CONTESTED HISTORIES

FREEDOM MONUMENT

Copenhagen, Denmark

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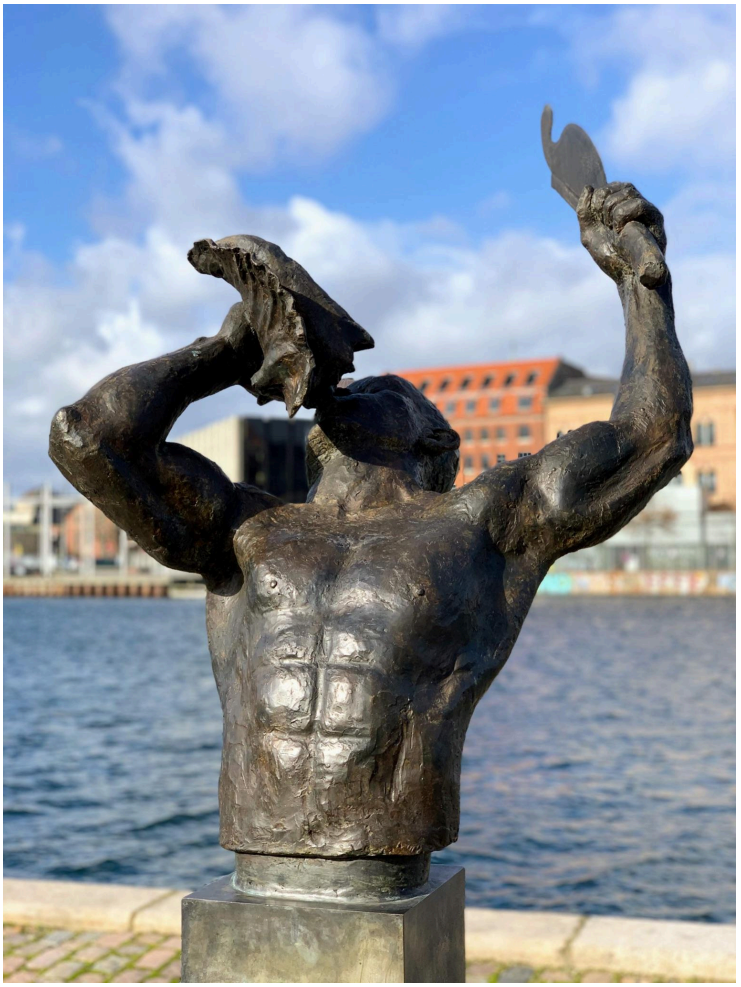

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Executive Summary

A copy of Bright Bimpong's Freedom statue was gifted to Denmark by individuals from the Virgin Islands in 2017, to mark the 100th anniversary of Denmark selling the islands to the United States. In 2019, the statue was finally placed in front of *Eigtveds Pakhus*, a colonial-era warehouse, which is now used by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The statue has reignited debates in Denmark over its colonial legacy, and, in particular, whether it ought to apologise to its former colonies.

Introduction

In 2016, to mark the upcoming 2017 centennial of the sale of the islands St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas to the United States, a group of USVI individuals and community organisations gifted Denmark three statues commemorating the shared history of Denmark and the Virgin Islands. One of these, The 'Freedom' statue, which depicts an enslaved Ghanaian blowing into a conch shell, was a replica of three statues placed on each USVI island in 1998, to commemorate the sesiquicentennial of the 1848 rebellion and the emancipation which followed. After exhibition at numerous museums in 2017 and 2018, on September 26, 2019, the 'Freedom' sculpture was unveiled in its permanent position, outside *Eigtveds Pakhus* - a colonial-era warehouse on Copenhagen's waterfront - becoming only the second permanent monument to address Denmark's colonial legacies in the Caribbean. Whilst the statue was broadly welcomed, it encouraged old debates, over whether Denamark should officially apologise for its involvement in the triangular slave trade and plantation slavery, to resurface. Whilst the Christiansfeld Moravian Brethren congregation issued an apology, and, at the centenary commemoration, the then Danish Prime Minister admitted that slavery was 'unforgiveable', an apology from either the state or the royal family is yet to be forthcoming.[1]

