underlying the periodization and subsequent analysis of the organization of work and gender roles: obviously, the sources are most informative for the most recent periods, and

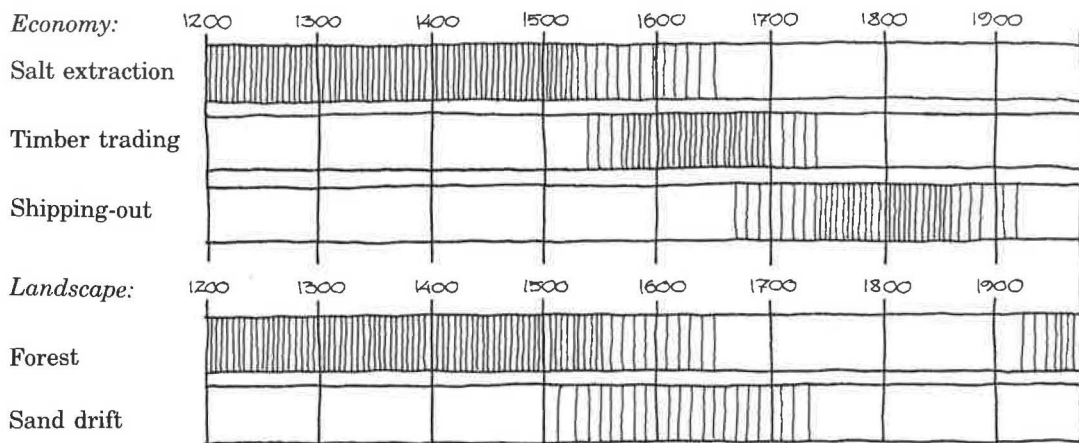


Fig. 4. Time chart for the most important elements included in the periodization of the island's history.

cautious inferences will occasionally have to be made about the earlier ones. A number of good descriptions are available of Læsø society between 1750 and 1880, written by officials on the island; the most valuable are those of the District Judge Lars Hess Bing (1802) and the District Medical Officer C. Rasmussen (1858). A considerable corpus of records and interviews exists covering the period 1880–1920: it includes material in *Dansk Folkemindesamling* (the Danish Folklore Collection) and NEU (the Ethnological Surveys of the National Museum of Denmark) and not least the results of the author's own fieldwork on the island from the 1950s and later.

To provide information about demographic conditions we have censuses from 1787 onwards; land registers, fiscal counts and parish registers enable us to go as far back as about 1650. Trial and probate records go back to the end of the 17th century, and a considerable body of material on the administration of the island can be found in the county records and the Viborg diocesan archives. (For example, the Chapter's cadastral accounts have been preserved – although with lacunae – from about 1590 on). As far as the middle ages are concerned, on the whole only a number of documents have been preserved, and there is a very slight amount of archaeological evidence.

I. Periods in the history of the island

The salt extraction period: (c. 1200) – c. 1520

Salt was the most important preservative in the middle ages and was therefore a commodity very much in demand. In many places along the Danish coastline salt was produced by burning seaweed and leaching the ashes; but this "black salt", as it was called, was of poor quality and had a limited range of uses. Good quality salt had to be imported, and was an expensive item.

On Læsø, however, it was possible to produce good quality salt by evaporating salt water, as water with a considerably higher salt concentration than ordinary seawater could be obtained by digging holes in the sand on the low-lying islands south of the main island. This water was poured into large pans which were hung up in a firmly built scaffolding and covered to keep out rainwater. Under the basins was a fireplace where wood or turf were burnt until the water had evaporated and the salt had been precipitated. Remains of such "salt-erns" have been identified in their hundreds along the south coast of the island and out on the so-called *Rønner*. A few of them have been investigated archeologically, but none has been dated with certainty (Albrethsen 1977).

The first documentation of salt extraction on Læsø is from about 1300, but the industry was probably in full swing a century before. In 1219

a boundary dispute between the Viborg Chapter and the large Cistercian monastery at Vitskøl concerning their holdings on Læsø was settled by royal arbitration. At that time each owned its part of the island, and there can be no doubt that it was the salt that attracted the attention of these two powerful ecclesiastical institutions to the remote island. Capital was needed to finance salt extraction using this technique; in particular the large salt-pans would have been expensive. There is also evidence that two other large monasteries owned considerable shares in the Læsø salt-pans and occasionally private individuals outside the island are also mentioned as owning interests in the Læsø production apparatus (Grüner Nielsen 1924: 32–37).

Yet some of the salterns must have been owned by the islanders themselves. Every farm had a share (either owned or rented) in a saltworks, and provided manpower to keep the pans filled with salt water and the fires burning under them during the summer months when salt could be manufactured. The Læsø islanders were tenants of the Viborg Cathedral Chapter, which owned the whole island from 1320 on, and they paid the bulk of their dues in salt. Over and above this, eight tuns of salt were paid annually per pan for the use of the woods belonging to the Chapter. In the 1480s at least three cargoes of 18 *læster* or approximately a thousand *tønder* or tuns of salt were shipped every year to Viborg's harbour on the Limfjord.

During the middle ages the Læsø woods could still supply firewood and timber for the salterns. Besides the pine forest mentioned above, on the triangular plateau to the north, there was mixed deciduous woodland in the lower-lying parts of the island. In the middle ages forest clearances made room here for settlements. Læsø farming was first and foremost based on cattle-breeding, for which the woods and littoral meadows afforded good conditions. But the enclosed, cultivated plots were small, and the soil poor. So cereal crops were not sufficient for the grain needs of the population of the island, which was therefore granted a royal licence in 1446 to purchase grain freely in other parts of the realm.

One can infer from the last point that the islanders themselves must have indulged to some extent in sea trading. It seems unthinkable, too, that they would not have disposed of part of their salt production in this way, but unfortunately we lack hard evidence of this.

Readjustment phase I: c. 1520–1570

The large-scale manufacture of salt required great quantities of wood and turf, and in the long run this was bound to have serious consequences for the basic resources of the island. At the end of the fifteenth century the first complaints were heard about the over-exploitation of the woods, and the first measures were suggested for conserving them; as might be expected, there was just as much concern about the digging up of turf between the trees as about felling them.

The situation was aggravated in the next century, when Læsø experienced what could be called its first ecological crisis. In 1536 came a warning against what would later become the worst scourge on the island – sand drift – and in 1559 the removal of marram grass and whatever else “grows on the earth, checking the drift of sand” was prohibited. At about the same time, the woods of the Chapter were described as poor; and assessments from later in the century show that there were now only pitiful remnants left of them (Grüner Nielsen 1924: 18–23).

However, the crisis of the middle of the sixteenth century also took the form of a conflict of interests between the islanders and the Chapter, which took zealous care that the salt-pans were kept boiling, but at the same time wanted the woods to be spared as far as possible. This left the islanders in a dilemma that was impossible to solve in the long run. As early as the 1520s they were on the verge of revolt, refused to pay dues and had to be called to order by a royal letter.

For the islanders it became ever more difficult and less attractive to keep up salt production. Not only were the basic resources running out at home (the fuel problem was becoming more and more serious) but the product itself was also having great difficulty competing in price and quality with imported south

west European sea salt. Even at the beginning of the seventeenth century a few salterns were still being kept in production, and it was only in 1652 that salt manufacture was definitely discontinued in an agreement reached with the people of the island. By that time, though, the hopeless situation had long since forced them to find a new and better niche: the Norway timber trade.

The timber trading period: c. 1570–1700

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Denmark was not only able to supply herself with timber, but could even export oak to Burgundy and Flanders. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, however, things began to change. Statutes were passed forbidding both the over-exploitation of the woods and the wasteful use of timber, and timber for building began to be imported instead of exported. During the period of prosperity beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century Denmark experienced one of its great building booms, and this meant a rapidly increasing demand for timber.

In the Dano-Norwegian state there were two regions in particular where the necessary material could be fetched. One was the Baltic island of Gotland, the other Southern Norway with Bohuslen. While West Norway exported considerable amounts of timber to England in the middle ages, the Southern Norwegian timber export only got under way at the end of the medieval period, stimulated by a growing Dutch demand. At the same time a technical revolution brought about by the invention of the water-driven saw made it possible to mass-produce boards and planks. Small sawmills were set up wherever a stream provided enough water in spring to run a simple water-wheel and there was access to a navigable waterway (Bull 1922: 391ff). Many of the sawmills were set up by the Crown and nobility, but small peasant sawing units also played a not inconsiderable role.

While the Dutch vessels usually arrived at the Norwegian quays in ballast, the Danish timber ships often carried return freights of grain or other agricultural produce. Norway has never been able to meet her own grain needs, and the increased prosperity created by

the timber trade meant that Danish agricultural exports found a market here with plenty of purchasing power.

A glance at the map (Fig. 5) will convince the reader that Læsø, by virtue of its strategic position in the Kattegat, was eminently qualified to play a role in this exchange of commodities between Norway and Denmark. Just how early the Læsø islanders began trading in timber cannot be decided with certainty. We find the first scattered information in sources from the last decades of the sixteenth century; but customs accounts exist from a number of small ports on the Oslo Fjord and in Bohuslen from the beginning of the next century. These records such large numbers of Læsø timber boats that one must conclude that the timber trade cannot have been a new phenomenon at that time. In 1612 between 60 and 70 vessels from Læsø called at eighteen ports in Bohuslen and three on the Oslo Fjord, and even if these figures are not exhaustive one can venture the conclusion that the timber fleet must have been of the same order as in the years around 1670 (cf. table, Fig. 6).

The accounts show that the Læsø timber boats made from two to four voyages a year. It appears that on the first voyage they would bring some of the island's own preserved meat products and ship's biscuit, baked for export from grains imported to the island under the provisions of the licence mentioned above. The logic behind this must have been that such a cargo would pay for the first shipment of timber, usually a judicious selection of beams, laths and boards bought from several farmers with their own water-driven saws. As the map shows, these small craft had ports of call all over Denmark where they could dispose of their cargoes, with particularly good trade openings in the Western Limfjord and along navigable streams. Rivers as we know them from the rest of Europe are unknown in Denmark in Denmark, but the small Læsø ships, the so-called *skuder*, drawing only a few feet of water, could sail upstream to points far beyond where larger vessels would have been forced to reload their cargoes (Stoklund 1972).

