This is the published version of a paper published in *Baltic Worlds*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Berencreutz, M. (2016)
The rise of early modern demesne lordship: The case of western Estonia.
*Baltic Worlds*, (1-2): 91-100

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:diva-130803
The rise of early modern demesne lordship

The case of western Estonia

by Magnus Berencreutz

In agrarian history, the description of early modern manorial management and organization has long emphasized a difference between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, the prevalent form of organization was *landbogodsdrift* (“husbandry lordship”), where the landowner’s own operation was modest in relation to the territory of the estate. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the contrary, a manorial estate management form had arisen, usually referred to as “demesne lordship”. It is defined as agricultural production by the estate itself of a large area, targeting a particular market, with the estate owner having jurisdiction over the estate inhabitants.4 The peasants were serfs with limited freedom in relation to the landlord. A peasant is defined as a member of a family running a farm for its livelihood. On an estate with demesne lordship management, the peasant would be obliged to work for the landlord.5

There is, however, an exception to this definition of manorial estate management within an area in coastal western Estonia. One reason for the deviation consisted in the fact that manorial estate management developed on small-scale estates during an ongoing war situation in the early 17th century; another cause was that around half of the privately owned land in the Swedish province of Estland was dependent on the Swedish Crown’s right of possession, since the land had been disposed of by the Crown within districts formerly administered as military strongholds for Swedish fortresses. This took place in a time of warfare which offered few possibilities of finding outlets on the market. The Swedish Crown became involved in the area following the dissolution of the Teutonic Order and its allied bishoprics. Around half of all land in the Swedish province of Estland was expropriated by the Swedish Crown, which started parceling it out to private persons.6

The purpose of this article is to test an explanation for the atypical nature of the development of demesne lordship in western Estonia in early modern times. My question is: What light does the different character of this phenomenon in western Estonia shed on current general explanations of the development of demesne lordship in the Baltic Sea region?7

Explanations of the development of demesne lordship

I will start the discussion of the development of demesne lordship in western Estland with a review of existing literature. The different types of explanations have been categorized as follows:

(A) One category of explanations considers the dependence on grain exports to Western Europe to be decisive. This category has been promoted by a normative theoretical discourse in works by Immanuel Wallerstein, Fernand Braudel and Hans-Jürgen Nitz from the 1970s onwards.8 Wallerstein and Braudel took center–periphery reasoning as their starting point. They saw England and the Netherlands as the center of the early modern market economy. Other regions were peripheral in their dependence on imports from these countries.9 In the 1990s Nitz developed this logic further by proposing as a theory Johann Heinrich von Thünen’s 1826 model about the market economic relations of the isolated state. It is based on the difference in transport costs of products to a point representing the market.10 The model presupposes that agricultural products are transported by horse and carriage to an urban market. Transport costs...
Manor life followed a long leisurely pace. The world was narrow and easy to grasp. in three rotating fields. Wallerstein saw this as an expression of the early modern peripheral regions in relation to the center in the Netherlands and England, and Nitz as a logical allocation of production in relation to the distance to demand. The explanation that conditions of sale would have contributed to demesne lordship during the 16th century has started a debate among agrarian historians in Estonia. Juhan Kahk asserts that demesne lordship contributed a 58% share of the profits from the agrarian sector before the outbreak of the Livonian War in northern Estonia. Because of war damage, the same share was not reached again until the mid-17th century. 

(B) Another category of explanation starts with the situation in the agrarian landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe that had been damaged by warfare and epidemics. This type of explanation was introduced by Arnold Soom's work in the 1950s on demesne lordship in the Baltic provinces and has declined in importance since the late 1990s. 

(C) A third category of explanations finds its source in the transformative impact of the regulations and laws introduced by the expansion of early modern central power. Robert Brenner introduced the explanation that the weaker position of demesne lordship in Western Europe was determined by the stronger protection enjoyed by leaseholders and freeholder farmers, in legislation as well as in their own commons. This position gave a certain local autonomy to farmers in Western Europe. Tendencies towards autocracy could be broken. Legislation and the administration of justice were focused on tax enforcement and military conscription. This category of explanation has gained strength in the early 21st century. The explanations will be dealt with in order in the following.

