Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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Part II

Confronting Power
4. Confronting Women’s Actions in History

Female Crown Fief Holders in Denmark

Grethe Jacobsen

Abstract
In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, noble women in Denmark (and Norway and Sweden) could be found holding the office of crown fief holder, that is, an individual who administered part of the royal estate, ranging from a few manors and villages to an entire county. They thus held the power and authority that came with that office, something that appears unique to Scandinavia among non-royal women, but which was ignored by later historians. This chapter tells the story of two noblewomen in sixteenth-century Denmark, sisters-in-law who confronted each other in a dispute over a crown fief they had inherited jointly—a dispute that was also affected by several more hidden agendas, including that of a king in love.

Keywords: women and power; women and authority; women office-holders; Danish women—early modern period; Denmark—sixteenth century

This chapter deals with confrontation on several levels. It opens with a story of two Danish noblewomen confronting each other over a property dispute, with the result that one woman was removed from her office as a (female) crown fief holder, only to be succeeded by the other woman. There is, however, more to the story than simply a disagreement between two women. It is also a story of love confronting political norms. Ultimately, on a more theoretical plane, it is a story that is familiar to all of us studying women’s history—the confrontation between the perceived role of women and the actual role of women during the early modern period.

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The story begins in December 1560, when the king ordered six noblemen to intervene in and settle a controversy over property involving two noblewomen, Lady Eline Gøye and Lady Anne Rosenkrantz. Half a year later, on 12 July 1561, Lady Eline Gøye received a letter from the king, ordering her to hand over the crown fief that she had administered for eleven years after her husband’s death in 1550. He had held the crown fief for the previous ten years, so the manor that came with it had been Eline’s home for 21 years. Eline had to hand over the account books, cadasters, and other documents concerning the crown fief to the royal chancellery, and in return she would receive whatever money the crown owed her. She was thereby removed from office and, one month later, Anne Rosenkrantz—her sister-in-law and opponent in the dispute—was installed as holder of the same crown fief. This did nothing to improve the already severely strained relationship between the two sisters-in-law.

Eline was the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Denmark during the 1520s and 1530s, Mogens Gøye (d. 1544). He had seventeen children from two marriages and left enough property for each of his adult heirs (or their heirs) to receive one or two manors, as well as land. However, in accordance with Danish inheritance law, the entire estate was divided into shares according to the number of heirs, with sons receiving two shares and daughters one share, a division of inheritance that was unique to the Nordic countries.1 Primogeniture did not exist in medieval and sixteenth-century Danish law. (This was introduced in the late seventeenth century after the advent of absolutism.) In the earlier Danish inheritance system, all heirs would receive one or two shares according to gender and, more importantly, each share had to be of absolutely equal value, even if that meant that a manor with adjoining lands had to be split between two or more heirs. This is what happened in the case of the manor of Clausholm, which Eline and her brother, Albrecht, jointly inherited. They both resided there with their spouses, when they were not administering their crown fiefs. As long as Albrecht lived, Eline, Albrecht, and his wife, Anne Rosenkrantz, managed to get along, but when Albrecht died, in 1558, Eline and Anne each began a remodeling and rebuilding program in their respective portions of the manor. Since the purpose of these programs appeared, at least in part, to be a campaign of mutual harassment, this was the reason the king called upon the six noblemen to intervene in December 1560. The dispute involved ‘the buildings, the courtyard, walls and moats on Clausholm, lands in forests and fields and other things belonging to

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1 Jónsson, ‘Døtres arvelod i perioden 1160–1860’.
the property’. The six noblemen did negotiate a settlement, and although Eline was very dissatisfied with it, she could do nothing about it. She complained to her friend and patron, the dowager queen Dorothea, but the latter could do nothing but offer her sympathy.³

A king in love

On the surface, this is a story of two women from the upper ranks of society confronting each other over property—hardly an unusual story in early modern Denmark, or elsewhere—but there is more to the story than two women fighting. It is also the story of a king in love and the political demands concerning his marriage, demands that did not include permission to marry his beloved. King Frederik II had ascended to the throne in 1559 and shortly before had fallen in love with one of his mother’s ladies-in-waiting, a young noblewoman named Anne Hardenberg. She was engaged to be married—to a young nobleman, Oluf Mouridsen Krognos, who was none other than Eline’s son. The king’s plans for marriage met strong opposition from his mother, the dowager queen Dorothea, as well as from his sister, the Electress Anna of Saxony, who both wanted him to marry a princess. The Danish nobility was also against the marriage because it would give one noble family, the Hardenbergs, an advantage over all the others, which might upset the cohesion of the noble elite and thereby shift the balance of power between the high nobility and the king, who shared political power during this period.⁴