In the course of the seventeenth century Denmark fought a long series of wars with

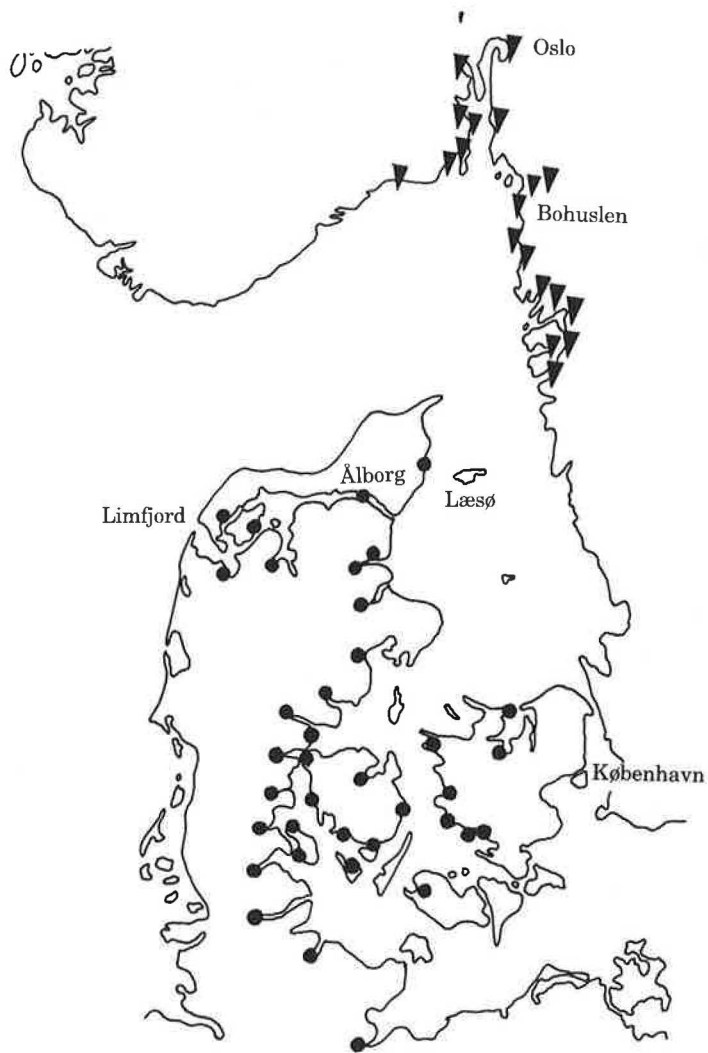


Fig. 5. Map of ports of call of the Læsø boats during the timber trading period. Triangles: Norwegian quays where timber was loaded. Circles: Danish localities where timber was sold.

Sweden. It was inevitable that these would affect small unprotected trading ships like those from Læsø, and in fact there were complaints about widespread devastation after each of the wars. Seafaring and sea trade are risky enterprises in wartime, but the opportunities for making profits are also bound to increase with the risk, and the table listing the number of vessels on Læsø shows that the ravages of war were made good and the fleet restored to strength amazingly quickly. That the sea brought fortunes home to Læsø during these years is evident from, among other things, the discovery of a large hoard of coins buried dur-

ing the 1675–79 war by one of the Læsø timber traders (Steen Jensen & Stoklund 1984).

It was characteristic of the timber trading of the Læsø islanders in the seventeenth century that the ownership of the *skuder* or timber vessels was shared among many partners, and no great concentration of the economic resources took place. It seems that almost all the tenants on the small farms of the island who would have had shares in the salt industry in the preceding period now took part in the timber trade, so that a couple of farms would jointly own and man a *skude*.

The good opportunities for making a profit

	"Skuder" (4–16 læster)	"Farkoster" (1½–4 læster)	Timber trading ships in all
1669	52	10	62
1670	61	15	76
1671	64	17	81
1672	59	19	78
1673	58	18	76
1674	56	6	62
1680	34	2	36
1682	36	3	39
1683	40	2	42
1684	41	2	43

Fig. 6. Size and tonnage of the Læsø fleet in 1669–1684 according to shipping lists in customs accounts. There are no lists for the war years 1675–79 or 1681. 1 læst was approximately two register tons.

outside Læsø itself made up for the depletion of the island's own basic resources, which continued throughout the century. As in the medieval period, cereal crops were cultivated on a very modest scale. While the small cultivated plots appear to have been enclosed by undressed wooden fences in the heyday of the forests, they were now surrounded by massive banks of turf serving the double purpose of screening the fields from the ever-present threat of sand drift and protecting the crops from untended cattle, grazing on the common lands outside the turf dykes.

Even as late as the war with Sweden in 1656–1660 timber was felled and firewood gathered in the Læsø pine wood. But the last remnants of the forest must have disappeared shortly afterwards, and there was no longer anything to check the sand drift that had already made its encroachment felt at the beginning of the previous century. By now the sand covered considerable stretches of the outlying fields and constituted an added strain on the remaining resources. The problem is outlined very clearly in a petition from the islanders from 1681, in which it is said that "the common land that should serve us as pasture is well nigh dug up", and the prospects for the future are painted in gloomy colours: "The lesson of these times is that whosoever would keep

beasts for the tilling of the earth, to this end he must have within his dykes both pasture in summer and fodder in winter; what grows without will be little enough for dyke-turf, kindling and other use". In other words, the widespread use of surface turf for three main purposes – turf walls, fuel and mixing with manure – had undermined the basis of the cattle-breeding that had been the most stable aspect of agriculture in the middle ages. The old practice of paying part of the dues in butter had also long since been given up and commuted to a cash duty, just as bullock-breeding seems to have died out almost completely.

Readjustment phase II: c. 1700–1750

In the first half of the 18th century Læsø experienced its worst period of crisis so far – a crisis with demographic as well as economic and ecological aspects. The last great war between Sweden and Denmark – the so-called Great Northern War of 1709–1720 – was to signal the end of the timber trading period. Yet more important than the war itself was the general economic crisis that followed in its wake.

A further important contributory factor was the structural changes in the organization of the Norwegian timber trade that had already begun half a century before. In the course of the 17th century there was a gradual concentration of the whole timber trade in the hands of merchants from the trading towns (Johnsen 1934: 35–36), and towards the end of the century the Læsø islanders seem to have been almost alone in trading on a modest scale with the surviving peasant sawmills.

Even though the Læsø islanders still had the advantage at the more modest trading posts at which larger vessels could not call, they found it increasingly difficult to compete. Some attempt at adaptation is indicated by the slowly increasing cargo sizes in the latter half of the 17th century. However, larger vessels were harder to use with Læsø as base and winter harbour, especially as the state of the local harbour had deteriorated through sanding-up. As a result, more and more traders began to use the port of Ålborg on the Limfjord as their sea trading base.

On top of the economic crisis for the Læsø is-

landers' timber trade, the same period saw the culmination of the long drawn-out ecological crisis. After the disappearance of the woods sand drift wrought unchecked havoc throughout the last decades of the 17th and the first decade of the 18th century, with a last violent outbreak in the hard winter of 1709. Contemporary sources estimated that about half of the island was laid waste. Property after property was abandoned because the arable land was covered in sand – in fact, the drifts sometimes lay as high as the windows of the houses. The worst-hit parish was Hals, of whose settlement only a little was left. In Hals Church a service was held for the last time in 1722.

The above-mentioned strain on agricultural resources increased drastically, and now it was not only outlying pastures, but also arable land that was in short supply. One sign of this was a greatly increased tendency to divide up existing tenancies among several heirs when an inheritance was distributed – a practice condemned in vain by the landowner, the Viborg Chapter.

Another characteristic feature of the ecological crisis was an acute shortage of fuel. This had as one result that a substantial amount of the animal manure was withheld from the fields and formed into fuel briquettes instead (Stoklund 1954–55), and as another that it was made illegal to gather heather and other plants in the outlying fields without a specially issued "heather permit".

However, the crisis the island underwent in the first half of the 18th century was not only of an economic and ecological nature; it was also very much a demographic crisis, partly taking the form of a general decline in the population, partly of a shift in the sex ratio that left the women very much in excess of the men. While the population in 1672 can be calculated from a tax census to have been about 1900, it fell according to contemporary reports to about 1400 in 1728 and about 1200 in 1743. The report from 1728 estimates that at that time there were five or six women for every man – a figure which is probably rather exaggerated.

There were two reasons in particular for the decline in the number of men. When it became

common practice to operate out of Ålborg, and as conditions on the impoverished island became ever less attractive, many of the island's more well-off skippers preferred to settle down as citizens of Ålborg. This partly explains the sharp decline in Læsø shipping in the years following the Great Northern War. In 1728 there were only eight vessels left in the Norway trade. In 1743 the number had decreased to three, and they all sailed from Ålborg.

More crucial, however, were the effects of conscription into the Danish Navy, as this directly deprived the island of a substantial proportion of its male youth. Many were lost in action, while others went abroad to avoid military service. Here the latter had good opportunities thanks to their expert seamanship, especially in the Low Countries, whose flourishing East India trade in those years attracted young seamen from many countries including Norway and Denmark.

The shipping-out period, c. 1750–1880

From about 1750 onwards we can see the island community, ravaged by crisis and sand drift, moving towards a new state of economic and ecological balance. Paradoxically, the backbone of the new economic system was precisely one of the phenomena that had triggered off the demographic crisis: shipping out in foreign service. Throughout this whole period the island's own fleet of vessels was limited to skiffs and perhaps a couple of sloops or similar small craft maintaining the island's own supplies of goods and taking the young men to Ålborg or Copenhagen when they were old enough to sign on in Danish, Dutch or English service. The 18th and 19th centuries were the great age of the sailing vessels plying between Europe and the new overseas colonies, and Læsø was just one of many European island or coastal communities supplying seamen for this international shipping trade.

