A prerequisite for the growth of royal administration and power is the existence of taxation. Agricultural production dominated the medieval economy of Sweden. The land was farmed by bönder, who owned the land they farmed and paid taxes to the king, or landbor, who paid rent (avrad) to the owner of their land. The difference between the two categories was not always as clear as it might seem, but generally tax bönder had greater right to the land they farmed and its inheritance than the landbor. The latter class of farmers appeared during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the same period there was a considerable variation in the wealth of the bönder—only later did the term come to mean something akin to ‘peasants’, but the decline in the status of the term began then. From the reign of Magnus Ladulås onwards the transformation of those with means into the frälse differentiated them clearly from other freemen, who paid taxes. The detail of precisely how and when these taxes and different tax units came into existence has been much discussed, because of the inadequate source material. In the high Middle Ages, as the influence of Roman law increased, different rights of land usage were introduced; the right to live on it, the right to use it, the right to rent it and the right to tax it. With the advent of writing rights to property could be set down, and kings ultimately gained the right to define rights to property, for instance, to grant land, to confirm the rights of those who had lost the written evidence of rights to land, and to guarantee the rights of subjects.\footnote{Harding 2002 pp. 13–22.}

The Swedish law-codes retain elements of a system of land ownership that existed in the Viking Period and probably earlier, in the form of bordsrätt. The purpose of this was to defend the right of a
family to its ancestral property. It has been argued that the concept of ‘ownership’ in the Scandinavian Iron Age would have been fundamentally different from that of the Middle Ages, perhaps akin to those found in chieftain societies of more recent times.\(^2\) There are many recorded examples from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries of misunderstanding between these and European traders and colonists, which arose because the natives regarded land as somehow inalienable, owned by the gods, whereas Europeans regarded ownership as transferred in return for gifts—in their eyes, by sale. As noted in Chapter 4, there is no doubt that the advent of written laws derived from Roman law changed the way in which land was disposed of, and ultimately ensured that the right to land was grounded in law and the existence of written contracts. Nevertheless, it is evident that a concept of possession, deriving from the continuous occupation and farming of a specific area, did exist in Scandinavia during the later Iron Age.\(^3\)

Ultimately, an inherited right to possession of land by a social unit, whether close family, extended family or larger community, derives from the advent of agriculture and fixed settlement. As early as the Neolithic Era the burial of ancestors in graves marked by dolmens may have acted as markers for the occupation of land by their kinsfolk.\(^4\) In an oral society each monument would have told a story, just as each name in a genealogical list had a story behind it. In the Scandinavian Iron Age the existence of ancestral burials in conspicuous graves such as mounds probably also served as proof of a family’s possession of land and added a sacral dimension to it. There is good archaeological evidence of a change in culture at the end of the Roman Iron Age that may have accompanied new concepts of ownership and inheritance. Deposition of valuable prestige items in lakes and marshes ended—instead they were retained as wealth to be passed on. Villages and land divisions such as fences began to appear, apparently for purposes other than enclosure of animals.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Löfving 2001a p. 118.

\(^3\) Burn-beat agriculture, as practised in certain parts of Scandinavia, required the constant moving of fields, but these were usually in the vicinity of a fixed settlement site.


\(^5\) Randsborg 1990 p. 117.