Explanations relating to the West European early modern commodity market

This explanation has been formulated most distinctively by Markus German in his bull market hypothesis, implying that the agrarian boom during the 16th century stimulated commerce and export much more than during the 17th century, when warfare hampered development. It has been confirmed that demesne lordship developed in Denmark and eastern Holstein in the 1530s and this innovation started spreading in the mid-16th century. Demesne lordship was adopted by more estate owners in their estate management planning in Schleswig-Holstein, Denmark, Poland-Lithuania and the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. In this connection, serfdom spread during the 16th century in the area. Nitz applied von Thünen's model for the localization of early modern agriculture to regions with demesne lordship. As described above, von Thünen's model consists of circular zones around the market. Localized dairy production and the cultivation of vegetables take place in the vicinity of the market. Further out in due order come zones of firewood, cultivation of grain without fallow periods, grain-fallow production, and grazing with emphasis on dairy cattle, production of grain in annually rotating fields, and farthest out a zone of extensive production of slaughter cattle on grazing fields. Both Wallerstein and Nitz have tried to show that demesne lordship on the continent can be explained as a European zone around the market in Western Europe with grain production...
Explanations of the structure and genesis of the war-damaged landscape

It has been pointed out that the eastern coastal areas of the Baltic Sea were damaged by wars from the 1580s onwards and that this fact influenced estate management in favor of demesne lordship, leading in turn to a deterioration of the legal status of the peasants. As for Central Europe, Erich Landsteiner has used a negative argument implying that demesne lordship decreased — for security reasons — in regions neighboring the Ottoman Empire. Eric Fügedi has shown that war damage during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) had corresponding effects on how estate owners managed their estates. Demesne lordship was extended and spread into regions stricken by war damage, such as Hungary, Bohemia and Poland. The effect on demesne lordship in Mecklenburg and what would become Swedish Pomerania during the Thirty Years’ War is judged to be due to civil legislation. Hermann Priene and Emil Gohrband have explained the extension of demesnes in Swedish Pomerania as partly due to war damage, causing estate owners loss of income and forcing them into debt.

Explanations based on the regulatory and power-political impact

In the legislation enacted by early modern central powers, the civil status of peasants was subordinated to the estate owners’ freedom of action in their planning. This freedom can be summarized in the concept of raison d’état. The influence of the central power was also expressed in legislation favoring the returns of the demesne.

A Swedish research tradition from the late 19th century interprets legislation and regulation as an expression of raison d’état. It has shown that since the 16th century, the Swedish central power gave nobility privileges favoring demesne both as an institution and as an ideal for the returns of the estates. The Crown used nobility privileges in order to secure the conscription of horses and mounted knights from the nobility’s estates, and the Crown continued to favor demesnes in the same spirit.

The Swedish Privileges of the Nobility of 1569 contains regulations exempting demesne owners and the estate’s inhabitants within one Swedish mile (about 10 kilometers) of the manor from various obligations and charges. Further favorable regulations were successively introduced, such as a monopoly on exports for the nobility. After 1612, houses and palaces owned by the nobility in towns were exempted from duties. The most important reform was to permit the nobility to establish ironworks and mines on their estates.

In constitutional law, the situation changed in 1611. The Swedish Crown changed the military recruitment methods from summons to arms and mercenaries to troop conscription. The nobility lost their previous immunity and were subject to taxation from 1612 onwards. Serfdom was illegal in Sweden with Finland. Peasants with taxation duties were entitled to the regional law and taxation diets, and from 1611 onwards, they were represented in the Swedish estate diet.

In the eastern and southern part of the Baltic Sea region the opposite was true: Legislation and court decisions in the early 17th century were increasingly accommodating to estate owners interested in applying serfdom in their relations with the peasants on their estates.

The influence of the central power on the private planning of early modern estate management in general and demesne lordship in particular has been elucidated from several angles. Alexander Loit can be said to have introduced this upgraded view of raison d’état in his 1975 analysis of the Reduction (the resumption by the state of estates given to the nobility) in Estonia during the time of Swedish Great Power. It was found that in medieval times husbandry lordship existed around the Baltic Sea and local jurisdictions, which would eventually be restructured into demesne lordship. That the acquisition of manpower was intense in this period can be shown from Swedish Pomerania, where it has been proven that agricultural workers were already hired in the estate economy in the 1630s.