It should be noted that Anne Hardenberg herself was not the problem. Judging from the letters of the nobility, she was generally well-liked and she remained a lady-in-waiting to the dowager queen, who was genuinely fond of her, as was the Electress Anna. It was instead her status as a non-royal person that caused the confrontation between the king’s desire to marry her and the views of his mother, sister, and the nobility concerning what constituted a proper royal marriage. This situation aggravated the already tense relationship between the king and his mother (who, as mentioned above, was also a good friend of Eline Gøye). Frederik refused to marry as long as his mother was alive and kept courting Anne for more than thirteen years. When the dowager

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2 Kanelliets Brevbøger, 13 December 1560.
3 Breve ... Herluf Trolle og Birgitte Gjøe, II, pp. 26–27.
queen died in October 1571, the Electress Anna succeeded where her mother had failed, namely in talking her brother into meeting with some suitable princesses, and in 1572, King Frederik married his young cousin Sofie.

We know much less about Anne Hardenberg’s own feelings towards the king. She apparently broke the engagement with Eline’s son but she never became the mistress of the king; moreover, she also tried to talk the king into marrying a princess. In 1572, shortly before King Frederik married, Anne wrote his secretary to ask whether she should return the jewelry that the king had given her during their long courtship. She was allowed to keep it at the king’s order. After the royal wedding, Anne expressed deep relief in a letter to Eline’s sister, and half a year later, she married her former fiancé, Eline’s son Oluf. Eline, however, had died in 1563 and so never experienced her son’s happiness, which, alas, lasted barely six months. In June 1573, Oluf died aged 38, while Anne lived as a widow for another sixteen years, administering her late husband’s property. They had no children, so she could not inherit his lands, but in his will he had stipulated that she should enjoy the property for as long as she lived.

The impact of the king’s love for Anne on his decision about the crown fief is impossible to verify, of course, as nothing is left in the sources about this. However, it is not difficult to assume that this was one possible reason why, in the early years of his courtship of Anne Hardenberg, he would want to remove the mother of his rival from her office, particularly because that woman was also a good friend of the king’s own mother who was so much against his plans to marry Anne.

Danish crown fief administration

Eline Gøye was, as mentioned, a crown fief holder and as such wielded public power and authority, something that was normally reserved for royal women as queens regnant or regents. Other than crown fief holders in Denmark and Norway, and Sweden until Gustav Vasa became king in 1524, I have not come across non-royal women holding public office anywhere else in Europe. The crown fief administration of sixteenth-century Denmark was an instrument for administering crown lands. Crown property was divided

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5 Breve ... Herluf Trolle og Birgitte Gjøe, II, pp. 187–191.
6 The following is based on my forthcoming book, Magtens kvinder.
7 The essential work on sixteenth-century crown fief administration is Erslev, Konge og lensmand. Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion is based on Erslev.
into a varying number of crown fiefs of different sizes: some, which later historians termed ‘major crown fiefs’, included a county as well as a royal castle or fortress, while smaller crown fiefs, later defined as ‘minor crown fiefs’, could be anything from a small number of farms and a manor to several villages and manors. The holder of a crown fief administered the property and collected ordinary and extraordinary taxes, fees, and services imposed on the subjects of the Crown. In addition, the holder maintained law and order by keeping an eye on how the local courts functioned. Holders of major crown fiefs were also obliged to provide soldiers and equipment in the event of war or attack on the kingdom.

Becoming the holder of a crown fief happened in several ways: as surety for loans to the crown, as reward for services to the crown, and as a regular office. The remark in the letter dismissing Eline Gøye indicates that Eline and her late husband, who was also very wealthy, had received the crown fief at least partly in return for lending money to the king. Conditions for holding a crown fief took three major forms: by account, by fees, and by service. A holder of a crown fief by account received a fixed wage for administering the crown fief and in return surrendered all income received to the royal treasury, subtracting all documented expenses. A holder of the crown fief by fees paid an annual fixed sum to the crown and could keep all income from the crown fief, but in return had to pay all expenses incurred in administering the fief. Eline held her crown fief by fees, as had her husband. A holder of the crown fief by service was obliged to muster armed soldiers in times of war as well as entertain the king and his officials whenever they resided in the area, but could otherwise manage the crown fief as if it were his or her private property. Anne Rosenkrantz held the crown fief under this condition, as she was obliged to provide four fully equipped soldiers and horses but did not have to pay any fees. Right before she received the crown fief, she had also lent a sum of money to the king.8

The administrative system of crown fiefs also became a central institution in the secular exercise of power in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Denmark. Controlling who received positions as holders of crown fiefs and which form these would take (account, fees, or service) was a decisive factor in the exercise of power during the late medieval and early modern era. Thus each of the two secular powers of the period, king and aristocracy, strove to control who became crown fief holders. In 1449, the aristocracy, through the Council of the Realm, was strong enough to dictate the rules for the distribution of crown fiefs in the coronation

8 Kancelliets Brevbøger, 5 August 1561.
charter of King Christian I, namely that no crown fief should be occupied without the consent of the Council of the Realm. This became the rule for succeeding kings, including Frederik II. As with all power relations, the balance of power was never stable for an extended period, yet overall the aristocracy generally enjoyed greater power than the king until the early seventeenth century.