In the 19th century it was customary that every reasonably healthy boy went to sea when he was 14. Thus everyone experienced life at sea; but for most of them it was a phase that was over at all events by the age of 35–40. Thus at any given time only about half of the potential male work force would be away from

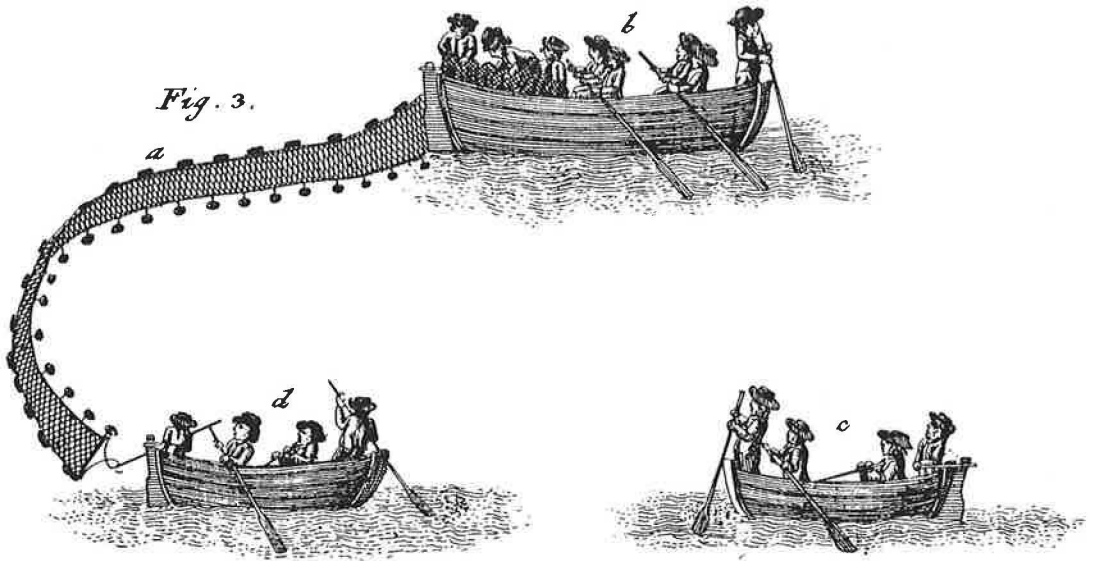


Fig. 7. Old print of garfishing with seine net. The members of the seine guild are divided among three boats. The seine is played out from the biggest boat, one of the smaller ones sails round with it and the fishermen in the third try to scare the fish into the net. From Bing 1802.

the island. In 1855, for example, 348 of the island's 645 men between 14 and 60 had taken ship before the mast; of these a good 80% were unmarried and only 20% married. About a third of the seamen at that time came back home during the winter months (Rasmussen 1858: 35).

As will emerge from the following, at home these men only took a very modest part in agricultural work, which to all intents and purposes was the domain of women. Even when they were at home on the island the men occupied themselves first and foremost with things that had to do with the sea, and with two activities in particular: salvaging work with shipwrecks, and fishing.

Læsø lies in the Kattgat like an octopus, with its reefs and shallows stretched out like tentacles towards ships sailing by. This is why shipwrecks have played an important economic role throughout the island's history both for the population of the island and for its owner, the Viborg Chapter. In 1239 the royal "right of wreck" was transferred to the Chapter, a right which it upheld until the introduction of absolute monarchy in 1660. Over and above this the Chapter levied a duty fixed at a

fifth of the salvage money from shipwrecks, and this salvage duty was not abolished until the 19th century.

In the middle ages salvage money was fixed at a third of the value of the cargo, and this principle was more or less upheld until the 19th century. It was a more disputed question whether the salvors had the right to take their own payment in the form of a third of the cargo itself. A number of the documents preserved from the middle ages are concerned with this; others are about disputes between the Crown and the Chapter over the right of wreck itself (Grüner Nielsen 1924: 59ff). From this period we know nothing, however, of the economic importance of the wrecks or of the organization of salvaging work.

Even though the wrecks must have been important both in the middle ages and in the timber trading period, their role must have become increasingly important during the shipping-out period. The same intensification of sea trading that was a precondition of the Læsø islanders' finding work in the ports of Europe also brought ever more and larger ships past the dangerous shallows off Læsø on their way in and out of the Baltic. In 1780–1800 alone 80

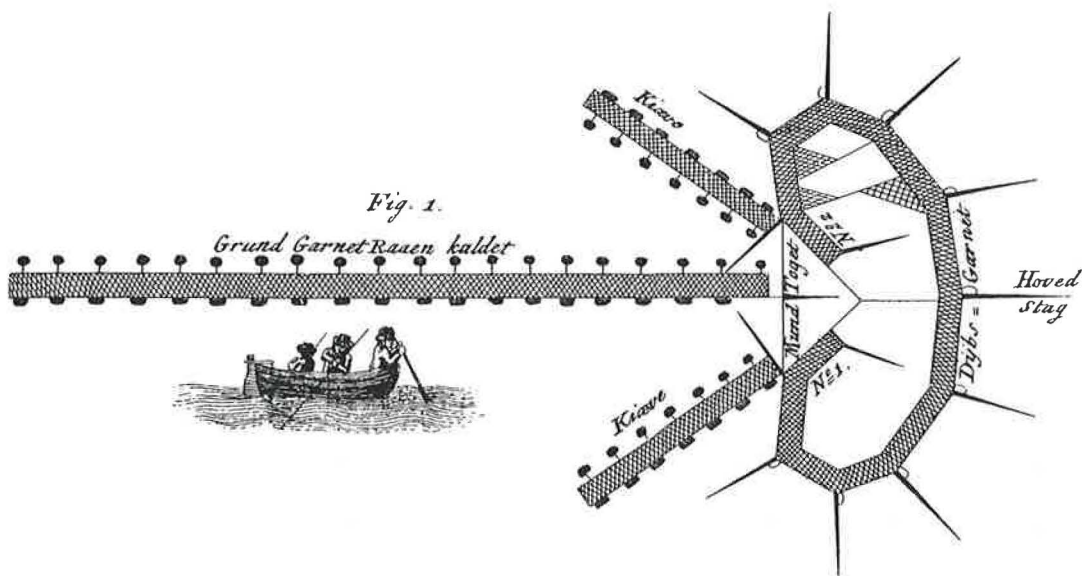


Fig. 8. Old print of a garfish ground net, a permanent type of tackle requiring a working guild of only three or four men. The members of the guild are seen here on their way along the leader to tend the net. From Bing 1802.

ships were wrecked off the coasts of the island. The distribution of these wrecks over the months of the year shows moreover that salvage work mainly arose during the first winter months and thus fell excellently into place in the men's working year both in the timber trading and in the shipping-out period.

In both these periods the Læsø islanders had a large number of sailing skiffs, which they used for salvaging wrecks and fishing as well as for transporting goods. Court cases from about 1700 show that these boats were not only active at the time of the actual wrecks, but that they later also sought to salvage goods from the sunken ships.

Most of the fishing that was done from Læsø in the shipping-out period was on a very modest scale and was only meant to meet the islanders' own consumption needs. That fishing was so poorly developed was connected with several factors: the difficulties of landing catches, poor sales opportunities and the fact that the young men were away from the island at their most active age. There was however one form of fishing that played an important role and affected almost all the families on the island. This was the catching of garfish during

the spawning period of the fish, from the end of April until the beginning of June, on the shallows south of the island. As with the wrecks, there is good reason to believe that we have here an occupational activity going back to the earliest history of the island, although the sources do not mention it until about 1700, and then, characteristically, because the meetings of the district court had to be suspended for the duration of the garfish season because of low attendance.

The older fishing tackle consisted of a large seine net needing three boats and a team of at least 20 fishermen for its use (Fig. 7). During the demographic crisis in the first half of the 18th century it was impossible to find enough men to man the seines, so the more well-off went over to using permanent tackle, the so-called ground net, which they had presumably got to know about from the Limfjord fisheries (Fig. 8). The ground net was more expensive to buy, but could be operated by as few as three or four men. In about 1800, however, the seine came into use again, and throughout the 19th century both types of tackle were used side by side. Dried garfish was an important element in the diet of the island, but during the ship-

ping-out period this form of fishing also provided ready cash, since a considerable part of the catch was sold, especially to Swedish buyers from the islands off the coast near Gothenburg (Bing 1802: 165–174; Stoklund 1958).

The stabilization of the Læsø community that we have observed after 1750 did not immediately lead to the reestablishment of the former population and sex ratio. At the first census in 1787 there was a population of just 1500 individuals, and it was not until the 19th century that the number of people on the island reached the same level as in the middle of the 17th century. As can be seen from the population pyramid (Fig. 9) there was still a considerable excess of women in 1787, and this continued throughout the period. This is a situation that is well known from other seafaring communities with a substantial migration of young males. On the other hand, as we shall

see in the following, there was a certain amount of immigration by men from Northern Jutland.

It was an important aspect of the stabilization process that the sand of the dunes was anchored by lyme grass and the soil that had been exposed to sand drift could gradually support heather and grass again. Several optimistic reports from about the middle of the 18th century mention this. It meant that sand drift had been checked; but also that the acute need for pasturage had been relieved. The pasture areas now also included the formerly cultivated land of the parish of Hals.

The improvements in the vegetation cover in both the old and the new outlying field areas meant that a new ecological balance could be established where heather and heath turf, for example, could meet the need for fuel. From about 1750 onwards we can speak of a definite "heathland exploitation" pattern signalled in the inventories of the equipment on the farms by an innovation: the special heather scythe, previously unknown on the island (Figs 10 and 11). This pattern involved no actual over-exploitation, but it did maintain the heather-clad moorlands as a characteristic feature of the cultural landscape in the shipping-out period.

Otherwise, it was also during this period that a change in the organization of pasturage took place. The large turf dykes surrounding the cultivated home fields that had formerly kept stray cattle away were now demolished and children began to tend the cattle instead.

Readjustment phase III: c. 1880–1920

A substantial amount of the more detailed knowledge we have about working methods, social organization and norms during the shipping-out period really comes from the interval we have here called the third readjustment phase. At this juncture the old way of life was still preserved in most Læsø households, but at the same time the foundations were being laid for something new and different.

Not least of the new developments was the fact that during these years the Læsø community – like so many other marginal Danish communities – was being integrated to an extent hitherto unknown into the greater society

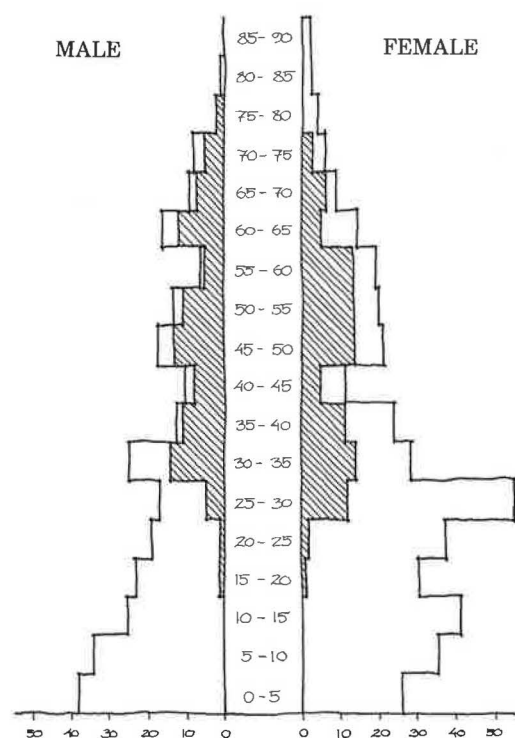


Fig. 9. Population pyramid for Byrum parish in 1787, showing the unequal sex ratio in the shipping-out period. The shaded area indicates those who were married.



