Danish-Norwegian Empire

Johan Heinsen Lund

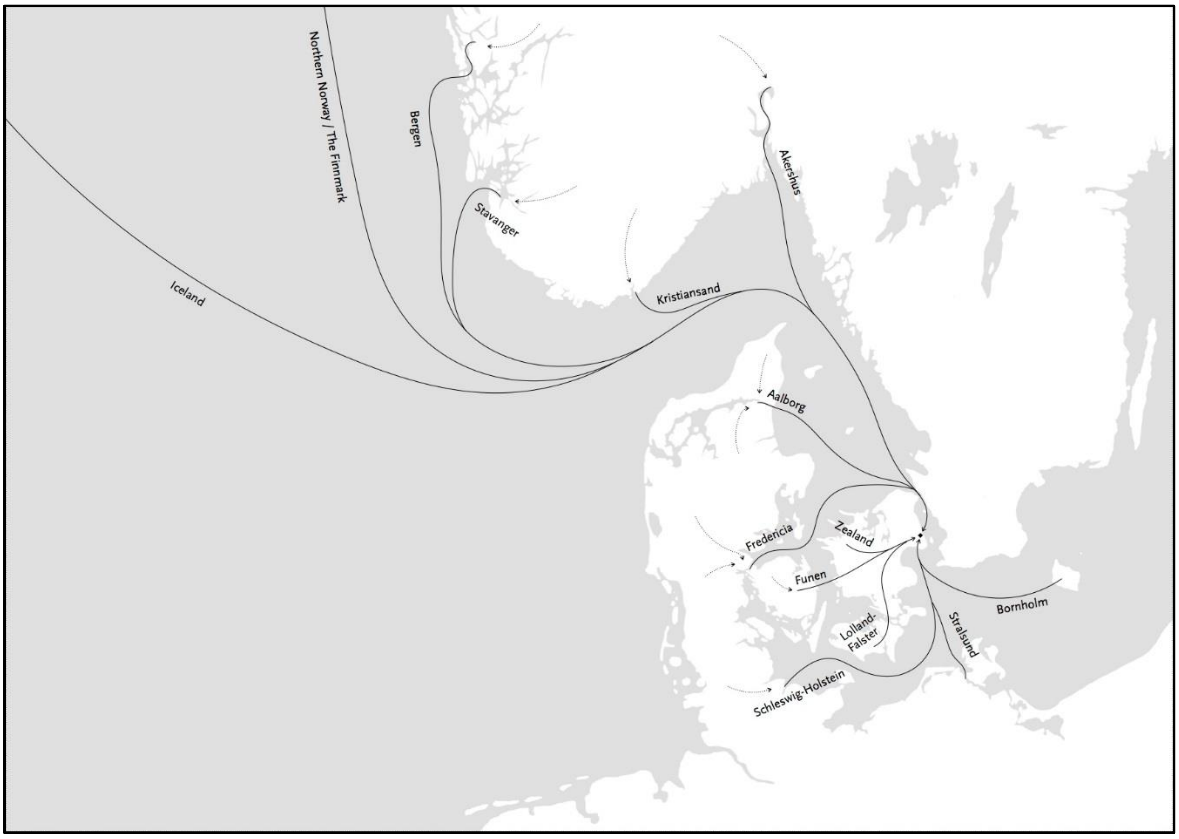
In the early seventeenth century, the Danish-Norwegian state took increased control of the machinery of punishment. This meant the institution of new forms of penal labour directly tied to the ambitions of the Danish rulers who presided over a vast, but scattered and thinly populated empire (including Norway, possessions in what is today Sweden, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and parts of what is now Northern Germany). At the time, Danish rulers harboured ambitions of becoming heads of a genuine European superpower. This institutionalization of penal labour created as part of this push created a quantitatively small (in the scope of global history), but lasting, circulation of convicts within the Scandinavian empire, which eventually came to include colonies elsewhere as well.