Not all members of the nobility enjoyed the benefits of the crown fief system, however. A small group of noble families, the magnates, exercised control over the distribution of crown fiefs through their male representatives in the Council of the Realm. This group of magnate families was composed of women as well as men, which meant that noble women could also share in the benefits of the group by receiving crown fiefs. Both men and women appear as holders of crown fiefs, including those created after the Protestant Reformation reached Denmark in 1536, whereupon the lands, buildings, and services formerly owned and claimed by bishops, monasteries, and convents passed into royal control. However, as in all patriarchal societies, there was a ‘glass ceiling’: although they could acquire crown fiefs, women could not become members of the Council of the Realm.

**Female crown fief holders in sixteenth century Denmark**

The number of female crown fief holders was not insignificant. One hundred and eight-nine noblewomen, primarily from the magnate group, held crown fiefs during the sixteenth century. As some of the women held more than one fief during their lifetime, the total number of fiefs held by women is 293. Overall, this corresponds to 14.7 percent of all crown fief holdings, with women holding 10.8 percent of major crown fiefs, 17.8 percent of minor crown fiefs, and 16.1 percent of former monastic fiefs (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1 Danish crown fief holdings by gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women as % of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major crown fiefs</strong></td>
<td>745</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minor crown fiefs</strong></td>
<td>775</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monastic institutions</strong></td>
<td>182</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>1702</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The longest a woman held a major crown fief was 37 years; another woman held a minor crown fief for 39 years and a third woman had a monastic crown fief for 26 years. The average length for women holding a crown fief was 4 years for major crown fiefs, 9.8 years for minor fiefs, and 7.7 years for monastic fiefs. We are not, then, talking about a widow closing her deceased husband's account books and handing over his crown fief within a year—there are many examples of that, of course—but about women making up a small but significant part of royal administration, representing the king in their crown fief.

In addition, while 69 percent of the crown fiefs were held by widows who had succeeded their husbands, as was the case of Eline Gøye, 31 percent were held by women who were given crown fiefs personally, either as widows, as was the case of Anne Rosenkrantz, or in a few cases (I count eight) even as unmarried women. Some of these unmarried crown fief holders did later marry, but they kept the crown fief in their own name. Among all the women who held crown fiefs, 40 percent had been married to members of the Council of the Realm, 46 percent had fathers who had been members of the Council of the Realm, and 32 percent had mothers who had been crown fief holders. In other words, a female crown fief holder would often have close family ties to other female crown fief holders as well as to the Council of the Realm, and she would in all events have role models when she became a crown fief holder.

My explanation for this somewhat unusual role of women holding formal power and authority, despite not being queens or dowager queens, is that in order to keep control of the crown fief administration, and thereby control the resources of the realm, the magnate group preferred to fill a vacant position as crown fief holder by choosing a woman from among their own families whenever there were no suitable male candidate. We can see this phenomenon clearly during the Nordic Seven Years’ War (1563–1570), when the number of women who received crown fiefs rose quite visibly. The war took a heavy toll among the nobles, including magnates, and women were appointed to vacant positions.

This would also explain why the deposition of Eline Gøye and the conferral of the crown fief upon her sister-in-law were accepted by the Council of the Realm without problems. Each woman could equally be counted as ‘one of our own’, as both the Gøye and Rosenkrantz families were part of the magnate group, so the group’s combined power was not threatened by the change.

This public role of noble women in sixteenth-century Denmark was largely ignored by contemporaries and by later historians, or mentioned only in
passing. The contemporary image of a noblewoman’s proper role emerges largely from printed Danish funeral sermons, which were widely read.\(^\text{11}\) The emphasis in funeral sermons was not on providing a true biography of the deceased, but presenting him or her as a true Christian (Protestant, of course) in life and death, as a model for others. Of the fourteen extant funeral sermons for women from 1565 to 1600, five were for women who had served as holders of royal crown fiefs, and all five had held their crown fief for longer than a year. For four of them, however, their career as crown fief holder is completely ignored. In only one case does the preacher refer to the woman as a public authority, namely in the funeral sermon of one of our protagonists, Anne Rosenkrantz, who died in 1589.

