

**Enslaved by the State:
Convict labour in Scandinavia, 1600-1850
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The term “slavery” is most often associated with the large transatlantic flows of bound labour, but early modern Scandinavians also used this term to identify another type of unfreedom: hard penal labour. All over both the Danish-Norwegian empire as well as its Swedish counterpart, convicts carried out sentences that were designed to render them productive to the state. Thus, in the centuries before the advent of the modern prison, labour was the primary mode of punishment in Scandinavia.

This paper connects a variety of these sites of penal labour in the two Scandinavian empires. It discusses the use of convicts in the colonies of the Danish West Indies, New Sweden, Greenland and the Finnmark, but also sites such as the Norwegian mountain works, public works punishment in stockhouses and military settings, labour in prison workhouses and hard labour for the navy in Copenhagen or Stockholm. Connecting these sites that have often been studied in isolation highlights the importance penal labour to the Scandinavian states. Thus, the two empires used convicts to many purposes, but two elements stand out: 1. Convicts were used to populate the states’ most distant parts when these failed to attract free migrants; 2. Convicts were used to provide inexpensive labour for the state’s core institutions – the army and the navy.

The paper then zooms in to explore one of these institutions: The prison Trunken at the naval dockyard Bremerholmen in Copenhagen (1620–1741). Male convicts from all over the Danish-Norwegian empire were sent there to labour on the docks or in the workshops producing naval stores. Through quantitative sources the inmate population is discussed, as are their experiences in penal bondage. Finally, the paper discusses the convicts’ responses to their enslavement by the state: their ever present attempts at escaping bondage. Thus, a common denominator for all the sites discussed is that the bonded themselves by a variety of means sought to escape their condition and the toil it brought. At Trunken almost 20% of the convicts ran away. Often such escapes hinged on preparation and collaboration.