The result of this reconfiguration of punishment was a bifurcated system of punishment and penal labour that would only end with the advent of "modern" prisons in the middle of the nineteenth century. Until then, the Danish system remained split between two different types of institution that also represented two different and highly gendered ways of connecting punishment and labour: On the one hand, female felons, juvenile delinquents and vagrants were incarcerated in prison workhouses (from 1605 in Copenhagen, in the eighteenth century elsewhere in the realm as well). In creating this system, the Danish authorities took heavy cues from the Dutch who had invented what was to become the model of this type of institutions in the late sixteenth century. On the other hand, male felons were sentenced to hard labour in military or naval institutions, either in the naval dockyard prison (1620-1741), the military Stockhouse in Copenhagen (1741-1860) or in various military or naval fortresses throughout Denmark-Norway. Contemporaries often labelled convicts in this second category as "slaves", and scholars have speculated that this form of punishment was really a continuation of the medieval practice of sentencing criminals to enslavement. Many of the convicts carried the stigma of dishonour, having been branded or flogged by the executioner as part of their sentence in what was seen as a polluting ritual. Being dishonoured meant that you could never be reintegrated into society, in part because your word carried no binding or legal force. A majority of these inmates also carried life sentences, many being commutations of sentences to hang.

These two strands aimed at mobilizing the labour force in two very different ways: While the prison workhouses trained their inmates in hopes of transforming the poor into a productive workforce to be of use in workshops or manufactures, in what can be conceived of as a an early version of a sort of disciplinary regime (again, taking cues from the Dutch), the institutions of hard "slave" labour simply aimed at exploiting the labour of criminal bodies conceived as already lost to society. Thus, both read as expressions of attempts to fashion Copenhagen into an economic and military stronghold. The prison workhouse of 1605 almost appears to have been the personal project of the King, Christian IV; he regularly visited it and paid great attention to how it was run. It is telling that upon his death in 1648 the prison workhouse was abandoned for a decade and a half, before re-emerging in a new location. Its proto-industrial complex provided cloth for the state's navy and military. The naval dockyard prison also appears to have been his design (literally, as he for instance gave architectural notes on the ideal location ofr its lavatories) and the initial motivation for bringing larger groups of convict workers to Copenhagen around 1600 was the need for workers in constructing the military infrastructure that was key to the King's ambitions. Thus, the naval dockyard prison was established around 1620 as an institutionalization of the earlier practice of using convicts as workers at the lowest rungs of the Danish state's burgeoning naval and military machinery. Such an institutionalization of convict labour appears to have been motived in part by the intense labour shortages faced by the Danish navy in the seventeenth century.

The state-driven character of punishment meant that both Copenhagen's prison workhouse and the naval/military institutions of Trunken and the Stockhouse received convicts from the entire realm, including Norway and Iceland. Later, as Denmark became a colonial power, the prisons in Copenhagen would also receive convicts from the colonies. Thus, the fragmented Danish conglomerate state solved the problem of punishment by instituting a uniquely centralized system in which Copenhagen served as a hub for three different, at times overlapping, flows.