Fig. 10. Heather harvest with the special heather scythe. Author's photograph, 1951.

around it, especially through the expansion of the infrastructure in Denmark. It was of immense importance for this process of integration that the island got its first harbour in 1872. From this harbour, Vesterø, on the western side of the island, regular steamship links were established with the North Jutland borough of Frederikshavn, which had been connected by railway with the rest of Denmark just the previous year.

Like the two preceding readjustment phases, this one was also characterized by thorough-going occupational changes. In the most important niche of the Læsø islanders, international seafaring, a mechanization and effectiveness was carried out that made it more and more difficult to reconcile seafaring activities with running a small farm on a remote island. Around the turn of the century service at sea still attracted many of the young islanders, but it was no longer the only solution. Alternative choices of occupation were possible: fishing, farming or one of the new types of employment that integration into the national community paved the way for.

In 1905 another harbour was built, this time at the eastern end of the island (Østerby), and along with the motorization of fishing the two harbours meant that for the first time there was scope for really intensive exploitation of

the abundance of fish around the island. At the same time new institutions and organizations stimulated farming. In 1896 the first cooperative dairy was opened; at about the same time a lending and savings bank came to the island, and the small farmers of the island joined forces in a smallholders' association for the safeguarding of their common economic interests.

Two new movements that made an impact on the island in this period – the temperance movement and the fundamentalistic religious laymen's movement *Indre Mission* (the Home Mission) – each signalled in separate ways a break with the norms and values of the old way of life. The Home Mission in particular was to play a major role on Læsø in the following period. The first revivalist tendencies appeared as early as the 1860s; in 1873 the first evangelical meeting with a speaker from outside the island was held; and in 1892 and 1893 the first evangelical meeting houses were built in Vesterø and Byrum.

The fishing and smallholding period: c. 1920–1960

This study is limited to the period before the changes that began around the turn of the century, and which meant, as far as the social organization of work was concerned, a break with the island's own traditions and to a certain extent an adaptation to the division of la-

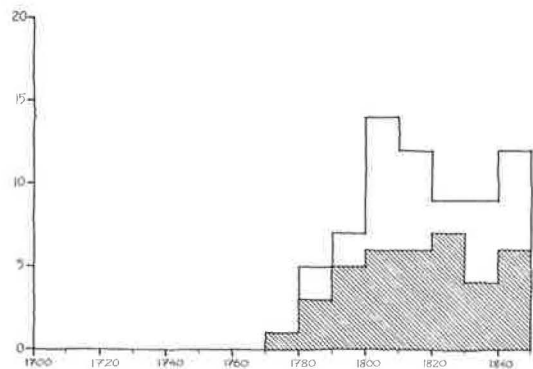


Fig. 11. Occurrence of the heather scythe in probate records (on the basis of ten estate transfers a year). The diagram shows both the total number of heather scythes recorded and the number of estates with heather scythes that changed hands (shaded area).



Fig. 12. The new fishing settlement at Vesterø harbour in about 1900. Old photograph from Læsø Local Archives.

bour prevalent in the rest of Danish society. However, to round off this picture of the history of the island developments in the present century will be briefly outlined.

The most striking feature of the period from about 1920 to 1960 was that the islanders for the first time since the middle of the 16th century were able to live on the resources of the island itself: the fish and the fruits of the land. Even though many continued to practice fishing and farming together in the same household there was a characteristic tendency towards a splitting-up of the two activities into independent occupations.

The great breakthrough for fishing came during the First World War, when the increasingly valuable catches were exported to Germany at war by railway from Frederikshavn. In the beginning of the 1920s a small town grew up at Vesterø harbour, and Østerby harbour too gradually developed an urban area.

The farming properties of Læsø are so small

that in a Danish statistical context they are to be classified as smallholdings. But precisely the time between the two world wars was the short period when a Danish country family could subsist exclusively on the yield of a smallholding, and this was also true of Læsø despite the poor quality of the farming land.

A characteristic feature of smallholding was the intensive utilization of the little cultivated plot. Outlying areas, on the other hand, which had been distributed among the plot-owners as early as 1845, decreased in importance. Exploitation of the remote, lean pastures was not profitable, and heather and heath turf gradually fell into disuse as fuel. As tree plantations became common (the initial move having been made by the state, which from 1925 onwards created a large dune plantation in the area where the medieval pine woods had grown) the basis was laid for a radical change in the landscape of the island. As turf cutting and grazing came to an end in the outlying fields, birch and

mountain pine quickly grew up on the former heathlands, which are today almost completely covered by plantations and natural woods. The wheel has thus come full circle: the island has to a great extent regained its medieval, forest-clad appearance.

In conclusion, a few brief remarks about developments in the last 25 years. In the 1960s and 1970s the small Læsø farms with their relatively poor soil became unprofitable in the competitive context of Danish and European agriculture. At the same time the island experienced a belated but considerable tourist invasion. Many of the small farming properties became summer resorts for town-dwellers, and the soil was tilled in larger units. In this period tourism became the most important industry besides fishing, which now entered into a boom period, due in particular to specialization in a very lucrative lobster fishing industry.

II. The Social Organization of Work

The farms – bases of economic activity

It has been mentioned above that it was not until about 1200 that there was a real permanent settlement on Læsø, and that this settlement was established in clearings in a deciduous forest that covered the lower-lying parts of the island. As can be seen from the map (Fig. 1) in the 18th century the cultivated areas still lay like large and small islands, the so-called *haver* (enclosed plots), in the surrounding, heather-covered common. There has never been any concentrated village settlement on the island. The farms were scattered, but almost always located at the periphery of the enclosed *have*, at the boundary between the home and outlying fields. A farm could have its own *have*, but in most cases the land, as the map shows, was shared by several properties, either so that each had its share enclosed separately or so that each property had a defined share in the *have*. The latter phenomenon was called *havefællig* ("allotment partnership").

In the middle ages three categories of taxable households occurred. The largest group was represented by the so-called *bol*, which we can describe as a small farm. A smaller category consisted of farmsteads about half as big

called *græssetter*, which originally must have been the households of smallholders attached to a farm. Finally there were the *inderster*, which originally must have been landless households, but which could later have a small plot of land. In the 17th and 18th centuries the difference between *bol* and *græssetter* gradually blurred, while on the other hand the real area and value of land constituting a *bol* varied greatly from property to property. This was connected with the fact that the islanders – with the permission of the landowner, the Viborg Chapter – had the possibility of taking land from the common into use for tillage.

In reality the cultivated land was not the most important element. It provided the household with a number of products, mainly subsistence goods, although it could happen that a thrifty farming household could have something left over to sell, for example in Norway. Yet the farms were not primarily agrarian production units, but must rather be described as legal platforms in society and bases for economic activities of other kinds. The most important medieval duty levied was also, as mentioned above, a tun of salt per farm. Later, in the seafaring period, dues were paid only in cash.

Formally the Læsø islanders were tenants of the Viborg Chapter, but apart from the obligation to pay land dues and lease recognition fees they had great scope. The tenants themselves owned the buildings erected on the properties, and in practice it was permitted to transfer the land to others both by inheritance and sale, as long as the Chapter received its dues. Handing down the land to one's heirs was acknowledged in 1540 to be an old, time-honoured practice, and the tenancy accounts from the middle of the 17th century show clearly that the properties were not only inherited intact or parcelled out in plots, but that parts of the tenancies were also bought and sold.

Thus the islanders, within the framework of a tenancy of a more formal than practical nature, had considerable scope for disposing of their farms as they wished: by buying and selling, by combining them or splitting them up. The Chapter looked askance at the latter prac-

tice, though, for if several people had shares in the same *bol* the responsibility for paying dues could become diffuse. In 1680 the Chapter complained that the practice had arisen of four, five, six or even more people establishing themselves in one *bol* "by right of self-appointed inheritance", whereby the properties were spoiled and great confusion arose in the cadastres. But later the Chapter had to allow this practice to continue, on the condition however that no more than two or three tenants settled in the same *bol*, and that land dues and taxes were paid punctually.

There can be little doubt that the tendency to split up properties accelerated at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, when the ravages of sand drift increased the strain on the remaining landed properties. In a community with a composite occupational culture in which agriculture only plays a modest role it is inevitable that the limit to how much a property can be split up will be rather low. It was a saying in later times on Læsø that if only a farm was big enough to provide fodder for two horses and three cows, then it was possible to divide it between two families.

Yet in the first half of the 18th century divisions of property were to sink considerably below this lower limit of viability, among other reasons because there were rather more owners of a property than those who were "sitting tenants", i.e. who actually lived and worked on it. For owning land was not so much a matter of having a share in a production apparatus as of acquiring special status. In a report from 1757 it is complained that young unmarried women are buying farm shares – often as little as a sixth or an eighth of a normal-sized farm – in order to avoid the personal tax levied at the time on *inderster* and unmarried servants, although they actually earned their living by working for others.

However, a farm share like this could also function as a social safety net, as by handing it on to others one could ensure oneself care and attention when one was no longer able to cope for oneself. This is a situation remarked on in a document from 1771, which says that "this custom used by the inhabitants of this island, of thus conveying the titles to their property

against their keep in their declining years, is the principal reason here more than in other places why this island is free of mendicants and beggars".

When there were several households on one farm, one spoke of *gårdfællig* ("farm partnership"). In property conveyances of the 17th and 18th centuries *gård- og havefællig* ("farm and allotment partnership") is a stock phrase. Exactly how it functioned we do not know. In the case of the remnants of the institution we know from later times the participants have clearly defined shares in buildings and land. As a rule it is a matter of farms divided in two, so-called twin farms, but a few examples have also been preserved of more complex divisions. An example of this was the farm *Bangsbogård*, whose extensive buildings were shared in 1900 between four "farm partners" (*gårdfæller*), while there were no less than nine properties with shares in the accompanying *have* or allotment (Figs 13–14) (Stoklund 1980).

In old farms that have only had one user in recent times it is not uncommon to observe that one of the outhouses has formerly been a farmhouse in its own right. This must mean that the farm was once divided into two units each with its own buildings. A division like this need not have been permanent, but could have been a feature connected with a new generation taking over. When a daughter married, her father could choose to hand over half of the farm to the young couple, keeping the other half himself. Later when he died or retired to live as a pensioner on the farm, the farm would be united again under one user.