With this evidence it has been emphasized that, in the late 16th century, regulations had a dampening effect on the exploitation of peasants in Sweden-Finland, Denmark, Poland and German countries like Brandenburg/Prussia. It has been argued that legislation in Poland and neighboring German countries made it easier for young teenagers to fulfill day labor duties to the manors instead of adults. A similar regulation along the lines of raison d’état was the Danish government’s decision to abolish serfdom on Sjælland in 1702.

In order to evaluate the existing explanations of the growth of demesne lordship in the Baltic Sea region, I will now discuss my findings concerning the divergent pattern of demesne lordship in the Swedish Province of Estland. In the existing academic discourse, the question about raison d’état has focused on an ideological break between the Swedish monarchial concept of provincial administration and the Swedish noblemen’s council aristocracy, which we may assume was favorably inclined towards the provincial aristocracy.

From territorial expansion to a source of income

The findings about the divergent structure of demesne lordship in western Estonia can be summarized in five stages. These stages have been formulated so as to be representative for the whole Swedish province of Estland, taking into consideration the amount of the Swedish Crown’s land disposals.

Husbandry lordship in the Swedish province of Estland (1561–1600)

Both the Crown and private estate owners pursued husbandry lordship because the estates were extensive and agriculture was based on cattle breeding. Measured in area, the demesnes made up a smaller part of the total cultivated land. Agricultural organi-
zation featured commons and collectivity among cattle-grazing peasants, both for the solution of local controversies and for the organization of cultivation: primarily care for grazing cattle, meadows and grazing lands. The demesne territories were most often organized in open fields used by the peasants. Cultivated land, consisting of meadows and infields, was consequently organized as open fields divided into allotments. The peasants used part of the yields from their farms for domestic trade. The Livonian War (1558–1583) brought war damage into the Swedish province of Estland with the loss of arable land, cattle and population. Fortress districts were particularly vulnerable as targets. Estates disposed of by the Crown in this period were landbogods with a demesne area of less than 50 hectares. Stipulations of possession were most often interimistic.

**Demesne lordship in the Swedish province of Estland (1600–1632)**

Because of the Crown’s land dispositions from its fortress districts, the number of private estate owners increased and the fortress territories were split into small private estates. With the Polish War (1600–1629), dispositions from the fortress districts escalated, the intention being to compensate for salaries and reward loyalty. All peasants in the fortress districts in Estland were thus transferred into a client relationship to a private landowner. All commons were deprived of self-government, also through lawsuits. During the Polish War, the Province of Estland suffered big losses of arable land, cattle and population. As a result of this devastation, the peasant farmsteads tended to be concentrated in the largest village of the estate together with the demesne, the area of which was less than 50 hectares. In comparison with the lands of the peasant farms, the demesne was less extensive and its land organised in open fields. Another type of estate was found where devastated land had been recultivated. A consciously selected dominant location for the village was formed with the best meadows and fields and the best supply of labor. These resources were jointly utilized by the peasants and the demesne of the estate in the capital village. Demesnes were proportionally large on estates disposed of with interimistic ownership stipulations.

Commons with fenced open fields were dissolved and the arable land of the demesnes increasingly concentrated apart from the farms of the peasants. Thus a type of estate emerged concentrated on demesne, where the focus of production was not entirely on grain. But the destruction of arable land was not a necessary condition. During this period, a type of estate appeared that would become the ideal for the next stages of demesne. On many such estates under demesne management, the peasants’ stables were transformed to provide draft animals, as labor rent in the form of day work with plough teams was increased. This process had already been accomplished on many estates during the first decades of the 17th century. They most often received hereditary stipulations of possession. Such an ideal estate consisted of a demesne comprising more than 50 hectares, without any attached peasants located on the demesne.

