

Grågård's Saga by J.C. Nielsen

Grågård in Thorning Parish is a very old farm, one of the oldest in the country. It is so old that its history and origins get lost all the way back in the Middle Ages. Saxo spoke of it in his report about the Battle of Grathe Hede in 1157, where he says, "Grågård was a large livestock farm, where there lived a rich Jute who went under the name 'the Rich Gray Farmer (Gråbonden).'" He tells that King Svend, the evening before the battle, let his horses go loose in some of Gråbonden's as-yet unharvested barley fields, where they gorged themselves so that they became heavy and sleepy in the battle, while Valdemar made his horses stay saddled and unfed ('with dry mouths'), and they were fiery and light-footed in the campaign, while Svend's were heavy and couldn't run. This contributed to Svend's loss of the battle on October 23, 1157. This tells us undeniably that the barley wasn't harvested at that time, but it may be right, as at that time we had a different calendar than we do now. It was the Julian, and we now have the Gregorian, which is six weeks behind the Julian. At that time October 23 would have fallen in what we now call September, which is often when the barley harvest occurs today.



Isøre Ting - Runestone near Roskilde where nobles gathered to elect the next king.

In his major historical poem, Valdemar the Great and His Men, Ingemann let Gråbonden be the great farmer from Sjælland, Ole Stam, which could be reasonable. When Svend Eriksen (with the later epithet Grathe, after the place where he fell) sought election as king at Isøre Ting near Roskilde, farmer Ole Stam stood up and spoke to this choice and said, "The people of Jutland have chosen Knud as king, and that we must also do, we shall not have more than one king."

And he cried loudly out over the assembly, "Cursed be he that gives Svend the crown!" Svend was named king of the people of Sjælland anyway, and Svend exiled Ole Stam, which naturally meant leaving Svend's riches and lands. He was sent to the islands and to Scania, from whence he would travel to reach Knud in Jutland. Ingemann also made Ole Stam Svend's murderer. Gråbonden has the captive king killed near his farm.

In King Valdemar's Land Book, well more than 80 years after the Battle of Grathe Hede, it is written that Grågård shall be subjected to an annual tax of three silver Marks. One can deduce that it had become a large farm by Valdemar's time, and covered an area of about 440 hectares (800 tønder land), since everything that is called Gråe or Gråskov today belonged to the farm. It was a farm about the same size as Aunsbjerg in our day.

In Valdemar the Great's time a wooden wayside chapel stood in the farm's field, where all the pilgrims, both those going to Jerusalem and to Rome, would stop and pray, both on the way out and on the way back home again. It is believed that Knud the Holy, on his flight through Aggersund away from the enraged peasants, stopped at Grathe Chapel to hold prayers as he went past. That chapel was made of wood. The first Christian churches here in the country were all made of wood, and their lifespan was only 200 years. After that they rotted and were replaced by more long-lasting stone churches that originally were made of hewn boulders, and later when people learned to make stone out of clay, built of bricks. Most of the boulder-hewn churches are still standing and are from 800 to 600 years old.

After Svend fell he was buried in the wooden chapel, which was probably pretty ramshackle. King Valdemar requested that a chapel be built of hewn granite. Now we must remember that Svend was laid to rest in the old wooden chapel to begin with, and the new chapel was built beside it. When the new one was finished, the old one was torn down. So then the old chapel, and with it the king's grave, was out in the open, and there his body was found in 1885 when the National Museum studied the site, a few yards north of where the stone chapel had stood. They found the body of a man whose head had been split open preserved in the red sand.

The Roskilde Chronicles write of the battle on Grathe Hede: "It was a false settlement which was reached between Svend, Knud and Valdemar, for soon Knud and his kinsman Konstantin were shamefully murdered by Svend on the 9th of August 1157, as they gathered in Roskilde." Valdemar escaped although badly wounded, fled to Jutland and asked the Jutes for help. Svend chased after him, fought with him on Grathe Hede, but through God's will he lost the battle and succumbed miserably: he was awarded the death he knew his scheming had earned him. His body was buried in the village church. The record books say that Svend was buried in Saint Kjeld's Chapel in Viborg Domkirke, but that was first built 52 years after Svend's fall on Grathe Hede, so it can't be true.

Saxo says about Svend: "He was killed by avaricious peasants, who gave him a hole for a grave, and buried him in the sand where he fell." But in Kristian the Fourth's time, Anders Pallesen, the pastor in Thorning, wrote to Ole Worm (history writer): "The king's grave near Grathe Chapel is in decay. At the ends of the grave stand two uplifted ("tvekløftede") stones; between them lies a flat stone. Therefore, King Svend's tomb was known in 1623.

About the flat stone on the king's grave, it is recorded that it was to be sold to Niels Storm from Aarhus, along with the two uplifted stones. Later it was repurchased by one of Grågård's owners, by the name of Anders Graa, who with his wife purchased burial plots at Søndre Parish's church in Viborg, and this is true enough. The two graves lie at the eastern end of the church, and there is a large flat stone on the slope of one grave. I have seen it many times: the best evidence that Svend is buried at Grathe Chapel.