Here we have assumed that it was a daughter who took over the property; for this was common practice in the period from the middle of the 18th until the end of the 19th century. While it was usual in the timber trading period (c. 1570–1700) that son followed father on the properties, "female inheritance" became the norm in the subsequent shipping-out period. Not that it *always* happened that way: there were many exceptions, for example due to purchases and sales, but if a farm remained in the family in this period it went in most cases to a son-in-law and daughter. The change in practice seems to have been assisted by the excess



Fig. 13. The farmhouse of *Bangsbogård* in the 1920s, when it still consisted of four combined farming units. Photo, H. Zangenberg, 1927.

of women and the many unmarried female property owners in the readjustment period from 1700 until 1750. But it became institutionalized in the shipping-out period (from about 1750–1880) as a practice that was well adapted to the course of the male working life in this period, which we will come back to in what follows.

This alteration in the pattern of generation change on the farms also had some repercussions for naming customs on *Læsø*. While the use of the name of the farm as surname was restricted before 1700 to the users of the properties in question, we can observe a tendency in the course of the 18th century for the farm names to become fixed family names that accompanied the bearers even when they moved to other farms on marriage. This tendency however ran counter to another practice, a tendency in everyday speech to call an owner who had married into a farm by the name of

his father-in-law. To give concrete examples of both cases: Melchior Stoklund had the farm *Strandgård* in Byrum parish at the end of the 19th century; he had been born on *Bangsbogård* but had his surname from his father, who had been born on the farm *Stoklund*; Melchior Stoklund had married into the farm *Strandgård* and in everyday speech was called Melchior Faldt after his father-in-law Lars Faldt.

“Fællig” and “selskab” – institutions for cooperation

As the *Læsø* farms were small and widely scattered and had no part in larger associations like the village guilds it was necessary to establish cooperative organizations of various kinds to solve problems of work and economy both within and outside the farming context.

On *Læsø* the term *fællig* (related to English “fellow(ship)”) was used of a number of institu-

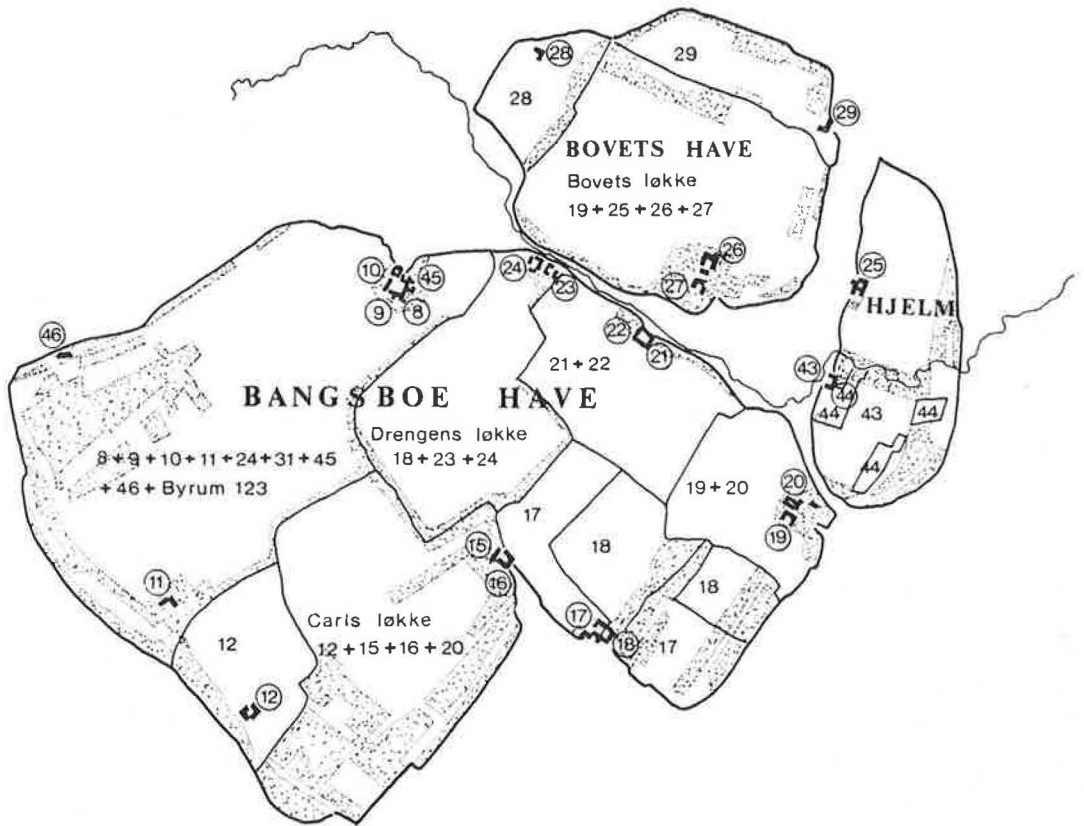


Fig. 14. Map of *havefælliger* ("allotment partnerships") at Bangsbo in Hals parish at the beginning of the 19th century. The figures in circles indicate the farmhouse buildings (8, 9, 10 and 45 are the four units at Bangsbo-gård, cf. Fig. 13). The figures in the enclosed allotments show which farming units were included in the *havefælliger* in question.

tions of this type. The concept was used quite loosely, but its core seems to have been cooperation between a number of persons – usually between two and six – who owned a production apparatus jointly or had shares in it (it could be a saltern, a farm, a ship or fishing tackle) and who not only contributed capital but also worked in the partnership.

We have already met the phenomenon in the concept *gård- og havefællig* used of the possession and running of the shared *bol*. In connection with farming there was also the so-called *ploufællig* or "plough partnership", which was however of a slightly different nature. But this institution too was predicated on the intensive parcelling-out of property. At the beginning of the 18th century teams of 8–10 pairs of horses were used for the wheeled

plough, and as each farm often only had one pair at its disposal several farms had to combine their plough horses to get this work done (Stoklund 1985).

We find the earliest information about the *fællig* institution in connection with the medieval salt industry, where the archives preserved refer at several points to the *fælligsmænd* or part-owners of the individual salterns. A saltern always had several owners and users. The shares could have been divided up through inheritance into smaller fractions, but it appears that quarter-shares were the most commonly occurring, and we may perhaps venture to conclude that common practice was that four farms were jointly responsible for the operation of a saltern.

We find a similar form of organization in the

following period in connection with the Norway timber trade (c. 1570–1700) and here we have rather more solid ground under our feet as regards the functioning of the institution. The sources show that it was common for two or more partners to have shares in a timberboat, but that the number of partners was as a rule strictly limited. The most common division in the source material is into thirds, followed by sixths and halves.

It further emerges that the boats were very much family affairs and that the size and number of the shares varied with the family cycle. Generation shifts as regards the boats can to a certain extent be said to follow the same patterns as with the farms. When a son had reached adulthood the father could hand over a share in the boat to him, and sometimes also the responsibility for it. Then when the son himself had grown-up children there was a new distribution, as sons and any sons-in-law got their shares. It was not unusual for partners in a boat to be in-laws. It was unusual for all the boat shares to be united under one single owner, as the third generation normally came in at the same time as the first withdrew.

The crews on the boats varied between four men (or three men and a boy) on the larger craft and two men and a boy on the smaller ones. Everything indicates that the partners were to a great extent identical with the crew on board (Stoklund 1972).

We also encounter *fællig* in connection with the fishing for garfish with ground nets after the middle of the 18th century. A *bundgarnsfællig* or ground net partnership consisted of three or four men who usually each owned a ground net. But two or more people could also own a ground net jointly, so that there were more partners than active fishermen. Family relations played a not inconsiderable role in the composition of these organizations, but neighbourly relations also seem to have been of some importance for recruitment (Stoklund 1958).

In connection with the ground net fishing one could also speak of *selskab* instead of *fællig*. While *fællig* is an old Scandinavian term, *selskab* is a late medieval Low German loan-word. *Selskab* was used on Læsø, for ex-

ample, of the joint owners of a boat working with the salvaging of wreckage in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the garfishing context the word *selskab* was used of the large organizations connected with the use of the seine, but they were never called *fællig*. It therefore seems that the concept of *fællig* was restricted to organizations of a more modest size.

The division of labour between the sexes

It was characteristic of the Læsø community we know from the 18th and 19th centuries that little division of labour among households had been developed. Real, professional craftsmen were almost unknown, nor had trade branched out as a special occupational category. The really crucial line of labour specialization, on the other hand, was the one that was drawn through the individual household: the division between men's and women's work. And here the demarcation lines differed not a little from those in Danish society in general, which is why they were noticed and described by so many travellers and officials. If we supplement this material with present-day records of life on Læsø in about 1900, as we will in the following, we can form quite a good picture of the division of labour and gender roles in the community in the shipping-out period. Using this as a point of departure, and with some help from some scattered, early accounts we can discuss the question of continuity and change in this important area of the social organization of work.

In 1764 there were plans to sell the island to a private consortium that wished to set up a saltworks and calculated, among other things, with a corvée labour supply from the islanders. This led to a letter being written by the population of the island containing the following passage, which, although prompted by a particular political issue, nevertheless sheds light on the islanders' own view of the situation at the beginning of the shipping-out period: "We are seafaring folk, who cannot do peasant work, but must seek out our living far and wide by sailing; and in order to have lodging for our women and children we have each bought for money the little land and its proceeds we inhabit and own; which our wives must them-

selves with great toil and trouble plough, sow, work and till as best they can". If their wives were also to be forced to do *corvée* labour for the saltworks, "why then, their own land would lie untilled, and they themselves would be forced to settle in Holland or elsewhere".

Here the main principle of the gender-based division of labour is set in sharp relief. Everything to do with the land is women's business; the work of the men lies out at sea. Of course the situation was nowhere near as simple in reality. Not all farming chores were seen as women's work to the same extent. Local norms actually reveal a hierarchy of tasks, some of which were counted as decidedly women's jobs, where others were just as definitely men's concerns. But there were other jobs that had a more neutral position in the system of norms, and which could be done if necessary by both sexes. Men's jobs could however be divided up



Fig. 16. Stack of heath turf on one of the *Rønner*. Author's photograph, 1949.



Fig. 15. Læsø woman with her most important implement, the spade. Author's photograph, 1950.

into tasks that an ordinary man with a seafaring past could reasonably undertake and others which he would attempt to avoid at all costs, and which were therefore to a great extent done by migrant labourers and smallholders from Jutland, the so-called *klunter*.