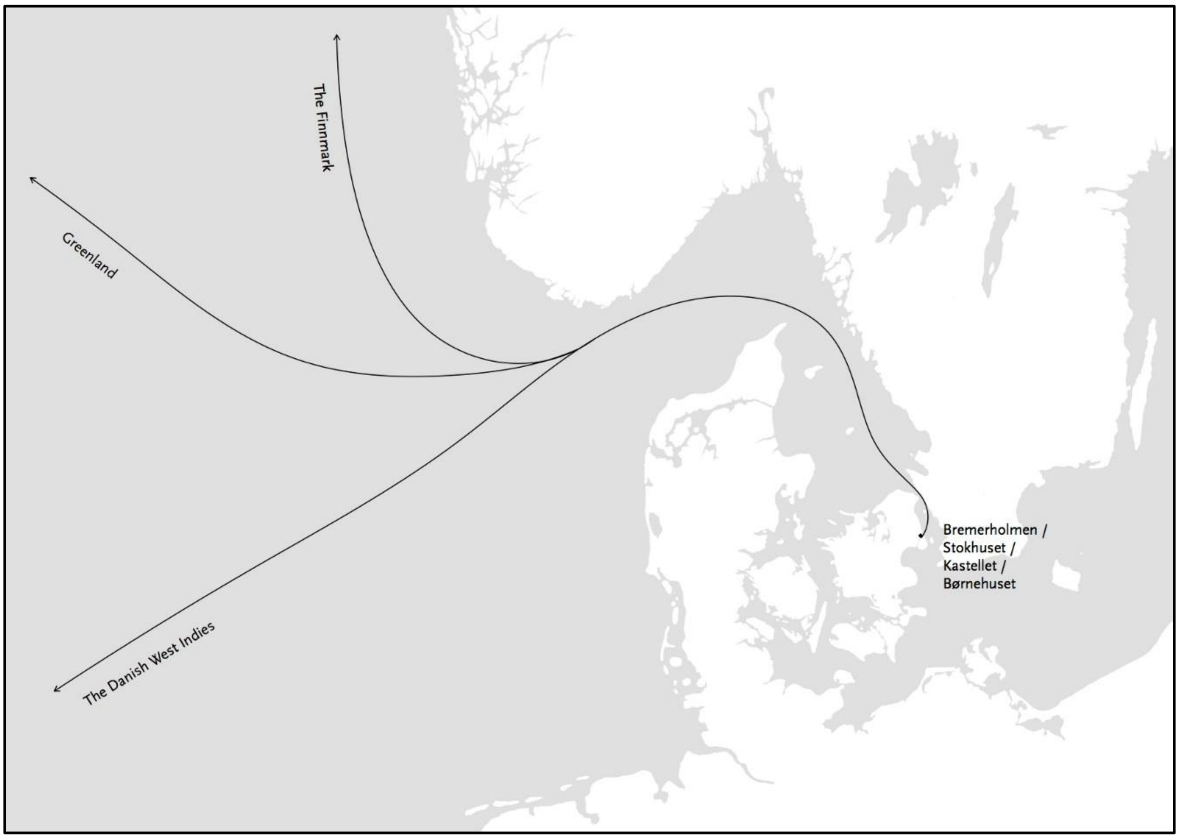
The first flow might be labelled *metropolitan.* As a centripetal force, it brought convicts from the entire realm to the capital where they served their full time in the institutions discussed above. This flow was in operation from the beginning of these institutions, and in a sense preceded them, as convicts and vagrants had at times been brought to Copenhagen to work as galley rowers in the sixteenth century (a practice which appears to have been abandoned in the early seventeenth century). In the early period it would often be naval ships that transported the convicts, but as time went on commercial shipping appears to have taken over the task. Convicts were usually shipped individually or in very small groups from the port nearest to the court where they had been sentenced. They were also transported over land. It is unknown if they did so in the style of chain gangs which were a common sight in early modern Spain. Few convicts had their wives or husbands brought with them to Copenhagen, so for most it entailed a separation from kin. Of course the cost of transportation also meant that local courts far from the capital were more likely to use other forms of punishment, principally corporal punishments. Thus, looking at the inmate registers of Copenhagen's early modern prisons, the farther away the destination the fewer the convicts. However, despite such incentives this trickle of convicts persisted for two and a half centuries.



Metropolitan convict flows

The second flow might be termed *provincial* and is perhaps of least interest here, because it brought convicts only relatively short distances. These were varied flows to a variety of different sites, mostly military fortifications, but also iron works in Norway and a few naval locations as well. When local prison workhouses were established in the various provinces in the eighteenth century, they also received convicts in this fashion. This way of dealing with convicts was also practiced in neighbouring Sweden. In Denmark-Norway the provincial flows reached peak importance in the period between 1739 and 1764 when briefly the Danish state appears to have hoped to decentralize the entire system of penal labour to a wide range of different locations. However, even in this period many were still sent to Copenhagen before then being shipped to places like the fort of Kronborg at Elsinore north of Copenhagen or the small naval base of Christiansø in the Baltic Sea. Copenhagen also had its own fort, Kastellet, which functioned in line with the provincial fortifications as a destination for convicts doing hard labour, and in contrast to most other destinations persisted being so after 1764, when the system was again restored to function in the way it had before 1739.

The last type of flow was *colonial*. Denmark became a colonial power when in 1620 it established a small fort and trading post on the Coromandel coast of India. From the beginning this colonial outpost was used as a site for the occasional exile, but only at the impetus of the King himself. Only a few handfuls of convicts were exiled to India. However, when in 1672 The Danish West India Company established a colony in the Virgin Islands of the Caribbean, convicts were key to the plan. At the time of its charter, a different trading company held the rights to trade in enslaved Africans. Instead the West India Company was given the right to transport as many convicts from Copenhagen's prisons as they wished. They seem to have preferred "willing" labour in the form of indentured servants, but as the colony's reputation was damaged, in part because of the hard labour suffered by the Company's servants and in part because of tropical diseases, convicts were a necessary reserve. From 1672 to the late 1680s the Company transported between 200 and 250 convicts to the Caribbean, a considerable number in light of the minuscule size of the colony itself. Most of these convicts were men brought from the naval dockyard prison in Copenhagen. In the colony they performed whatever labour were needed for the Company, and were effectively the property of the Company. They were chosen mainly among those sentenced to life, and the duration of their sentence was still in full effect upon arrival in the colony. Already malnourished at embarkation, the vast majority of them died in the voyages or within months of arrival in the colony's tropical disease climate. Those who survived helped build the colony. This flow ended as the West India Company went into a state of hibernation in the late 1680s and the right to colonial trade was given over to other agents.