Background

Denmark and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Although often overshadowed by the colonial legacies of Britain and France, the Nordic countries, including the twin-kingdom of Denmark-Norway, were also involved in the development of the triangular slave trade in the seventeenth-century - the first Danish trading post, Fort Carolusborg, was established on the 'Gold Coast' (present-day Ghana) in 1658. By 1685, Fort Christiansborg had become the capital of the Danish Gold Coast, and by the early eighteenth-century the Danish position had been consolidated, and begun to expand eastwards along the coast.[2] Whilst trade in gold and ivory initially dominated, at the turn of the century focus shifted to the transatlantic slave trade.[3] The establishment of Danish colonies in the Caribbean functioned as the official 'rationale' for trafficking across the 'Middle Passage', as Denmark sought to profit from the growing plantation economy.[4] Between the start of Danish involvement in the slave trade in 1660 and the implementation of abolition in 1803, approximately 85,000 African people were enslaved and forcibly transported to the Caribbean 'under the Danish flag' - most of whom disembarked in the Danish West Indies.[5] Across the eighteenth century, the Danes accounted for approximately 5 per

[1] Don Buchanan, "Transfer Day: Danish Prime Minister Says Slavery Is Unforgivable", *St. Croix Source*, March 31, 2017.
[2] Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition, vol. 2, Studies in Global Slavery*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.
[3] 'The colonialism of Denmark-Norway and its legacies', *nordics.info*, n.d.
[4] Per Hernæs. "Slave Trade, Slave Plantations and Danish Colonialism," In *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade,* ed. Holger Weiss, Leiden: Brill, 2016.
[5] Ibid, p.102.

cent of the transatlantic slave trade, however, this rose to 'well over' 10 per cent in the early 1780s, when Denmark benefited from its neutrality in the American War of Independence.[6]

Although the supply of enslaved Africans for forced labour in the Danish West Indies was 'regarded as essential', the *Vestindisk-guineisk Kompagni* (Danish West India and Guinea Company) was a 'reluctant participant in the slave trade' because it was known to be unprofitable.[7] In 1754 the *Vestindisk-guineisk Kompagni* was dissolved, and subsequent companies granted royal charter, such as the *Guineisk Kompagni* (Guinea Company, 1766-76) and the *Østersøisk-guineisk Handelsselskab* (Baltic and Guinea Trading Company, 1781-87), also went bankrupt. On November 29, 1786, a government committee was appointed to 'investigate how the Africa trade "can tolerably be continued without economic loss"', which concluded that the Danish transatlantic slave trade would continue to lose money.[8] Thus, economic circumstances aligned with the growing abolition movement - which was inspired by, but more 'pragmatic' than, similar debates in Britain, France and America, for Danish reformers the central concern was the 'external slave trade', the importance of 'internal trade' within the Danish West Indies for the national economy was accepted - to prompt the Danish finance minister, Count Ernst Schimmelmann, to establish the 'Slave Trade Commission' in 1791.[9] On March 16, 1792, Christian VII accepted the Slave Trade Commission's recommendation and issued an edict to abolish the Danish transatlantic slave trade from 1803.

However, the intervening decade gave Danish planters a 'grace period… to secure a critical mass of slave labour that might replenish itself': trade to the Danish West Indies was opened to all Danes and foreigners, public loans were granted to purchase enslaved people, and licences for sugar exportation were offered.[10] The purchase of an adult male was supported with a loan of 225 rix-dollars West Indian currency, whilst that of a female 'in her most fertile years', by 250 rix-dollars, suggesting an attempt to increase the number of African women 'imported' to the Danish West Indies.[11] Overall, from 1792 to 1802, the rate of trade across the 'Middle Passage' was higher than ever before, approximately 125 Danish ships trafficked 25,000 Africans to a life of enslavement in the Danish West Indies.[12]

With the abolition of the slave trade, Danish settlers and merchants sought to transform their trading posts on Africa's 'Gold Coast' into plantation colonies.[13] There were both state-supported plantation efforts, as well as, 'attempts by private entrepreneurs to establish sizable plantations',

[6] Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition,* p.6.
[7] Ibid, p.13.
[8] Ibid, p.68.
[9] Ibid, p.72.
[10] Per Hernæs. "Slave Trade, Slave Plantations and Danish Colonialism", p.102.
[11] Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition,* p.159.
[12] Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition*.
[13] Per Hernæs. "Slave Trade, Slave Plantations and Danish Colonialism"..

but all ended in failure.[14] Eventually, Danish territories were deemed unprofitable, and were sold to the United Kingdom in 1850 for £10,000.[15]