Land that had been devastated was re-cultivated and new land was added through dowries, purchases and new enfeoffment. The demesne was organized around the cultivation of infields of the largest village. The peasants’ farms were located in villages around the demesne and together, they cultivated more land than the demesne. In certain cases, annexes to the central demesne were formed. The land best suited to grain production was selected for the demesne, thereby increasing the need for peasant labor.

During this period, the Swedish Crown started to administer the Province of Estland by taxing estate owners and imposing duties on foreign trade, and to purchase agricultural products from Estland. This indicates that the demesne system concentrating on large-scale grain production had spread to several districts within Estland during this period.

**Demesne is extended in the Swedish province of Estland (1632–1681)**

During this period, tensions decreased in Estland. Agriculture and living conditions for the population improved. The Westphalian Peace of 1648 resulted in a growing export market for grain. The demesnes on the estates were expected to gain a profit from exports of grain. For this reason different types of estates were standardized in the form of those ideal estates mentioned above. Demesnes specializing in grain production became most frequent. Their infields were extended through the reclamation of meadows and grazing lands and the eviction of peasant farmsteads from the demesne village. All open field-sharing between the demesne and peasants was abolished. The density of demesne increased, partly because intensifying annexes were added, and partly because the estates’ area increased. Estates in Swedish Estland were also parts of estate holdings in other parts of the Swedish Empire.

The estate of Kurrifer as depicted in the 1689 plan shows how an estate of a type with a dominant large village organized the transformation towards intensified production on a grain-producing demesne. The land had been divided between manor and peasants and there were still remnants of the devastation from the early 17th century in the open fields. According to the late 17th century survey document, most of the cultivated land consists of the land owned by the manor in the largest village of the estate, and the manor had taken up most of the land resources in the Kurrifer estate as a whole.

A few peasants with their farms belonging to the demesne village lay dispersed on its periphery on the boundary towards the neighboring village of Nurms. Nurms might have been formed when the demesne was divided
from the peasants’ fields. This is suggested by the fact that both the peasants in the village with demesne and the peasants in the adjacent village of Nurms controlled a greater land area than in the peripheral village of Ragna (Figure 1).

Reduction in the Swedish province of Estland (1681–1695)
The governmental reduction by the Swedish Empire that was initiated in Estland in 1681 included, as part of the strategy, reclaiming alienated crown land for lease. The reform was part of a European trend at the end of the 17th century to increase revenues to the state treasury by leasing land. It was accompanied by centralizing regulation of the judicial system, among other things. Through its regulations the Swedish Government created an internal market in its Baltic Sea provinces equal to the amount of export. The management of leasehold estates was regulated, formally freezing the organization of agriculture as well as the management of work on the estates now reclaimed by the crown, dating back to the time of extended demesne in the period 1632–1681.

Crisis in agriculture in the Swedish province of Estland (1695–1710)
In the mid-1690s the rising cash boom had turned into a deep slump. In spite of this agrarian depression demesne management continued unimpeded. Production was often illegal. Demesne lordship where the demesne was concentrated on infields only had become arduous to the peasants on the estates. There are strong indications that this concentration on demesne management had contraproductive effects on yields.

To explain the process of demesne lordship in the Swedish province of Estland, it seems necessary to develop the analysis further. Early modern warfare had a destructive impact on the market. This first entailed the destruction of the Hanseatic League, the Teutonic Order and the papal bishoprics in the eastern Baltic area. This interpretation was offered by the Swedish scholars Magnus Roth and Johan Axel Almquist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the arguments for a new explanation of the development of demesne lordship in Swedish Estland must be discussed and this explanation should be formulated as a hypothesis.

Discussion of a new explanation of the development of demesne lordship
Poland was the center of the Baltic Sea region’s grain export. The breakthrough for grain export in the area came in the late 16th century at the time of the Livonian War and the outbreak of the Dutch War of Independence (1577–1648). Research on the subject has often pointed out that besides the regional devastation of the Baltic Sea region after the Livonian war, the Polish War and the Thirty Years’ War undermined trade conditions in the early 17th century. But the pressure for transformation towards extending the areas under demesne has been confirmed for the early 17th century in Lithuania, Swedish Pomerania, and western Estland. Common to all these territories was that they had been subject to war damage and occupation by troops of the Swedish Crown. But one aspect has been neglected as irrelevant, namely that the geopolitical balance and trade structure was disrupted by the English elimination of Dutch naval power in the late 17th century, destroying Amsterdam and the Netherlands as a major importer of grain. The foundation of the Russian imperial capital St. Petersburg in the Bay of Finland in 1704 and the Russian conquest of all the Swedish Baltic provinces in 1710 further upset the balance. In the 18th century, the imperial powers of Russia and Prussia gradually occupied and annexed Poland-Lithuania.