That the battle at Grathe was one of the most significant battles fought in our country's history is a fact. With Svend's fall, Erik Emun's evil kin sank in the soil, the civil war had ended, Valdemar was now the sole king and a renaissance time began that Denmark had never seen before, the shining time of Valdemar. The church and state worked hand in hand, Denmark was mighty internally and externally, and church-building took hold. Large, stately houses of worship stood with tall towers and sky-scratching spires, the symbol of thought that went high up to heaven, and the time that followed. Well could Ingemann with truth sing: "On Grathe Hede now larks sing; in Denmark is a new dawn."

Grathe Chapel was a place where all roads met. From Knudstrup or South Knudstrup a road led up over Gråskov to Grathe Chapel; there was another crossroads from the chapel that led down over the bog's western corner, following the military road that left Knudstrup. Also a road ran southeast from the chapel over the moor's easterly end and out westward in the country: a lane still remains west of the lake.

When the area where the chapel once stood was studied in 1885, graves were also found where the churchyard had been, and they were full of bodies. Where did they come from? Not likely from the surrounding population, for they were few at that time, and also there were three churches in the thinly-populated parish, namely Ungstrup, Thorning and Grathe. They must have been traveling pilgrims stricken by plague, perhaps all the way back to the Black Death's time, sick people who had dragged themselves to Grathe Chapel with Death following, to be buried in the holy, consecrated ground. When the chapel was torn down is not known, but it is said that the church was so leaky in the roof and joints that on rainy days the minister couldn't hold services and still keep himself dry. King Valdemar the Great commanded that a chapel of hewn stone be built on the site. King Frederik the Second decided to tear down both Ungstrup Church and Grathe Chapel and build onto Thorning Church with the stones from the other churches. That king was very diligent at tearing down churches and destroying Catholic shrines.

The chapel was 24 yards long and 18 yards wide, a really sizable church. Thorning Church was at that time only 26 yards long. The old folks I've spoken with only remember that the church stood at window-height, and there was still a wall around the churchyard and grave-sites. A couple of boys, one of them my father-in-law Peder Lassen, and the other Kristian Graae, were out tending sheep near the church and also on the grave-tussocks, and were in agreement that a little tussock was a child's grave, and a larger one an adult's grave. They went between the collapsed stones and found a nice censer (a dish for burning incense) that Frederik the Seventh had in his private collection, but with his death passed to the National Museum: I have a picture of it in my room. The vessel hung from three chains, of which one had been lost. When I added onto the farm, I found some hewn stone from the chapel, which I set to the side,

and afterwards set into the walls of the new farmhouse. Next to the entry sits one of the nicest, that in few words tells the farm's history with these words from Ingemann's Valdemar the Great and his Men: "And from the wedding dance to the vale the army rouses itself before dawn. Grågård's fields and Ravnholt valley together deal a great blow. 23 october 1157."

In the time of the Battle of Grathe Hede, the owner of Grågård, the Gray Peasant (Gråbonden) was likely at a high point: it was a very large farm, from which some resources would still go to the king when there was war in the land. They could provide weapons-trained journeymen, either cavalry with horses in armor and plate, or well-armed infantry, or maybe both. That Gråbonden was involved in the war is apparent from the fact that King Svend, in the prelude to the battle, set up his tents on Gråbonden's fields, and that Gråbonden offered to provision his army. But he was on the other side of the battle: he went over to Valdemar with all his journeymen. When Gråbonden's wife came out with the required provisions, she spoke truthfully that he had not been at home: as soon as Valdemar arrived, they had gone over to him! The saga tells that Gråbonden's wife was very beautiful, coming with the foodstuffs, and Svend forced her to spend the night with him in his tent. Gråbonden had a private reason to avenge himself with Svend, when he as a prisoner was returned back through Gråbonden's farm. When the time had come that Valdemar had triumphed, Gråbonden ran to his nearest plow, took a plow-axe, ran after the king and clove his head from the back side, so that he sank, dead, from his horse. It is said that Svend demanded to be led before Valdemar, doubtless in the hope that his noble kinsman would spare his life. The old folks say that Valdemar held court in Thorning after the battle, where many of Svend's captured men were sentenced to death, among others Knud's murderer in Roskilde, Barber Ditlev, a skunk and a bloodhound. That Valdemar would hold a trial in Thorning after the battle is believable enough. The army could be quartered for the night and have a meal: out on the heath there was nothing like that.

For 300 years we hear nothing of Grågård or Gråbonden, but in 1488 it is reported in the Aarhus archives that nobleman Aksel Ibsen, owner of Strøvinggård, has purchased Grågård's fields, and is says in the court book, 1488, "Owned - Gråe Skov by Aksel Ibsen, also Impgård is included under Ungstrup Church, which is owned by Aksel Ibsen."