The Danish West Indies

After earlier unsuccessful attempts to settle the island, in May 1672, the *Vestindisk-guineisk Kompagni* (Danish West India and Guinea Company) established a colony on *Sankt Thomas* (Saint Thomas), appointing Jørgen Iversen as Governor. Following an early experiment with indentured servants, a plantation system rapidly developed - by 1715, there were 160 plantations on the island, 32 operational sugar mills, and 3,000 enslaved persons.[16] In 1718, the Danes expanded their territory in the Antilles by occupying a smaller island, *Sankt Jan* (Saint John), four miles east of *Sankt Thomas*; and in June 1733, the *Vestindisk-guineisk Kompagni* bought *Sankt Croix* (Saint Croix), an island 40 miles south of *Sankt Thomas*, for 750,000 Livres from France. The three islands formed the Danish West Indies until 1917, when they were purchased by the United States for $25 million, today the US Virgin Islands are an unincorporated territory of the United States.

Extensively planted in the late seventeenth century, the soil of volcanic *Sankt Thomas* was soon exhausted by the cultivation of sugar, and, although *Sankt Jan* was planted with tobacco, cotton and sugar, it was too small to be economically significant. Thus, from the late 1740s, the majority of sugar production, by enslaved persons, in the Danish West Indies, occurred on the bigger and flatter *Sankt Croix*. By 1754, the number of enslaved people on *Sankt Croix* totalled 7,566, an increase of almost 400 per-cent from the 1,906 listed in 1742.[17] In 1755, the Danish Crown, under Frederick V, took control over the islands from the *Vestindisk-guiniesk Kompagni*, however, as a nineteenth-century observer documented, except for in 'the narrowly political sense' the Danish West Indies 'had never been Danish'.[18] For example, cultural and commercial hegemony on *Sankt Thomas* and *Sankt Jan* belonged to the Dutch: by 1688, they constituted 44.6 per cent of 'free adult males' on *Sankt Thomas*; and 'by 1721 of the 39 planters in St. John 25 were Dutchmen and only nine Danes'.[19] Additionally:

> English language and culture rapidly set their seal on St. Croix, paralleling Dutch cultural dominance in St. Thomas and St. John. By 1741 there were five times as many English in St. Croix as there were Danes, and it was the English more than any other national-cultural grouping that set St. Croix on its career as an important producer of sugar.[20]

[14] Ibid, p.108.
[15] Niels Brimnes, "Den danske koloni på Guldkysten 1659-1850," *danmarkshistorien.dk,* January 4, 2012.
[16] Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix,* Saint Andrew Parish: The University of the West Indies Press, 1994, p.7.
[17] Waldemar Westergaard,*The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule 1671-1754*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917, p.235.
[18] Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix,* p.19.
[19] Ibid, p.11.
[20] Ibid, p.13.

One consequence of weak Danish influence was, 'the token deployment of the nation's resources on colonial defence', for example, in 1733 the military presence on *Sankt Jan* consisted of 'six infantrymen, one corporal and a lieutenant'.[21] This became a contributing factor to the 1733 Slave Insurrection on *Sankt Jan* - the first example of enslaved people taking control of a colony. A series of natural disasters had prevented the enslaved inhabitants of *Sankt Jan* from being able to provide food for themselves, leading many to abandon the plantations - an outlawed practice known as 'marronage'. In response to the rise in 'marronage', Governor General Philip Gardelin introduced the 1733 Slave Code, which codified:

> the death penalty for the ringleaders [of marronage], after torture with red-hot pincers at three separate public locations. Those convicted of or caught in conspiracies to run away would have a leg removed in the event that their masters would not pardon them. In such circumstances, 150 strokes and the loss of an ear in the presence of a justice of the peace was the prescribed penalty.[22]

The Slave Code further intensified the growing resistance to bondage, and in November 1733, a group of the Akamu people - a 'proud people' who had, until 1730, dominated the inland trade routes of Africa's Guinea Coast - rose up in an insurrection.[23] Due to the 'absurd inadequacy' of the Danish military presence, the rising continued until June 1734, and it was only eventually put down with the assistance of a company of free African Caribbeans, British troops from Tortola, and 400 French soldiers from Martinique.[24] Plans for a rebellion were also discovered in *Sant Croix* in 1759, however due to the early discovery, it was prevented before it had begun.[25]