My conclusion is that a new explanation should take into consideration war-based changes in the markets, structures of trade, and the central administration of the provinces of the Swedish Great Power. I argue that the discussion should start from the concept of the military state. According to Jan Lindgren, the military state emerged in early modern times; its aim was to finance the military sector of the central power through taxation and other duties.

The role of the Swedish military state
A typical feature of the Swedish military state was a policy of armament based on agrarian production and industries working with raw materials. The Swedish nobility received privileges in return for producing provisions, iron ore, and metal products and were subject to taxes and conscription of the estate population. The central government entered into alliances in order to deliver the best technology to the armament industry for the production of arms. From the early 17th century the Swedish Crown monopolized iron and grain exports and regulated flows
of trade through blockades and purchases. For this reason, the armaments industry created new markets for provisions and other products such as beer and charcoal. The Swedish Crown also arranged the transfer of lands as security to private persons, aiming to improve its financial situation; this was particularly applied in the provinces.

In the contemporary early modern continental area, the military state has been confirmed as a reason for the development of demesne lordship in two cases, Mecklenburg and Hungary. It has been shown that purchases by the military state caused demesne lordship in Hungary from the turn of the century (around 1600), and that demesne lordship in Mecklenburg is partly explained by the fees levied for arming the military.

Eli F. Heckscher approached the problem by arguing that the Reduction of 1681, which dedicated land to the maintenance of the Great Power’s military, may have forced landowners into demesne lordship because of loss of income.

In relation to the situation on the continent in the 18th century, it has been confirmed that demesne lordship reached its highest level of exploitation through labor rent. In the same century, the Amsterdam market faded and the provincial territories of the Great Powers, both in the Baltic Sea region and on the continent, expanded to their greatest extent. The Stavnsbånd maintained by the Danish Government between 1733 and 1788 is an example of how the estates were integrated with an organization for forced conscription in which male persons were tied to the estates by regulation.

There are more clues to an explanation in confirmed cases of demesne lordship focused on urban areas in the Russian Baltic provinces and in Austria-Hungary in the 18th century. Part of the explanation is probably that the European capitals and many other towns were garrison towns and bases for the maintenance of the Great Powers’ military forces.

In Denmark, Schleswig, and Holstein from the late 17th century onwards, estates mainly supplied dairy products to the market. The fact that dairy products are heavy fresh goods indicates restructuring to supply domestic markets at short distances from the estates. Relations to urban centers have been proved to explain demesne lordship in Austria-Hungary. A similar example can be found in the Russian Baltic provinces, where, as Kahk has shown, estate owners switched to selling potatoes and vodka distilled from potatoes in the late 18th century. The target for this production was primarily St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire. From the 18th century onwards, the potato was an important food for the military of the European Great Powers, for both direct consumption and the production of brandy. The war between Prussia and Austria—Hungary in 1778—1779 is called the Potato War because it was caused by the availability of provisions to the troops. On the continent, this was an eastern equivalent to the production of cotton, sugar cane, and tobacco on western colonial slave plantations in the 18th century.

**A hypothesis**

My intention has been to discursively try to explain the anomalous appearance of demesne lordship in the early 17th century in western Estland in the Baltic Sea region. I have shown that the commodity markets in Western Europe were important factors in this development, especially during the 16th century and following the Thirty Years’ War.