If at that time there were any residents of Gråskov, they would travel past Thorning Church and to Ungstrup Church; at that time this was how they dealt with poor Christian people. King Christian the Second forbade this, but the arrangement was broken by the manor lord as being contrary to good morals and customs.

There was at that time a great forest in Gråskov, and we can still see the place where the manor lord sliced the mighty oak timbers for building and ship-building. Three iron smelting ovens can be found in Gråskov, which had massive oak legs to stand on. The lord understood well enough how to butter his bread at the poor peasants' expense.

Things went swiftly downhill for Gråbonden. The farm passed to the last bishop in Aarhus, where it remained for a long time, belonging to Silkeborg Castle, which also owned in the Lysgård area Hovlbjerg, Vråds counties, yes, all the way out to Ringkøbing region: in all approximately 8000 tønder hartkorn (as much as 116,000 hectares¹), which the Crown during the Reformation took over from the bishopric in Aarhus. So it was not only with Christian kindness that King Kristian the Third carried out the Reformation: it was also to get hold of the immense riches that the church had accumulated in the form of property.

There were three, actually four types of farmers, and these were Crown farmers, Church farmers, and nobility, and then there were the free farmers who in the end owned only 6 percent of the land. It was best to be a Church farmer: they seldom had to do work on the manor fields (as part of payment for being able to work their own fields). Next best were the Crown farmers, poor men or nobility, and last the free farmers who owned their own farms and were free from working the manor fields, but who were so indebted that it was a doubtful benefit. In Kristian the Fourth's time Gråbonden was a servant of the Crown, and the king asked Gråbonden Kristian Mikkelsen to leave Grågård, that he might post a colour-guard on Grågård for hound hunting. The farm had at that time been gathered together, with the exception of Gråskov, or it would not otherwise have been able to sustain a hunt. But

¹ see conversion chart on this web page:
http://www.sizes.com/units/charts/UTBLDenmark_premetric_land.htm

Gråbonden Kristian Mikkelsen was not the kind of a man who would take a bluff: he said no, and would not leave until the king found him a different farm. That didn't happen, and Kristian Mikkelsen continued to live on Grågård until his death.

During the days of the Swedish war Grågård found itself burned by the enemy, its men slain, no seed, no drivers. Anders Graae had the farm (he who lies buried in Viborg). I don't know whether he was a copyholder, but it was apparent that he was well-off, as he could spend so much on himself and his wife when they died.

Grågård was split in two from a single farm to twin farms, East Farm and West Farm. When that happened I don't know, but the two Gråbønder must have endured something to come out of it with each other. The church was in the West Farm's field, and was address No. 1, the East Farm No. 2, but the farmer in the East Farm believed that the church remains were a common heritage. One evening the East Farm's sons drove over to the church in search of a load of hewn ashlar (finely cut masonry), and the West Farm's sons went in to their father and said, "Now they're coming from East Farm with a load of stone that they stole over at the church," and they asked if he was going to go out and take it from them. "No," said the old man, after a struggle, "It is not worth having a fight, better let me go." He went out and stopped the vehicle, lifted the cover and said, "You might well go and fetch me a load also." But East Farm's sons didn't want to load more stones, and they never came back on that errand. The West Farm's owner was quite a giant, as were his sons and grandsons, who I knew when I was little. They were named Peder Skov and Kristian Graa, real examples of the old Jute strength, and Kristian Graa's child who is now grown up, is also evidence that there is strength in the Danish bread. From the sons of the strong West (East?) Farmer, that farm went over to a son-in-law who sold the farm to strangers, and then it had many various owners in recent generations, but the Graa family, the West Farmer's descendants, still live here on the farm.

For 34 years I was myself Gråbonde, until I ceded the farm to my son-in-law Jørgen Hoberg, as owner of the old farm with its many and important memories, which he holds with honour. In the many years I lived on Grågård, I was able to keep the lovely monument, the stone from Grathe Chapel, in sight, carried by Denmark's good son Thor Lange from King Svend's grave,

to remind me of the victory on Grathe Hede. I stood there many times and told listeners all I knew about the battle on Grathe Hede, and many strangers came to inspect the stone and hear the stories. These times are some of the best memories I have. Many times I found weapons from the battle: how strange to walk on the old battlefield where the fate of the fatherland was decided 800 years before. It whispered Ingemann's great words to me, an evocative call of the ancients' thoughts from the grave, to warn us about annihilation's doom.

Stig op ef graven du slægt der døde
Forkynd dit Fald og afmaal din Brøde,
Advar os for udslettelsens Dom,
Og vis os hvorfra din Frelse kom,

Come up from the grave, you family who died,
Proclaim your fall and measure your iniquity,
Alert us to annihilation's doom,
And show us whence your Saviour came.

Do we not also today need to remain cautious of annihilation's doom? There are in the life of a nation two factors, the Christian and the National. Throw one of them overboard, and we also will slide under annihilation's doom, and we will have no more strength for rejuvenation in us.

Signed: J.C. Nielsen



The Monument on Grathe Hede