Among women's farming chores we find first and foremost all digging up of earth and turf, and their most important tool was the spade. The special Læsø spade was short and curved, and it was used with the hands alone, or sometimes with the help of the knee, but never of the foot (Fig. 15). At the end of the 17th century the spade occurs in legal records as the female implement *par excellence*, used according to court proceedings for many different purposes, including its use as a weapon in fights between women. The digging up of the heath turf with this spade was also the outdoor job that was still considered as women's work furthest into the 20th century, and "digger girls" were often hired for this purpose.

The spade probably assumed its role as the women's main tool in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. In that period, with the disappearance of the woods, the heath turf took on increasing importance as kindling, as material for building dyke walls and as manure additive. But the spade also grew in im-



Fig. 17. Three women driving a load of seaweed home with horse and cart. Old photograph in the National Museum.

portance as a farming tool at that time, as the constant subdivision of the properties had the effect that many of the plots became so small that it was more convenient to dig them with a spade than to plough them. It was moreover common up until the end of the 19th century for the ploughed earth to be given a final going over with the spade to even out the stiff furrows before sowing.

The tending of cows and sheep was women's work, as in so many other communities. More surprisingly, the women here also cared for the horses, for in almost all societies the horses are men's animals. But on Læsø all carting jobs and chores connected with horses were definitely women's work. Everywhere in the oldest local court records, from the last decades of the 1600s, one finds women working as carters. In 1690 we find a woman driving in from the outlying fields with a cartload of turf; another woman is sentenced for "having hay and grain driven on holy days". In 1704 a woman drives

down to the beach for a load of seaweed manure (i.e. seaweed to mix in the manure); another is persuaded by a man to fetch a load of contraband wood at the north beach. A couple of trials from the 1740s show that at ploughing time each woman drove her team of horses, and this was also the case in the first half of the 19th century (Stoklund 1985).

One of the oldest descriptions of men and women's roles on Læsø says that "when men and their wives drive to church the wife drives for the man, who sits in the back of the carriage" (Pontoppidan 1768: 704). The same situation is mentioned in the 19th century. In 1858 the Medical Officer on the island describes it as follows: "All driving with few exceptions is managed by the women; they hitch and unhitch the horses themselves and do the duty of a coachman: on solemn occasions, when the priest is called to a sufferer, or the doctor to a sickbed; when hard labour is to be done in the fields or on the heath; when corn and turf are

to be carted; at loading and unloading; or at the salvaging of wrecks, on which latter occasion they must often wait for hours on winter days with horses and carts by or even in the sea, in rain and wind, frost and snow; and they hold out with the greatest perseverance regardless of whatever accidents or misfortunes may occur”.

And as a concrete example of this he gives the following account: “A forty-year-old woman, four or five months gone with child, was driving the horses herself one day in December to assist with carting salvaged goods up from the boats, on which occasion half a sea mile had to be driven in the sea itself, which because of the freeze at the time was covered by a thin layer of ice that had to be broken by the horses. Some part of the wagon broke, but undaunted she sprang out in the ice-cold water to well above the knees and without further assistance got the wagon tied together and then

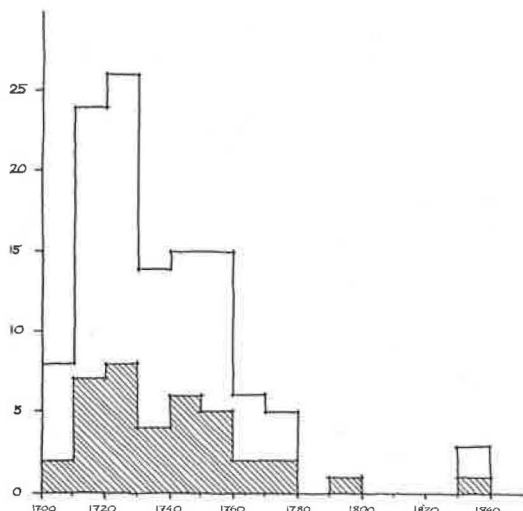


Fig. 19. Occurrence of corn sickles in probate records (on the basis of ten estate transfers per decade). The diagram indicates both the total number of sickles recorded and the number of estates with sickles that changed hands (shaded area).



Fig. 18. Læsø woman sowing corn from her apron. Old photograph in the National Museum.

first continued her drive to the stores to unload the goods before going home to hand over the driving to her daughter; whereafter she took to her bed with a good measure of strong waters and a hefty plug of chewing tobacco, and the next day was in the best of health, without this in any way affecting her pregnancy or her general state of health later” (Rasmussen 1858).

It should be mentioned in this connection that it was also the job of the women to drive the ground nets for garfishing out into the shallows south of the island, far enough out to be loaded on to the rowing boats. Here we see the borderline between the two forms of transport, the boat and the wagon, and the gender roles in this respect emerge clearly.

With work connected with the corn harvest and mowing hay the gender boundaries were not quite as sharply drawn. Before about 1750 two harvesting implements were used on Læsø: the sickle and the scythe. The former was here as in most other places a women’s tool, while the scythe was for the men. At that time scythes were almost exclusively used for mowing hay, while the corn harvesting was done with the sickle. The transition to using

the scythe for harvesting corn took place in the course of the 18th century, and is indicated by the dwindling number of sickles mentioned in probate records (see Fig. 19). This change in technology meant in reality that the men were taking over an important element in the agricultural work, or rather that it was now being organized in the same way as elsewhere, with the men cutting the corn and the women binding it up. But it could also happen that the women used the scythe; and it can be observed here as elsewhere that there was a difference in the measure of approval or disapproval accorded when men or women overstepped the boundaries between work roles: it was laudable that a woman did men's work, but ridiculous for a man to play a woman's role (Löfgren 1975: 65).

At the close of the 19th century outside labourers were used on many properties at harvest time. But these were mostly immigrant Jutlanders, the *klunter* mentioned above. They were best at using the scythe because they had taken part in this kind of work since childhood. "The Læsø men at that time went to sea from boyhood, so they never became too familiar with the scythe; but when they grew older and became the man of the farm or the house themselves they learnt to use it with success, but probably through no desire of their own in many cases" (recorded in NEU).

Another decidedly male job was threshing the corn with a flail, but it was a job that was viewed negatively and that the native Læsø men as far as possible left to the *klunter*, even though it was in just those winter months when threshing took place that there was plenty of male labour available on the island.

As I have said, true men's work according to Læsø norms was first and foremost anything to do with the sea, i.e. fishing and sea transport of goods to and from the island in the small boats; and especially salvage work on wrecks. But in addition to these, craftsmanship, especially woodwork, was viewed very positively and counted among the things a real Læsø man should be knowledgeable about. On most farms in the 18th and 19th centuries there was a so-called "carpentry room", which was a workshop, considerably better equipped than the

average farm workshop. Many of them could be heated, so they were good to work in in the winter when there was time for this type of job. Several of them had an excellent assortment of home-made carpenters' tools, and this has left its mark on the homes, which were often furnished with finely wrought doors and panels.

But the most important area for the Læsø woodworkers was boat building. In the shipping-out period a substantial number of the skiffs were built on the island, and scattered examples suggest that the same was the case with the larger vessels used in the timber trading period (c. 1570–1700). So we may venture to conclude that the craftsman's skills as well as the maritime aspects of the male sphere of work were already characteristic features in the Læsø society of the 1600s.

On the other hand we can be certain the transition to the shipping-out period entailed a decisive change in the course of the typical male working life. In the timber trading era a Læsø man went to sea, in his younger and more mature years, in the *skude* he had inherited a share in. Although his sailing took him far and wide in Danish and Southern Norwegian waters (see map) it was still an element integrated into the other Læsø activities; it was a job that was done in cooperation with other Læsø men and with Læsø as home base. Three or four trading voyages were made in the *skuder* in the summer season from April to October, while one stayed home on the island in the winter season.

In the following period the Læsø men shipped out on board foreign vessels, and were thus drawn into an international seafaring culture that would leave its mark on them. A normal Læsø boy would go to sea when he had been confirmed (i.e. in his early teens). As a rule he would sail in home waters at the beginning and end of his career, and could thus be home in the winter. But in between lay his period as an ocean-going able seaman on the seven seas, and during this segment of his life the sailor had to be away from the island for a long stretch of years at his most active age.

These changes in maritime activity underscored the man's distance from the agricultural workers, as we have seen above in the ac-



Fig. 20. The crew of one of the ships of the Royal Greenland Trading Company in 1905. The captain and five crew members are Læsø men. The Greenland Trading Company was at that time one of the main employers of seamen from Læsø.

count of the use of the scythe. At the same time this helped to institutionalize the female succession on the farms, which as I have said was also assisted by the surplus of women and the need to ensure them an independent economic basis.

The transformation in male careers also seems to have had certain consequences for the social cycle of the year on the island. In the shipping-out period it exhibits some of the same features we know to be characteristic of other seafaring communities: for a large part

of the year the activities of the two sexes were strictly separate. The young men who had taken ship were away from the island. The women and the older men were left alone on the local scene, each busy with their own tasks. But for a few winter months they made up for lost time. Then the young manhood of the island – or at least part of it – returned home, so many social events were concentrated in the short period of time when the community was, as it were, intact.

This was true to a striking extent of the so-

cial gatherings of youth known as *legestuer*. These were open to the public and in the years around 1860 a police permit was necessary to hold them. Because of this we have their exact dates for a number of years and can observe their distribution over the months of the year. They started in October, became frequent in November and December, culminating in Jan-

uary and February. By March they were over, for then the seamen left the island again.

We can find other features of this annual cyclical pattern by reading the church registers. They show that while the major marrying months in most agrarian societies are from October to December, the ceremonies on Læsø were placed in January and February. But this

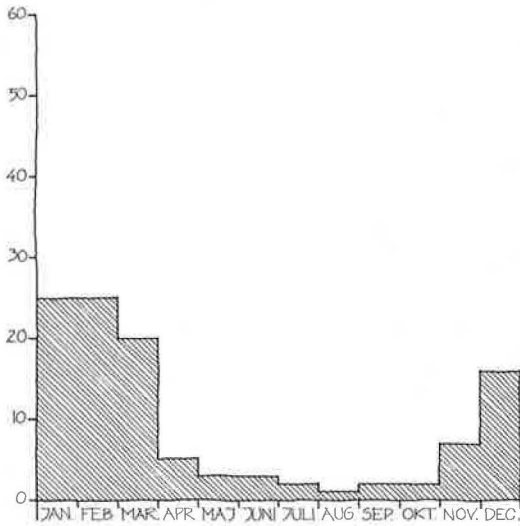


Fig. 21. Distribution of weddings over the months of the year, Vesterø parish 1650-75.