The war-stricken early modern agricultural landscape increased the effect in certain regions. But the causal links have been insufficiently disentangled and are empirically unsatisfactory. I argue that effects of actions related to raison d’État have been confirmed in several regions in early modern Europe. The exceptional early modern demesne lordship in the Swedish province of Estland can be related to this category. The motive for applying this explanation has, in my opinion, gained credibility and relevance even if circumstances are still unclear. The key to the logic of this argument is that the years of warfare and calamity in the early 17th century extinguished the peacetime boom of grain exports to Amsterdam. It would thus be relevant to assume that the organization of the Swedish military state can explain the growth of demesne lordship in Swedish Estland from the turn of the century, 1600.

But how should it be interpreted; what was the initial factor that motivated the decision to introduce demesne lordship? Were the decisions anchored in a political design for demesne lordship by the Swedish military state or were they an effect of its governance? Was the rule different in the provinces the Swedish Great Power had acquired from 1561 or was it valid for the whole realm? Was the policy concerning the alienation of land pursued in the Swedish province of Estland valid for all Baltic provinces? What were the motives behind the policy; was it a deliberate policy by the Swedish Crown aimed at disciplining the inhabitants of the province or at benefiting from the revenues of a lucrative agrarian sector?

One hypothesis proposed in this article concerning the development of the early modern demesne lordship in the Baltic Sea region takes as its starting point the impact on private land ownership in Europe of governments’ extension of their political powers and increasing conflicts. Immunities were abolished and taxation introduced. The area of taxed land increased and the estates were divided into different categories of tax-levying large agricultural estates. The small scale of the estates was thus a side effect of the policy pursued. It led to the Swedish Crown treating the provinces as a separate state domain where a policy applied to the domestic conditions was pursued. The Crown thus tended to determine internal conditions in its provinces by direct rule, aiming at discipline in accordance with the two most
important institutions of the early modern central power: the military state and the produce market.66

The image of the Swedish Crown as an institution with manifold properties is supported by Torbjörn Eng’s hypothesis of an ideological break between royal power and provincial autocratic-minded council aristocracy in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, concerning the view of the provincial government of the Swedish province of Estland. Eng’s interpretation is that the royal power saw the inhabitants of the Swedish province of Estland as constitutionally equal to those of Sweden proper.67 That Swedish governance in the Baltic provinces changed focus, differentiating between the different areas, is shown by how the military state was organized in Livonia after the Westphalian Peace. Livonia was administered as a territory with a line of garrisons on the border with Poland, while only one infantry company was accommodated in the castle in Reval in Estland.68

I would suggest a working hypothesis in which the central power saw its policy as a center–periphery mechanism aimed at establishing discipline. The Swedish Crown saw this mechanism as having the most favorable effect on private estate owners’ decisions concerning the running of the estate and peasants’ freehold rights, permissions, and competences.69 For this reason the estates were seen by the Swedish Crown as the foundation stones of early modern ownership conditions.70 Its decisions were risk-minimizing in the Baltic as the provinces bordered on hostile, belligerent military superpowers. The effect was a repressive and autocratic provincial Swedish regime. Rights and duties in Sweden proper were not valid for the inhabitants of the Baltic provinces.

Concerning the motives for the rapidly implemented shift into demesne lordship in the early 17th century on the domains of private estate owners in Estland, I do not find any causal connection based on the premises discussed above. Lacking a sufficient explanation, I will suggest that one reason was the supply of provisions for the maintenance of the Swedish military state during the years of calamity in the early 17th century.

Might there have been an agreement with the private persons who received land from the Crown’s fortress districts about supplies of necessities from their private autocratic estates to the Swedish Crown? I hope to return to this question in a forthcoming study. In this article on the development of early modern demesne lordship in western Estonia in the early 17th century, the 21st century discourse about raison d’état has been broadened with additional arguments about the role of the early modern military state in the development of demesne lordship in the Baltic Sea region, following Braudel’s and Wallerstein’s reasoning behind their center–periphery models. At this stage of research there are already reasons to assume that the early modern process based on raison d’état has resulted in two expressions, just like the contemporary emergence of demesne lordship in the Swedish province of Estland: one bellicose and autocratic, and one enlightened and prohibitive. The latter stage led to a mercantilist administration in Estland using the export harbor of Reval (Tallinn), while Livonia in the south was administered as a garrison province serving the fortress troops stationed along the border with Poland.71

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