1848 and 1878: Emancipation and Fireburn

Throughout the early years of the nineteenth century, Denmark's authority as an imperial power continued to weaken: the Danish state declared bankruptcy on January 5, 1813, and in May 1814 Norway was granted an independent constitution. In the Caribbean, the British occupied the Danish territories between March 1801 and February 1802, and then again between December 1807 and April 1815. Thus, after 1815, Denmark was 'clearly in reduced circumstances'; by the end of the 1820s, 'proposals were being discussed for economies in colonial expenditure'; and, by 1842, Denmark had given up on 'being a colonial power', selling 'its East India possessions to Britain in 1845'.[26] Further, the British 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act, which resulted in full emancipation in 1838, placed additional pressure on the Danish position, as:

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[21] Ibid, p.11.
[22] Neville Hall, "Slave Laws of the Danish Virgin Islands in the Later Eighteenth Century", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292 (1), 1977, p.174.
[23] "The 1733 Akwamu Insurrection", *National Park Service*, June 15, 2023.
[24] Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, p.11; "The 1733 Akwamu Insurrection"; Louise Sebro, "Freedom, Autonomy, and Independence: Exceptional African Caribbean Life Experiences in St. Thomas, the Danish West Indies, in the Middle of the 18th Century," In *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p.222-223.
[25] Niels Brimnes, "De vestindiske Øer, 1672-1917".
[26] Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, pp.30-31.

> British Tortola was practically within cannon shot of a poorly policed St. John and the narrows between could be swum by the intrepid, or negotiated by fishing boat and improvised raft. The British island held magnetic attractions for the slaves of St. John, particularly after 1840... By 1845, there were instances of slaves escaping from the more distant St. Croix to Tortola. In the same year the futility of attempts at prevention was demonstrated by the simultaneous escape of 37 slaves from St. John.[27]

Finally, the possibility of another British annexation, which, the Danish feared, would lead immediately to emancipation without compensation, the French movement towards re-abolition, and growing public antipathy towards slavery in Denmark, culminated in Christian VIII issuing a royal edict in 1847 that slavery would be abolished after a grace period of twelve years, and that, as of July 28, 1847, all children would be born free.

However, the concession of freedom in principle but not practice, and the situation of enslaved parents but 'free' children, caused significant discontent; in July 1848 a revolt broke out on *Sankt Croix*, with enslaved labourers gaining complete control over the town of Frederiksted. Fearing the consequences of a significant rebellion, on July 3, Governor General Peter von Scholten abolished slavery with immediate effect. The role of von Scholten's mistress, Anna Heegaard, a free person of colour, in encouraging the Governor General in his reforms of the 1830s and the emancipation of 1848, is now widely recognised by scholars.[28] However, Von Scholten had acted outside the remit of his authority, he came under severe attack from the plantocracy, suffered a mental breakdown, and was replaced by Peder Hansen. The new freedmen and freedwomen only enjoyed their, somewhat, improved conditions for a short time. Plantation owners feared that a reluctance to work and having to pay wages would decrease their profits. These concerns led Hansen to propose a Labour Act that would effectively return the labour conditions of the newly emancipated population to their rights and conditions as enslaved people: contracts tied workers to their employers for at least one year at a time, most people of African descent received a wage of 5 cents a day which was subject to daily deduction of 5 cents for food and medical care, and physical punishment was still enacted on those who refused to work. The Labour Act came into effect in January 1849, just six months after abolition, and was 'another form of slavery'.[29]

The relationship between labourers and the governing elite remained antagonistic in the following decades, with strikes, work stoppages and small insurrections. However, the situation erupted once more on *Sankt Croix* on October 1, 1878 - 'Contract Day', a public holiday and the only day in a year where workers were permitted to change contracts. A riot broke out, following news that a farm labourer - Henry Trotman - had died from police brutality; most of Frederiksted and 50 plantations burned to the ground, around 100 people were killed, and the Governor-General placed the island under a state of siege until October 31. The extent to which this violence was an orchestrated rebellion is debated among

[27] Ibid. p.31.
[28] Neville Hall, "Anna Heegaard-Enigma", *Caribbea*
[29] Clifton Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the

academics: the workers used battlefield tactics to attack the plantations, and 'communicated with each other by blowing into conch shells, ringing bells or beating drums'.[30] Among the leaders to emerge during Fireburn were the 'three queens': Queen Mary (Mary Thomas), Queen Agnes (Axeline Salomon), and Queen Matilda (Matilda Macbean); who have since obtained semi-mythical status. In the aftermath of the uprising, 12 men received the death penalty and were shot, and 40 people - including the 'three queens' - were convicted of participating in the uprising and imprisoned. However, three significant reforms were introduced in the aftermath: contracts were no longer solely annual, labour unions were formed, and plantations were subdivided into farms, with labourers permitted to buy up to 28 acres of land. Nonetheless, in spite of these reforms and further programmes by the Danish government to improve living standards, the Danish West Indies continued to experience a decline in both agriculture and trade conditions until the outbreak of the First World War.