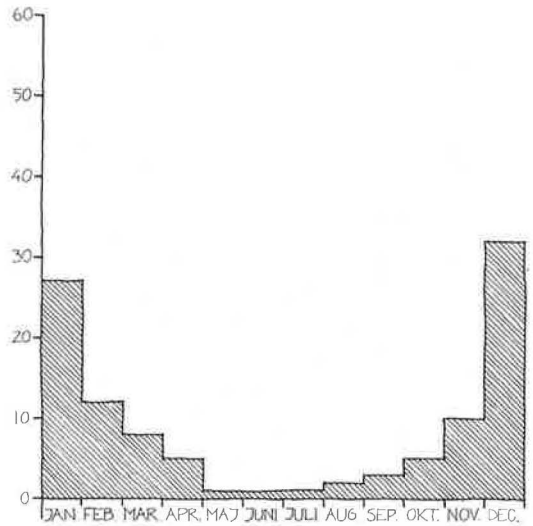


Fig. 23. Distribution of weddings over the months of the year, Vesterø parish 1750-75.

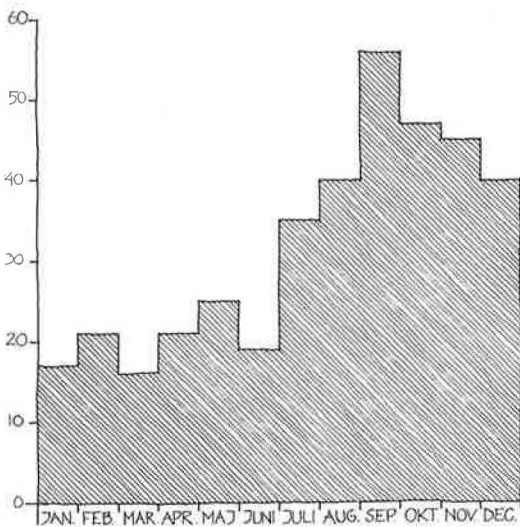


Fig. 22. Distribution of christenings over the months of the year, Vesterø parish 1650-75.

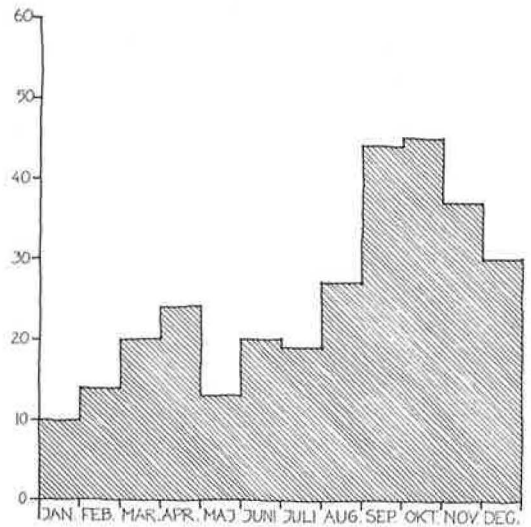


Fig. 24. Distribution of christenings over the months of the year, Vesterø parish, 1750-75.

pattern also comes out in the distribution of births – and thereby of christenings – throughout the year. A marked rise in this area in the autumn months shows that far more children were conceived in the first two months of the year than in any of the other months.

In one of the island's three parishes the church records go back to 1650, and this means that we here have the possibility of clarifying the question of continuity and change in the transition between the timber trading and shipping-out periods. As can be seen from the diagrams (Figs 21–24) the two periods are similar in terms of the distribution of weddings and christenings over the months of the year. But at the same time it is observable in the transition from the former to the latter period that there is a gradually denser concentration of the social events, especially the weddings. This is a change that accords well with the fact that in the 17th century the Læsø timber boats lay idle from the end of October until the beginning of April, while the Læsø men who sailed in foreign service in the 18th and 19th centuries were only at home on the island in December, January and February.

Male and female roles

As has been shown above we can trace some lines of development back to the timber trading period as far as the division of labour between the sexes and the related annual cycle are concerned, and establish the likelihood that some of the traits that characterized the community in the 19th century must have been developed as early as the 16th and 17th centuries.

When we come to the role patterns and behavioural norms of the two sexes, we are less well provided with source material. Here we must resort even more to descriptions from the 19th century and information from present-day tradition. On this point too it is the District Medical Officer C. Rasmussen whose work from 1858 gives us the best contemporary "field observations", although everything he writes has of course been passed through the filter of his own middle-class cultural presuppositions.

He says of the Læsø women that their house-

work, cleaning and cooking are kept down to a minimum, and that the children are very much left to their own devices. The women have been "forced by circumstances to take over all the concerns of house, field and heath; they manage and control both outdoors and in, have become self-willed, and because of their frequent great physical exertion and unbecoming occupations have lost no little of the healthy feminine nature and attitudes. The sense of homeliness is with few exceptions all but alien to them, and in consequence the relations of family life leave much to be desired".

That the strenuous work in the fields increases endurance and physical strength "and gives their movements a more masculine aspect is of course only natural, and in truth one must admire the strength and dexterity they exhibit... just as it is remarkable to observe the gait of the women, which these much tried creatures get up with a rapidity and lightness the like of which one will scarce find among the rural peasantry". At home their manner of dress is slipshod, but when they are going into town "their sense of decorum emerges"; then they are always impeccably dressed in stockings, shoes, gloves and with a white handkerchief in their hand. They put great stock in a fine, pale complexion and therefore always work out in the open well covered with a large white kerchief.

Well into the 1800s the women were still at a surplus, and this seems to have influenced sexual norms. About this the Medical Officer says: "Wantonness is especially common among the female population: acquiring a sweetheart is with few exceptions constantly in their thoughts; and sensuality, which pervades their whole conduct, is naturally kindled by their having to take part in and perform actions which are not only unwomanly but are often a direct affront to modesty. Marrying is a paramount aim in their life, and liaisons are often initiated with the greatest rashness: no male is considered too mean... The frequency of births out of wedlock – with paternity fastened on married men, among these unfortunately men who are to be counted among the more enlightened and cultured classes, even public officials not excepted – gives a clear indication of the



Fig. 25. Salvors assembled on the north coast of Læsø in about 1900. Their skiffs are moored by a wrecked bark. Old photograph in the National Museum.

state of affairs". It seems that, given these relatively free sexual norms, it was also tolerated that quite a number of the more well-off men had an extra woman in one of the small farmhand dwellings and that they acknowledged paternity of their children.

The older accounts also lay stress on the difference between the rhythms of men's and women's lives. While a woman was in constant activity a man could idle much time away "in the tavern, inn or drinking shop" (Rasmussen 1858). This characterization must be seen in the context of the man's special working conditions. His work was to a great extent divided up into periods with little or nothing to do, interrupted by bouts of intensive day-and-night work, for example with salvaging or seasonal fishing. The wrecks in particular must have played a significant role for this pattern of life

in the 18th and 19th centuries. They were, as has been noted, of great economic importance, they came without warning, and the salvors had to be ready to drop everything and go to work on the wrecks whenever the chance presented itself. Thus they could be a hindrance to the development of other economic activities or – in the words of the District Medical Officer – "a prime reason why industriousness in any direction finds no special favour and is considered unnecessary" (Rasmussen 1858). Fishing was one neglected area, trade and cargo voyages with the small craft of the island another. It was not an uncommon occurrence for a prospective voyage registered with the customs officials to be called off. This created havoc in the customs officer's papers, which is why he found it necessary in 1827 to provide an explanation, saying that the Læsø skippers refrain from

sailing "as often as the wind is against them and they see their way to greater profit from the prospect of a wreck" (Stoklund 1967).

Those Læsø men who had been to sea in their younger years were later also deeply marked by the international seafaring culture whose norms and values they brought home with them to a great extent: a man who had come ashore was still afforded the status he had acquired at sea, and life at sea remained a focal point in the interest of the Læsø men. This was what the men talked about when they met in the long winter evenings, surrounded by curious boys who were initiated in this way into their future calling.

Yet this was a world to which the women had no access. The men did nothing to draw the women into their conversations, one of my informants (b. 1895) told me. Nor did they give them any basis for understanding what was being talked about, and the women themselves asked no questions. They sat and listened and punctuated the conversations with exclamations of surprise; but where the countries and cities mentioned in the conversations were they had no inkling. His grandmother could speak of people who "had rounded Kaporen", but clearly associated nothing with Cape Horn. There were also several other seamen's expressions that were "Double Dutch" for the Læsø women.

These "real" Læsø men with their seafaring background were however only a part of the male population. The other part consisted of the *klunter* mentioned above, migrant labourers from Vendsyssel in Jutland, who settled permanently in large numbers on Læsø. Around 1850, for example, between a quarter and a third of all fathers of families had been born off the island. The two categories of men had a sort of complementary relationship with each other: one could say that the presence of the *klunter* in the Læsø of the 18th and 19th centuries was a precondition of the others perfecting their "real" male role.

The stock of the *klunter* was not high among the native Læsø folk. One woman informant told me that in the 1890s "foreign" hired hands were never present at a *parbal* or "couples' dance". "They made sure of that at the door –

you could always say the dance was all booked up. But they did come along to the *legestuer* – they were public. They'd often have girls they'd go out with, but a decent Læsø girl wouldn't have anything to do with them. They were sort of reckoned as third-class folk – the sailors thought they were quite a cut above them: they spoke properly and that sort of thing. They were always good dancers, them from over the water. They could really shake a leg, danced better than the Læsø men, but still they wouldn't be reckoned for anything at the dance".

Yet in spite of the negative view taken of them there were still many of the *klunter* who whisked off a Læsø girl and perhaps got a farm into the bargain. Part of the explanation lies of course in the constant shortage of Læsø men. The lot of the single woman working on a farm was not an attractive one, so it was a matter of getting married at almost any price, as will also have been evident from the account of the District Medical Officer.

While the native island men had their place in an international seafaring culture, the *klunter* had deep roots in the North Jutland farming culture. This was obvious from their dress, from the way they used their tools and many other small features. Some of the *klunter* who married on Læsø chose to adapt to local conditions and perhaps even took ship as seamen. Others became pioneers in the slow modernization of Læsø farming. But it could be difficult for them to assert themselves, in the opinion of Dr. Rasmussen (1958): "The men from the mainland have with a few exceptions acquired properties hereabouts by marrying the Læsø women, which has certainly had, and still has, an inhibiting influence on the progress of agriculture, since the women, accustomed to rule the roost both indoors and out, have shown themselves able to preserve their supremacy, and are very reluctant to give up the ingrained habits and die-hard usages that have been theirs from time immemorial".