Colonial convict flows

Intriguingly, one of the factors that brought the Company to its knees was the agency of convicts themselves. In January 1683 a large group of convicts on-board a frigate on its way to the Caribbean allied with a group of angry sailors and mutinied. They hoped to take the ship to Ireland, to sell it along with its goods and to share the spoils equally among all involved in the mutiny. It never came to pass, as their coalition fractured. A large group of the convicts where set ashore in the Azores before a small group took control and attempted to take the ship back to Denmark. It was wrecked on the Swedish coast, however, to the economic detriment of the Company, which never really recovered. Only after a complete re-organization in 1697 did the West India Company take full control of the Virgin Islands colony. At that point they invested heavily in the slave trade and outright refused to use convicts - even though various Kings repeatedly enquired if they would alleviate the pressure on Copenhagen's prisons throughout the first half of the eighteenth century.

Eventually such persistent pressure led to another short-lived experiment in the 1740s, when minor offenders were recruited in the prisons to serve as indentured servants. Their status was thus different from their late seventeenth-century predecessors. Their numbers cannot be determined, but they appear to have been around 100 persons.

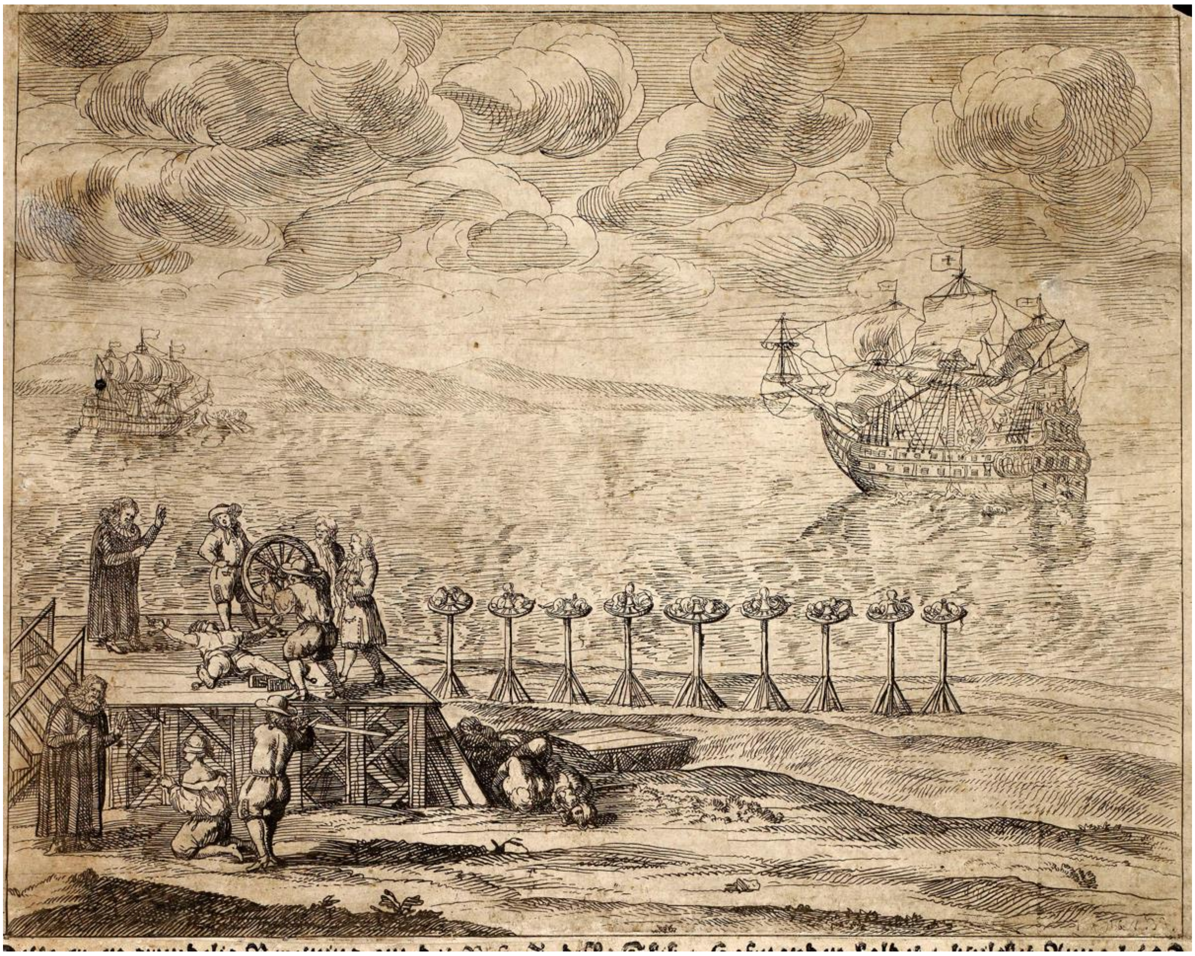


Illustration of the mutiny of convicts and sailors onboard a frigate of the Danish West India and Guinea Company in 1683, and the subsequent execution of nine mutineers in Copenhagen. From a contemporary leaflet now kept at the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

In the meantime Denmark had renewed its ancient claim on sovereignty of Greenland. In 1728 it became the site for another brief experiment in convict transportation. 12 male felons from Copenhagen’s castle and 12 female felons from the prison workhouse in Copenhagen were forcibly married and sent to Greenland as part of an expedition to found a state-run colony at Nuuk. It was a miserable failure. The convicts plotted to mutiny as the state of the colony quickly devolved under poor leadership. The experiment was not repeated even though officials had long fantasized about populating this arctic territory with the vagrants of the realm. Another plot was to do the same in the Finnmark. This northern part of Norway was inhabited by the indigenous Sami people as well as Norwegians who ran a lucrative fishing