Chapter 4

Slave Trade, Slave Plantations and Danish Colonialism

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The Danes were deeply involved in the transatlantic slave trade throughout the 18th century. Danish ships operated all over West Africa, from the Gambia and Sierra Leone to Angola, carrying at least approximately 85,000 captives from the African slave export centres to the West Indies in the period 1660–1806. Key points of embarkation and debarkation were the Danish trade forts on the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and the Danish West Indies, i.e., the small Caribbean islands of St. Thomas, St. Jan and St. Croix (the present-day U.S. Virgin Islands). Danish slavers were supposed to satisfy the demand for slave labour in the small Danish colonies, particularly the plantation complex on St. Croix, the so-called ‘sugar island.’ Although in practice no ‘closed’ mercantilist national system existed – slavers landed captives elsewhere in America as well – the ideal link was between the forts in so-called ‘Danish Guinea’ and the Danish West Indies. And this link was the major (official) rationale behind Danish trafficking across the Middle Passage.

In the 17th century, trade in gold was the major attraction for European commercial actors in West Africa, when a virtual ‘scramble for the Gold Coast’ took place aimed at challenging a declining Portuguese monopoly. The Dutch captured São Jorge da Mina in 1637 and ousted the Portuguese from the Gold Coast a few years later. European rivals from England, France, Sweden, Denmark-Norway and Brandenburg thwarted Dutch monopoly aspirations: trade lodges and strongholds of various European powers competed for gold, and for the favour of African rulers and traders. In the end the Dutch, the English, and the Danes obtained a permanent foothold. The gold brought them and their castles to the Gold Coast, and from the turn of the 17th century an ever-increasing slave trade kept them stationed there.

The slave trade became the economic basis of the Danish forts on the Gold Coast. Slave exports were channelled through Christiansborg castle at Accra (Osu), the Danish headquarters and, during the 18th century, the Danes expanded eastward. In 1736, Fredensborg fort was established at Ningo, and in

1 P.O. Hernæs, Slaves, Danes, and African Coast Society (Trondheim: Faculty of Arts, Norwegian University of Science and Technology 1995), pp. 226, 232.
the mid-1780s former trade lodges at Ada and Keta on the western and eastern side of the Volta River were transformed into the forts Kongensteen and Prindsensteen. A small fort, Augustaborg, was also built in Teshie, a town which today is part of Accra, although it was operative for only a few years. Thus, the Danes developed a relatively strong presence on the eastern part of the Gold Coast. Their power was very limited, however: they controlled the forts, not their African hosts. All the same, leading circles in Copenhagen talked of the Danish king’s ‘possessions’ in Africa, and of ‘Danish Guinea.’ In practice, the Danes had developed no more than a sphere of interest demarcated by a string of forts. This sphere later gave rise to certain territorial ambitions and served as a bridgehead for Danish colonising efforts on the eastern Gold Coast.

Even as trade flourished, however, the abolitionist movement gained strength during the last decades of the 18th century. Major abolitionist campaigns in Britain from 1787–1788 put pressure on the political establishment; Wilberforce submitted the first propositions to Parliament to abolish the abominable trade in 1789 and; he subsequently introduced a bill in 1791, which was rejected. After this rejection, Parliament was flooded by mass petitions. Public opinion in Britain was clearly against the trade; abolitionism had become a mass movement. Although the British Abolition Act did not get passed by Parliament until 1807, the intense debates around 1790 marked a turning point. From that year on the continuation of the British Atlantic slave trade was no longer self-evident.

The British abolitionist campaigns and debates had important repercussions in Denmark. The Danish finance minister, Count Ernst Schimmelmann, probably expecting an imminent ban on the British slave trade, supported efforts to find commercial alternatives to the slaving business and, in 1791, he orchestrated a commission of enquiry, the so-called Slave Trade Commission, the aim of which was to make recommendations concerning the future of the Danish slave trade. In fact, this Commission eventually endorsed abolition, which led to the famous Royal Edict of 1792, prohibiting subjects of the Danish king from participating in slave exports from Africa. The Edict was not to take effect until January 1803: planters in the Danish West Indies were given a grace period of ten years to secure a critical mass of slave labour that might replenish itself.² Ironically, this set off an increased wave of slaving activity by ships under the Danish flag, which opened up a shuttle-traffic between the Caribbean

² For a detailed analysis of the process which culminated in this Edict, see Erik Gøbel, Det danske slavehandelsforbud 1792 (Copenhagen: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2008), pp. 22–138.