'Freedom'/'The Conch Shell Blower'

'Freedom', known within the US Virgin Islands as 'The Conch Shell Blower', was created by the Ghanaian artist Bright Bimpong in 1998 to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the emancipation of the enslaved peoples of the former Danish West Indies. The statue stands two metres high, and consists of a marble plinth with a bronze plaque that reads 'FREEDOM', and a bronze figure. The figure depicts an enslaved man from the waist up, blowing through a conch shell whilst brandishing a cane knife with his left hand. The conch-blowing imagery is significant; slave drivers, also known as bombas, would summon enslaved people by blowing in *tuttues* (conch shells), and they were also used 'as an emergency signal in the event of a fire or an uprising'.[31] However, workers also 'often communicated with each other by blowing into conch shells', including in the rebellions of 1733, 1848, and 1878.[32] The sculpture also bears a tribal mark that can be traced to Tumu, in Ghana, to indicate that the individual depicted is African born and has an affiliation and identity of his own. The statues were commissioned by Walter G. Brunner, a political campaign manager and art collector based in St. Croix, and placed on all three islands in 1998. The 'Conch Shell Blower' stands outside the customs house in Frederiksted, St. Croix; in Franklin Powell Park, Cruz Bay in St. John; and in Emancipation Garden on St. Thomas. On March 30 2021, the 'Conch Shell Blower' on St Thomas was removed from its peripheral place in the park and placed in the centre, replacing a bust of Christian IX - initially erected in 1909, to commemorate the King who reigned from 1863 to 1906. Commenting on the replacement, former Senator Myron Jackson, who championed the initiative in the Legislature, argued:

> There are two sides to this conversation, about taking him down and taking down the history, but today's generation is saying the contradictions are too harsh, and when they come here for

[30] Ibid, p.344-345.
[31] Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, p.73.
[32] Clifton Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies", p.344.

Emancipation Day, that the king overshadows the whole concept. Then on the periphery is the Conch

Figure 2: "Freedom" Images by readerwalker and Gruepig

Shell Blower for freedom. Emancipation should be the focal point, not the king's reign.[33]

Decision-Making Processes

Upon Brunner's death in 2011, his personal copies of the 'Freedom' statues - which also include the busts of two historical figures, labour rights activist D. Hamilton Jackson, and Moses 'General Buddhoe' Gottlieb', a leading figure in the 1848 rebellion - were passed to his sister, Carol Whittier, and her husband, Ted. With the help of Jeffery Nichols in Maine, who had the busts of Jackson and Buddhoe in his personal collection, and Matt Eckstein and David W. Knight Sr. of the Virgin Islands Historical Preservation Commission, the Whittier's donated the statues to the St. John Historical Society (SJHS), with the aim of gifting them to Denmark, to mark the Transfer Day centennial, on March 31 2017. From the Danish end, the so-called 'Freedom Project' was facilitated by Karen Sivebæk Munk, curator at the *Holbæk Museum*. Having raised $5,000 through fundraising and small donations to cover shipping costs, the SJHS shipped the three statues to Denmark in September 2016, where they were taken into the possession of the *Museum Vestsjælland*, a fusion of five Danish museums.[34] Importantly, these statues represented 'the first time in history that monuments depicting Danish subjects of African descent [were…] placed on permanent public display in the nation of Denmark'.[35]

[33] Sian Cobb, "Danish King's Bust Removed to Make Way for Emancipation History", *St. Thomas Source*, March 29, 2021.
[34] "As Centennial Approaches, a Gift From the Virgin Islands to Denmark," *St. John Tradewinds*, October 21, 2016; Amy Roberts, "'Freedom Statues' From V.I. Make History in Denmark," *St. Thomas Source*, November 14, 2016.
[35] Lonnie Willis, "Freedom Project in Denmark Will Receive V.I. Statues," *St. Thomas Source*, July 29, 2016.

