

## **Summary – bailiffs, village tensions & witchcraft in the late seventeenth century**

This thesis is microhistorical investigation. In 1692 the peasant and bailiff Hans Stange was accused of being a wizard. He lived on the island of Falster in southern Denmark, where the king was the manorial lord. It was therefore the official, that supervised the royal estate, that was plaintiff, then a trial was started against the bailiff. He summoned all the peasants on the island, where the bailiff functioned, to investigate the accusations. The perspectives of this case lies first of all in the fact, that it illuminates the problematic position, that the bailiffs among the peasants faced. They were to supervise the peasants, that they lived among. In this case it is the representative, that the bailiff normally served, that was plaintiff, and the peasants, that he normally was superior to, that accused him. Since it is a case about witchcraft, there is reason to believe, that the accusations were related to fundamental differences between the bailiff and his neighbours. Differences, that not necessarily relates directly to his position as bailiff, but indicates how he could be used as bailiff and accused of being a wizard at the same time. The case therefore illuminate tensions in a village too and the function of witchcraft in the late seventeenth century, and how the local officials dealt with witchcraft just shortly before they stopped raising these cases.

The court record have been supplemented with other sources. The administration made accounts of the servants under the king, that are used. In addition to that there is records relating to deceased peasants properties and an parish record, where the local priest wrote about the case.

The island Hasselø, where the bailiff and his accusers lived, was very isolated. New peasants were dominantly found among children of the existing peasants. It turned out, that Hans Stange differed from his fellow peasants even before becoming bailiff. He restored a desolated farm in another village. Thereby he did a favour to the estate, that could not otherwise get feudal rent of the land. The extent of the problem of desolated land was enormous. The peasants were reluctant to rent this land, since it did not make them prosper. Hans Stange got great debts after restoring the farm. His effort is therefore more likely to be seen in relation to the appointment of him to bailiff shortly after.

The trial showed, that the bailiff had a bad reputation of being a wizard among the peasants on the island. He got the reputation shortly after 1660. Very few could testify about situations, where he had used his witchcraft. Only four persons had accusations, among them two descendants of the deceased brother and sister of the bailiff. The bailiff maintained he was innocent.

The official of the estate, the plaintiff, pledged him guilty of using witchcraft with the purpose of harming his neighbours. According to that the bailiff was to be imprisoned with hard labour and to lose his properties. But the Judge at the local court did not find, that it was proved, that the bailiff were able of doing witchcraft. His scepticism did not however relate to the defendant being a bailiff. At the same time the courts were sceptical in cases against poor women, where the witnesses could tell about stronger proofs of witchcraft than in the case of the bailiff. The court was reluctant to sentence in cases of witchcraft unless the accused confessed. The remarkable aspect of this case is, that the judge found, that the bailiff was guilty of trying to harm his neighbours anyway, and that he should lose his properties. That sentence looked like a settlement between the two parties. By using a very gentle way of executing this sentence, the case ended up with a sort of fine, that the bailiff could pay in cash. The bailiff kept his farm, but could no longer hold the office as bailiff. This could only happen with the approval of the estate official, and in addition to that it looks like he had ensured, that the bailiff was treated fair outside the court during the trial. The change from witchcraft to village tensions indicates, that the official of the estate and the judge were sceptical, but found, that it was their duty to raise the trial and sentence the bailiff. After the trial the priest visited the bailiff several times and since Hans Stange maintained his innocence, even then confronting death and thereby the divine "court", the priest wrote a strong statement in the parish record, where he tried to rehabilitate the bailiff by stating, that it was the son of the bailiffs brother, a master of a ship, that had started the rumours against Hans Stange.

Then looking closely at the witnesses testify about the bailiff, certain differences appears. Some of them had only heard of the bailiffs bad reputation, while others stated, that he was wizard. It seems that it was the few peasants, that had moved to the island from outside, who were reluctant to state anything with certainty. Even though they had lived there for ages. Contrary to these are the relatives, who apparently started the rumours and peasants born on the island. Two peasants, that were well of, stated, that they were unsure, that the bailiff could do witchcraft.

The accusations were of two different kinds. Two poor peasant found, that their problems as peasants were related to the bailiffs witchcraft. The connection between his threats and the apparent harm done by these words is very loose. The master of the ship had a stronger accusation. He used to be carpenter and had as such neglected to work for Hans Stange 23 years earlier. Hans Stange then made a threat, that he should be paralysed. That happened 10 years later, and that incident had a

great impact on the reputation of the bailiff. It convinced most of the peasants, that he was a wizard. The incident 23 years earlier was related to the desolated farm, since it was that farm, the master of the ships should have worked on. Therefore it seems that there is an indirect connection between the witchcraft accusation and Hans Stange being appointed as bailiff.

The microhistorical approach has thereby showed, that the officials of the local administration looked for peasants with the ability to and ambition of doing something extra as servants then recruiting new bailiffs. That gave them loyal bailiffs but ensured at the same time an opposition between these and the peasants they should report about. But the office it self was looked upon with respect. Hans Stange could perform his functions even then accused of witchcraft. The neighbours did not dare to take action against him before summoned by the official. By doing so the officials showed, that then confronted with peasants complaints against a bailiff, the matter was treated seriously. That was part of the duty, felt by the official.

The tensions in the village rarely turned into an open conflict. The village community could remember disturbing words for ages. Then a peasant was looked upon as a disturbing element, he ended up with a reputation that was impossible to change. The honour among the neighbours was central and expressed the truth about the person. Even the officials found that reputation was just as important as arguments, then considering a case. The reputation had a double meaning. In addition to its effect in daily life, it was important to have a clear conscience before meeting God. The close relationships between relatives helped maintaining order in the village. But strong conflicts could arise out of the same relationship. The impact of being born in the community functioned as a mean of control. Newcomers could bring new resources with them, that changed the balance of power.

The judges seem to be sceptical then they were confronted with testimonies from witnesses only. They were aware of other explanations on the apparent witchcraft. That scepticism had nothing to do with the person being accused. The case shows, that under the impression of the general rumour about the accused, could more unconvincing accusations arose, as then the poor peasants related their situation with witchcraft. Perhaps a few of the peasants looked upon in the same way as the judge. These sceptical peasants as well as the leading accusers and the accused were as a matter of fact similar in some ways. They made their own conclusions and were perhaps more alike than different from one another.