industry. However, the little ice age of this era made this arctic location relatively inhospitable. In its efforts to keep control of the area, the Danish-Norwegian state used convicts. With the Norwegian law code issued by the Danish King in 1685, Norwegian courts were allowed to use the place as a site for banishment and they did so even after Norway became independent from Denmark in 1814. In the 1750s Danish officials also hoped that The

Finnmark could become a site for banishment of convicts from other places as well. Thus the King forced the Icelandic-Finnmark Trading Company to take on several small shipments of convicts. The Company argued against it, in part by stipulating that Danish convicts could not endure the harsh climate. State officials then decided to try and use the inmates sent Copenhagen's prisons from Iceland for the task. Again the experiment was short-lived as, for reasons unknown, it was given up after only a few attempts.

Epilogue

We usually think of transportation as a thing of the past. In Denmark these mostly centripetal flows ended in part as the empire was gradually disbanded and Denmark became the miniature nation-state it is today. Yet vestiges of it remain. Greenland is still part of the Danish realm (though considered an autonomous country). This also means that the Greenlandic system of punishment is still entangled with the Danish. As of today there is still no high-security prison in Greenland, so Greenlandic felons are flown across the Atlantic to serve time in a special ward of the prison Herstedvester outside of Copenhagen. At the time of this writing (June 2016) the building of a prison in Nuuk to end this echo of imperialism are proceeding, although it is unknown if the new Greenlandic prison will have a sufficient capacity to end this flow completely. Meanwhile Norway has opened up a new flow, having recently contracted the establishment of a prison ward, Norgerhaven, for Norwegian convicts in a Dutch prison located in the village of Veenhuizen. Thus, in punishment, Scandinavian states continue to look abroad.

Further reading

Frederik Stuckenberg, *Fængselsvæsenet i Danmark* (Copenhagen: Gads forlag, 1893).

Jens Engberg, *Dansk Guldalder: eller oprøret i Tugt-, Rasp- og Forbedringshuset* (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1973).

Johan Heinsen, "Dissonance in the Danish Atlantic: speech, violence and mutiny, 1672–1683," *Atlantic Studies*, 13, 2 (2016): 187–205 DOI:10.1080/14788810.2015.1092796

Olaf Olsen, *Christian 4.s tugt- og børnehus* (Copenhagen: Wormianum, 1978).