The hope of the Freedom Project was that the statues would 'tour various museums and educational institutions throughout the country during the Centennial year', and that, 'After 2017, the statues [would…] be placed on permanent public display at locations within Denmark'.[36] Before arrival, it was agreed that the bust of Buddhoe would stay with the Museum Vestsjælland, as part of a permanent exhibition on plantation slavery in the Danish West Indies at its Holbæk Museum, and that *Arbejdermuseet* (the Workers' Museum) in Copenhagen would make the bust of Jackson 'a centrepiece of their collection'.[37] However, the final destination of the 'Freedom' statue remained unclear - in November 2016 Sivebæk Munk stated that she would like to see the statue permanently installed outside the *Vestindisk Pakhus* -the king's warehouse - in Copenhagen:

> Four out of five pounds of sugar imported from the Danish West Indies came through these doors… Sugar brought great wealth to the nation… We really need a monument that reminds us as a country of our colonial engagement.[38]

The then Deputy Mayor of Culture in Copenhagen, Christian Ebbesen, supported the idea of placing the statue in a public location, as did Bertel Haarder, the then Minister of Culture, who stated that 'It's a really good idea to erect such a monument that reminds us of our colonial past, including our past as a slave nation'.[39]

The centennial resulted in almost 30 temporary exhibitions on various aspects of Denmark's colonial legacy, and the 'Freedom' sculpture was displayed at a number of them, including 'Behind Colonial Mirrors', an exhibition at the Christiansborg Palace which ran from September 16 to December 17, 2017; and 'Stop Slavery', which ran until April 2, 2018, at *Arbejdermuseet*.[40] 'Freedom' was also exhibited at the Holbæk Museum, the National Museum, and Copenhagen City Hall. In March 2018, it was announced that 'Freedom' would be permanently located outside *Eigtveds Pakhus*, an eighteenth-century warehouse now used as a conference venue for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his announcement, then Minister for Culture, Mette Bock, stated:

> Eigtveds Pakhus is a beautiful and classic warehouse from 1750 at the waterfront of Copenhagen, but also the remains of a time when many had to pay a high price for the riches that were created. This is a good location for Freedom as a reminder that people need to be free, and that we need to be on the right side in that struggle.[41]

Whilst this, albeit sparsely visited, location does have links to Denmark's colonial past, the warehouse was used to store goods acquired by the *Asiatisk Kompagni* (Asian Company), and not sugar from the Danish West Indies, as *Vestindisk Pakhus* - Sivebæk Munk's preferred location - had done. Instead, on March 31, 2018, 'I AM QUEEN MARY', a monumental public sculpture by Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers and Virgin Islands artist La Vaughn Belle, commemorating Queen Mary, was

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Amy Roberts, "'Freedom Statues' From V.I. Make History in Denmark".
[39] Christian Wenande, "Sculptures to Remind Denmark of Colonial Past," *CPH Post Online*, November 3, 2016.
[40] "Sculpture of 'Freedom' in V.I. to Receive Prominent Location in Copenhagen", *St. Thomas Source*, March 26, 2018.
[41] Ibid.

unveiled outside *Vestindisk Pakhus*.[42] On September 26, 2019, after undergoing a restoration process to equip the statue to 'withstand the Danish climate conditions', 'Freedom' was finally unveiled in its permanent position outside *Eigtveds Pakhus*, becoming Denmark's second public memorial to slavery in the Danish West Indies. Unlike the three sculptures in the Virgin Islands which face the water, 'Freedom' in Copenhagen has its back to the water. A bronze plaque on the statue reads, in Danish and English:

> In memory of the struggle against slavery in the Danish West Indies. Gifted to Denmark in 2017 after a fundraiser on the occasion of the centennial of the Transfer of the Islands to the US. Copies of the sculpture can be found on each of the three islands.[43]

At the statue's inauguration, then Minister of Culture, Joy Mogensen stated:

> Our Danish history contains both bright and dark chapters. We must not hide from our own history, not even the most shameful chapters. The 'Freedom' sculpture helps to remind us of a time when Denmark was a colonial power. The sculpture is a reminder of man's never-ending struggle for freedom. And because we have not always been on the right side of that question, we are forced, among other things with this work, to constantly ask ourselves whether we are still sufficiently committed to people's freedom and self-determination in the world.[44]