The preacher mentions that, in addition to other virtues, Anne possessed the virtue of wisdom, through which she could ‘rule in this secular world. Because God had assigned her to be a public authority, then he had also endowed her with the virtues that a good official ought to have’. But—the preacher continues—her duties were often ‘man-like and not the business of women [...] And one could not find many who possessed what God had bestowed on her’.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, according to the funeral sermon, the case of Anne Rosenkrantz was exceptional and she succeeded primarily due to her masculine virtues. But as we have seen, Anne was far from an exception.

This brief comment is the only mention in a funeral sermon of a noblewoman holding office, and it does not give details about what Anne’s public duties were. In contrast, all the funeral sermons for men describe their public careers. Some are outlined in a cursory manner, while others are described in more detail but—and this is the point here—all noblemen are depicted as public officials if they were crown fief holders or held other offices. This habit of overlooking female crown fief holders and their actions has continued in historical writings and research, making it an example of another type of confrontation, namely that between the actual historical experience of women and the perceived historical experience, handed down by male historians.

Another twist in the confrontation between the perceived role and actual roles of women comes when we examine the role of Eline’s second husband, Vincents Juel, whom she married in 1559. He was a nobleman, younger than her and from a good (but not magnate-level) family. After he married Eline, his name appears in letters sent to crown fief holders, as if he has taken over her crown fief, but he never received a formal letter of crown fief holding.

\(^{11}\) The following is based on Jacobsen, ‘Danske ligprædikener’, unless otherwise noted.

\(^{12}\) Scavenius, En Lijgpredicken, E ii v–E iii r.
and the royal letter ordering Eline to surrender her office does not mention him at all. He is mentioned in the letter to the six noblemen concerning the property fight between Eline and her sister-in-law, and later in some documents in which he deeds some of his wife's property to the king in return for some other property. Here he is acting on behalf of his wife, which is the traditional role of a husband in accordance with Danish contemporary law.

In 1560, Eline’s brother-in-law made a list of his in-laws and on this list, Eline’s husband’s name is written instead of hers, but in another note by the same brother-in-law to the king, he writes that ‘these good [i.e. noble] men have property in Holbo and Try counties’ and among the ‘good men’ listed is ‘Lady Eline Gøye’. So Eline’s contemporaries saw her as the wife of Vincent Juel but also as a crown fief holder and property owner in her own name. (Danish law, incidentally, was rooted in continental Roman and Germanic law and while circumscribing the independent agency of a married woman, never erased her legal personality as did common law in England.) Vincents Juel did eventually receive a crown fief, but not until after Eline’s death and after holding military office and acquitting himself well during the Nordic Seven Years’ War.

This dual identification—as a wife, but also as an individual—raises another question, which we cannot answer but should at least consider: did these women see themselves as belonging primarily to a gender or to a class? Judging from the funeral sermons (which all concern persons from the high nobility), women as daughters and wives were expected to be submissive to fathers and husbands because of their gender, but they should definitely not behave submissively towards their children, their servants, and their peasants. In these relationships, the women are praised for being firm and protective, and even for being good ‘lords’ to their servants and peasants. I will venture to say that this particular group of women from the highest levels of society was most likely more conscious of class than of gender. The experience of some magnate women serving as crown fief holders, and thus exercising power and authority over both men and women, would have strengthened this rank-based sense of identity.

Conclusion

This seemingly ordinary dispute over property between two sisters-in-law in sixteenth-century Denmark turns out to contain several layers

13 Breve ... Herlaf Trolle og Birgitte Gjøe, I, p. 60.
of confrontations: most obviously that between the women, but also the confrontation between the ideas and notions of later generations of historians and storytellers as to what women could or couldn’t do, on the one hand, and on the other, the actual lives and experiences of women in the past. Women made up 15 percent of all crown fief holders during the sixteenth century, though contemporaries largely ignored this, and later historians forgot or were unable to imagine that non-royal women held formal power.

With the introduction of Absolutism in Denmark in 1660, the female crown fief holders disappeared. The absolute monarch now appointed administrators of crown property without the Council of the Realm, and monarchs preferred men from the bourgeoisie. Within a few decades, the administration of the country was overhauled and women with authority disappeared from Danish society. A few women, notably dowager queens and ladies at court, could still hold (limited) political power, but women exercising formal power was a thing of the past—and a quickly forgotten past.

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About the author

Grethe Jacobsen is the former Head of Department at the Royal Library in Copenhagen. She has published widely in Danish, English and German on women in medieval and early modern Denmark, since 2004 with focus on noble women and power.