It can be claimed with reasonable certainty that the *klunter* were a phenomenon of the shipping-out period, of the society that took shape in the first half of the 18th century, one of whose characteristics was the skewed sex

Fig. 26. Married couple from Læsø, photographed around the turn of the century in their best clothes.



ratio. There is also reason to believe that the male and female roles outlined above belong in their fully developed form to the same period, but that their beginnings were to be found in the timber trading period from about 1570 until 1700. Unfortunately there is an almost complete lack of hard evidence for such an assumption.

In one respect only there would appear to be some possibility of tracing lines further back. This concerns the most important material

representations of gender roles: male and female costumes. Let us begin by looking more closely at dressing customs in the form they took in about 1900. The photograph in Fig. 26 shows an elderly Læsø couple in formal costume, as they wished to present themselves, with the strictly separate gender roles strongly emphasized. The man is dressed in a costume without local features, but he indicates with his beard and earring that he belongs to the world of the sea. The woman by his side is his

equal, but hers is another world. Her horizon is narrower, and the costume she is wearing identifies her unambiguously as a wife from the small island in the Kattegat that many Læsø women were never to leave. Yet at the same time the costume, with its silver and expensive materials, communicates a sense of prosperity and self-awareness.

Throughout the shipping-out period the Læsø men followed general seamen's fashions. In 1768 it is said that they »wear Dutch ships's clothing« (Pontoppidan 1768: 704) and in 1828 that they "dress like seamen, and their clothes are both bought and sewn in one of the ports they visit on their voyages" (Brinck-Seidelin 1828: 277). The women's costume, on the other hand, remained almost unchanged throughout this period, except that changing fashions could have some influence on the cut and the choice of cloth, and that the headgear underwent some changes in the course of the period as a result of intracultural status communication.

In the 19th century the formal costume in which the woman in the photograph is dressed consisted – apart from the large white kerchief with a cap under it – of three parts: 1) a deeply pleated skirt reaching down to the shoes; 2) a sleeved jacket with an opening at the top framed by some large silver buckles and closed below with silver hooks; 3) beneath the waistcoat a sleeveless bodice whose opening was closed by eyelets and a long silver chain.

The combination of sleeved waistcoat and bodice was at that time a very old feature that the women of Læsø had preserved longer than women elsewhere in the country. Using probate registers we can trace the formal costume back to about 1700. It consisted then of the same three main elements: skirt, bodice and waistcoat. But on the basis of typological and culture-historical criteria we can establish that the Læsø costume must have acquired its most important characteristics as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. We find the oldest stylistic features among the wealth of extant examples of costume silver, some of which are in late Gothic style, with Catholic iconographical features like the Ave Maria symbol (Grüner Nielsen 1924: 144).

In the 16th and probably also in the first part of the 17th century the costume of the Læsø women must to some extent have followed changing fashions. At that time the costume with its silver was probably meant to indicate that a Læsø skipper's wife was a match for the prosperous burghers's wives of the Jutland merchant boroughs, from whose clothing it is unlikely to have differed substantially. In the latter half of the 17th century costume usage seems to have become more conservative and by the beginning of the 18th century – in the middle of the island's period of crisis and decline – we find a clear awareness of the Læsø costume as something special – one of several privileges said to have been granted to the Læsø islanders by Queen Margrethe in about 1400. The myth of the costume as a gift from Queen Margrethe, an idea that still lived in later popular tradition (Grüner Nielsen 1924: 243) was brought up in 1738 as an argument for circumventing the austerity measures of certain sumptuary edicts of the time. This early consciousness of the Læsø women's costume as something significant and unique is also evident from the fact that a particularly fine example was displayed in the 1770s for a visiting bishop.

In the society of the shipping-out period (c. 1750–1880) with its thoroughgoing division into men's and women's spheres it became a matter of course for the man to follow the usages of international seafaring culture, while the woman emphasized her rather peculiar identity as a Læsø woman, a status without immediate points of reference outside the island. We find exactly the same dualism in costume usage in a number of other North West European island communities with a maritime basis of subsistence (for example in the Frisian Islands).

The costume thereby also became very much a symbol of the special women's role that finally took form on Læsø in the 19th century. It is therefore hardly surprising that the discarding of the costume seems to have been closely connected with the dissolution of this role. Its death blow came partly from the previously-mentioned Home Mission revivalist movement after the middle of the 19th century. In its ear-

liest phase this was characteristically a women's movement, and appears to have had some elements of revolt against the male and female roles of the older society, including the men's idleness, drinking and extramarital relations. It seems almost like a symbolic act that some of the "saved" women at the end of the century sold off portions of their costume silver to buyers to raise money for the Home Mission.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to trace some of the main lines in the history of a Danish island community over a 700-year period from about 1200 until about 1900. The source material for the oldest part of this period is extremely fragmentary, and the reconstruction therefore only has a few scattered fixed points of reference. The state of the sources for the later centuries is more encouraging, but not all the material has been exploited fully. Some aspects of the sociocultural development of the island society have been the subject of more in-depth analyses than others. The picture I have attempted to draw here of the long-term process therefore has the character of a provisional outline, but it is to be hoped that it has pointed out the possibilities offered by studies of this kind for the understanding of cultural processes.

From an ecological and economic viewpoint the history of the island has taken the form of a number of adaptations to changes, often radical ones, in external and internal circumstances. We can distinguish between three main periods: the salt extraction period (from about 1200); the timber trading period (from about 1570); and the shipping-out period (from about 1750). None of these periods can be understood if it is seen *exclusively* in the perspective of the local community. All of them have their preconditions in the national or international social division of labour as regards the interchange of commodities (in the case of salt extraction primarily at the national level, with timber trading in the European context and with shipping-out in the international sea trading at the global level).

Necessary as it is to see the history of the is-

land in this kind of macroeconomic context, it is equally necessary to know the legal and administrative framework which in various degrees and forms determined the restraints on the economic activities of the islanders. While the landowner, the Viborg Cathedral Chapter, was on the whole only interested in ensuring that the customary dues were paid on time, and therefore interfered very little in the dispositions of the islanders, the growing power of the state asserted its influence with increasing strength in the course of the centuries. In many respects this state control and intervention was an important element in the island's conditions of existence. One of the most evident examples is probably the role that the conscription of seamen into the Navy in the 16th and 17th centuries came to play.

However, the existence of the islanders has not solely depended on these external factors. Just as crucial have been the radical changes that these centuries have seen in the local ecological environment, partly as a result of over-exploitation (the destruction of the forest, sand drifts). The scarcity of local resources has led to alternative ways of dealing with the supply problem; and farming, the subsistence occupation of the island, has repeatedly changed its character in the course of adaptation to changes in the local ecological environment.

In the period under study we could point out several technological changes both in farming and fishing, a subject which has however only been given cursory treatment in this account. In some cases these were local inventions, in others innovations coming from outside the island, like the ground net or the heather scythe.

Even though the history of Læsø must be considered in conjunction with that of the surrounding world into which it was to a greater or lesser degree integrated, the special conditions of existence which were the Læsø islanders' still led to the formation of a way of organizing daily life and a world view which are peculiar to this island community, and which constitute a coherent whole.

How did this sociocultural system react to the sweeping ecological and economic changes? I have attempted to clarify this in the present article by focusing on four basic structural fea-

tures: settlement patterns, farm structure, cooperative organization and the gender-related division of labour, all of which exhibit a high degree of stability and permanence, and are only comprehensible if viewed in the long-term historical perspective.

The settlement pattern and farm structure of more recent centuries can only be understood against the background of the medieval situation. The enclosed allotments and scattered building pattern have their preconditions in the medieval forest clearances, just as the small farms, *bol*, with their relatively free legal status must be seen in connection with the medieval occupational pattern (salt extraction). The scattered buildings and small farms are in their turn preconditions of the institution called *fællig*. We have seen that its earliest realization was as an organizational form for cooperation in connection with the salterns. Later the same framework was used for cooperation in, for example, timber trading and ground-net fishing.

Bol and *fællig* can thus be seen as tools in the ecological-economic process of adaptation in the post-medieval centuries. They were already-existing forms, familiar solutions that could be brought to bear on new problems. At the same time they must be seen as essential features in the sociocultural system, reproduced across and despite extensive ecological-economic changes. But reproduction under such changed conditions must almost inevitably at the same time mean changes, a gradual transformation of the system. We have seen how the reproduction of the *bol* through the deterioration of the ecological environment and the strain on resources took on the character of a gradual decimation of the properties. And we have seen how the disproportionate sex ratio in the population along with changes in the course of the male working life led to a shift from male to female inheritance as the farms were taken over by new generations.

The best opportunities for studying the interplay between continuity and change are offered by the gender-related division of labour and the related norms and roles. But here we must work with a rather shorter time perspective, as the medieval source material is scanty,

so that we have no way of deciding which preconditions the division of labour known from later times may have had in the salt extraction period. However, from the timber trading period (c. 1570–1700) onwards the characteristic division appears between women working in the fields and men sailing and fishing. This sexual division of labour is also an important feature in the following shipping-out period (c. 1750–1880), but at the same time it seems to change its character.

To some extent we can relate the changes in the social roles of the two sexes to demographic and economic factors, but these relations do not seem to us to explain exhaustively the sociocultural changes in this area. We are therefore obliged also to operate with certain tendencies in the system channeling the variations in reproduction in a definite direction. Male and female roles can perhaps be seen as such cultural tendencies, gradually being carried to extreme conclusions within the boundaries of the system. It is in this respect interesting to observe that the cultivation of the “real” maritime male role has as one of its necessary conditions the existence of another male category, that of the *klunter*.

The special role that fell to the Læsø women was signified by a costume that by its conservative retention of ancient features became ever more unique. The discarding of this costume and the selling of the costume silver marked a break with a role that had become more and more extreme in the course of two centuries. The rejection of an older set of roles that we find in the last decades of the 19th century, then, has its basis in two areas. On the one hand we can demonstrate that changes in occupational conditions removed the economic foundation of the traditional division of labour on the island. On the other it is tempting to see the break as the result of certain tendencies in the sociocultural system having reached an extreme limit, where a kind of “fatigue” might be expected to appear in the system. These are reflections of a quite provisional nature, but will be taken into consideration in further studies of permanence and change in this small island society.

Translated by James Manley

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