As of July 2020, 'The Freedom Project', is working in partnership with the Ghanian National Museum, the SJHS, grassroots movements CHANT and ST.JanCo, and a Board of Patrons that includes several former Danish foreign ministers, to place a fifth copy of the Freedom statue in Accra, Ghana. In this way:

> *Freedom* will stand on three continents as an international place of remembrance and a memory that symbolically ends the triangle between the former slave nation Denmark and the former colonies in the West Indies, to which slave traders shipped enslaved people from the Danish Fort Christiansborg in present-day Ghana.[45]

History of the contestation

The erection of the 'Freedom' statue in Copenhagen in September 2019, pushes against what was, until not long ago, the prevalent view in Denmark that Peter von Scholten was a benevolent emancipator - the tagline for a 1987 film on von Scholten reads 'He freed the slaves in 1848. He spoke against the king and the government. He was Denmark's last governor-general of the West Indies'.[46] Instead, the statue places the enslaved rebelling to the fore in the story of emancipation, questioning Danish innocence and collective memory. Thus, the monument's very existence, the history it speaks to and how that history is remembered, and, in particular, whether Denmark

[42] La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, "I AM QUEEN MARY", March, 2018.
[43] "Denmark is hesitating to officially apologize to the U.S. Virgin Islands for the transatlantic slave-trade", *US Virgin Islands, How the Past Affects the Present*, June 7, 2020.
[44] Ministry of Culture, "Statue of Liberty ready for inauguration", September, 2019.
[45] Karen Sivebæk Munk-Nielsen et al., "Freedom – Initiativgruppe Støtter Opstilling af Monument for Dansk Slavehandel i Ghana," *Pov. International*, July 24, 2020.
[46] "Peter von Scholten", *IMDb*, n.d.

should apologise to its former colonies, are all factors that were contested as Denmark recognised the Transfer Day centennial.

On November 11 2016, shortly after Denmark first received the three statues from the Virgin Islands, sociologist Ulla Holm wrote an opinion piece in which she argued that the response of 'unreserved joy' to the 'Freedom' sculpture and the effort put into 'finding [it] the most prominent location', fell into a trend of retelling history in a manner where 'the history is squeezed into a post-colonial narrative template with whites in the villain role and Africa as the raped continent'.[47] Holm went on to criticise the lack of recognition of the role of African Kings in the slave trade and how Africans also 'plundered and burned [Danish] forts and plantations' as acts of revenge when Denmark abolished its transatlantic slave trade.[48] She concluded the article by asking, 'Who wouldn't want to have been a colonial power?'[49]

On the other side of the debate, social rights activist, Nicole Frederiksen, argued in an article dated October 30, 2016, that the 'history of Denmark as a colonial power must emerge' and be 'Retained as a repentant part of national history', in order to 'get rid of *hyggeracisme*' - the act of 'using racist words and expressing prejudices about people of other ethnic origins in a way that one thinks is funny and unproblematic, but which is hurtful and offensive to those one talks about or with'.[50] In contradiction to Holm, Frederiksen claimed that Danes are too ignorant of the role Denmark played in the transatlantic slave trade, and that this ignorance allows for racism to continue today. She provides the usage of the word 'neger' - which could be translated as the N-word - in Denmark as an example of this. For example, on October 22 the word had been used in the description of a wanted perpetrator by the North Jutland Police.[51] In response to Frederiksen, on November 3, former Danish ambassador, Niels Erik Andersen, wrote an opinion piece in which he argued that a person who had gone through the Danish education system or who followed Danish news cannot realistically be ignorant of Danish colonial history.[52] While he agreed that, 'it is good and well that we Danes, again and again, remind ourselves, each other, and the wider world of our past as a colonial power', he also stated that he could not 'see the utility of the further collective self-torment that Nicole Frederiksen is setting up'.'[53]

As the Centennial approached, debate around whether the state or the queen should apologise for Denmark's role in the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery intensified. On March 27, 2017, in the absence of an official apology and because 'someone has to do it', the Christiansfeld

[47] Translation by author, Ulla Holm, "Den Hvide Mand Vil Være Skyldig", *Information*, November 11, 2016.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Nicole Jacqueline Obovo Valentin Emore Frederiksen, "Danmarks mørke fortid skal frem i lyset", October 30, 2016.; Den Danske Ordborg, "Hyggeracisme," Den Danske Ordbog, n.d.
[51] Ditte O. Lynge and Benjamin Krogh, "Politiet Efterlyser 'Neger' for Overfald: Nu Undskylder De," *Ekstra Bladet*, October 22, 2016.
[52] Niels Erik Andersen, "Kommentar: Historieløshed om Dansk Slavehandel," *Berlingske*, November 3, 2016.
[53] Ibid.

Moravian Brethren congregation called for Danes to sign their declaration on www.wechange.dk, which stated:

> The time has come for reconciliation in heart and mind. As citizens of Denmark, we hereby declare: That we view the regrettable past, where ancestors of the population of the US Virgin Islands were held in slavery and forced against their will to work for slave owners, many of whom came from Denmark, with sadness. For this, we apologise, albeit belatedly, in the spirit of respect and love.[54]

The Moravian Brethren missioned among the enslaved population of the Danish West Indies from 1732, baptising thousands of converts, but they also owned enslaved people themselves. News of the actions of the church reached the Virgin Islands, with *St. Thomas Source*, commenting:

> The church's actions stand in contrast to the official position of the Danish government. The nation is quick to acknowledge slavery was bad, but balks at going from that step to then taking responsibility for the wealth its monarchy derived from the slave trade or the troubles within the islands it populated with men and women violently taken from their homes and forced into chattel bondage.[55]

The question of apology also somewhat overshadowed the official ceremony marking the Centennial in the Virgin Islands, which leading politicians, including then Prime Minister Lars Lœkke Rasmussen, and then foreign policy spokesperson for *Enhedslisten* (The Red-Green Alliance), Nikolaj Villumsen, attended. Villumsen, who has long campaigned for a direct apology, stated in the run-up to the ceremony 'I think it is absolutely crucial that the Danish state assumes responsibility, and I believe that you should follow up with concrete initiatives'. However, whilst Rasmussen did not apologise in his speech at the Transfer Centennial Ceremony on St. Croix, he did state that slavery was 'unforgivable', and called the 'men and women of the Virgin Islands who defied suppression' the 'true heroes', who 'were not given their freedom; [but…] took it'. Rasmussen's 'brutal honesty' was 'warmly received', by then Governor of the USVI, Kenneth Mapp, who spoke after the prime minister.

Despite the high profile of the Centennial commemoration, and the arrival of the 'Freedom' statues, it appears that, in 2017, the majority of politicians and civil society still held the belief that Denmark should not apologise for its role in the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery. Partly this appears rooted in fears that an apology will pave the way for demands for reparations, but also, as academic Astrid Nonbo Andersen, has argued, it speaks to a fear of confronting Denmark's self-perception as a nation:

> The whole notion of being a peaceful nation on the edge of Europe will be shaken. At the same time, it can be argued that it would also trigger a moral demand that we should have done something about our conflict with Greenland, which is still in an unresolved state in relation to Denmark. There is still an idea that everything we have done for Greenland has been done with the

[54] Translation by author, Jens Rebensdorff, "Nu Kan Du Selv Sige Undskyld for Slaveriet," *Berlingske*, March 25, 2017.
[55] "Danish Moravians Apologize for Slavery", *St. Thomas Source*, March 27, 2017.

> best intentions. And it therefore becomes very sensitive, if we are suddenly asked to take responsibility...[56]

Summary & Conclusion

The original Freedom statue was created in 1998 to commemorate how the enslaved people of the former Danish West Indies had won their freedom. The gift of a replica sculpture from the people of the Virgin Islands to Denmark in 2017 symbolically reflected the shared history and enduring legacies 'between the former slave nation Denmark and the former colonies in the West Indies'.[57] The sculpture was well received and has a permanent place on the Copenhagen waterfront. Yet, the statue also reignited the decade-old debate over whether Denmark should officially apologise for its role as a former colonising nation. While no official apology has been offered, the debate has continued, and the statue has provided a new space for conversation and remembrance in Denmark.

Research contributed by Helja Asadi-Gholami and Alice Reffin

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[56] Sarah Iben Almbjerg, "Hvis Danmark Undskylder for Slaveriet, kan det Ødelægge Vores Selvbillede," *Berlingske*, March 25, 2017.
[57] Karen Sivebæk Munk-Nielsen et al., "Freedom – Initiativgruppe Støtter Opstilling af Monument for Dansk Slavehandel i Ghana".

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen
Program Director
+33 66828327
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat
Riouwstraat 139
2585HP The Hague The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

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