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## History

# Why is Greenland a part of the Danish kingdom?

Ever wonder how a tiny northern European country came to control a huge Arctic island? The answer, like the relationship itself, is a complicated one



**CULTURE** A good part of the reason is the guy on the left (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

**June 9, 2016 - 4:53am - By Iben Bjørnsson**

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Most Danes don't know why Denmark and Greenland are connected, even though many of us have some sort of relation to Greenland: family or friends, knowing some of the many Danes that have lived and worked there for longer or shorter periods of time or even having lived there ourselves. Still others only hear about Greenland when the queen mentions it in her New Year's address. The subject is mysteriously, and remarkably, absent from the school curriculum.

Those who know and love Greenland often speak of the community, common destiny and shared history between the two countries. But what is this history, and why does little Denmark speak of a common destiny with a large Arctic territory thousands of miles away?

### The beginning

Usually, the start of the Danish-Greenlandic relation is dated to 1721, the year in which Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede (pictured above) arrived in Greenland and started colonising it. But according to Ole Marquardt, associate professor emeritus in history at Ilisimatusarfik/the University of Greenland, we have to go further back to

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understand why Denmark started taking an interest in Greenland. We need to go all the way back to 1380, when Denmark and Norway became a united kingdom.

With the union, Denmark gained access to the Norwegian tax territories, Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands. At this time, Greenland was inhabited in part by Norse settlers (more popularly known as the Vikings), who arrived at the end of the 10th century. They lived there for some 500 years before disappearing in the 15th century.



*Postcard showing Greenland's coloniser, Hans Egede, and his wife, Gertrud Rask. Made for the Greenland Exhibition in 1921 celebrating 200 years of Danish presence in Greenland (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

The Norsemen set the scene for Egede's quest in 1721. His official mission was to find their descendants and reform them. They had been Catholics, and after the Reformation in Europe (and Denmark) he thought they should reform as well. But while the Norsemen thus provided Egede with an official mission, Inge Høst Seiding, a PhD in Arctic society and culture at Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu/the Greenland National Museum & Archives, reckons he might have had another agenda as well: missionary work amongst heathens who worshipped neither the Catholic nor the reformed version of the Christian God.

"At this time, Danish missionary work had already begun in other colonies, for example Tranquebar (now Tharangambadi) in India. We know that Hans Egede was very interested in the missionary work carried out there," she says. "So the thought of missionary work among heathens was definitely not foreign to him when he left for Greenland."

#### **Establishing the relationship**

Egede didn't find any Norsemen. Instead he was met by the Inuit. They were no strangers to Europeans arriving in ships: both the British and the Dutch had whalers sailing the shores of Greenland in the 1600s, going ashore to trade with the Inuit. But whereas the English and Dutch went away again, Egede and his people stayed and started a mission.

Egede's mission was backed financially by the Bergen Company, an association of traders, but it failed to turn a profit, and the company closed in 1726. King Christian VI took it over, but when the colony continued to operate at a loss he decided to close the whole thing down in 1731. Egede pleaded to keep it going though: a number of people had already been baptised and the mission, he argued, was going well. He was allowed to stay, and, just two years later, the king had a change of heart. Why?

Mr Marquardt explains: "Both then and now, one does not willingly give up territory. Colonisation had already begun and there was also the notion that Greenland was an old crown territory."

And then there was the mission. That was not something to be taken lightly.

"No doubt, Hans Egede thought he, as a Christian, had a responsibility for the people he had met," Ms Seiding says. "It shows in the reports he sent back to Denmark. He saw the

mission as an obligation, and that it was actually an integrated part of the pietistic Christianity that the king also professed to. So he might not have been very difficult to talk back into it.”



*Royal Greenlandic Trade Place in Copenhagen in 1818. The company's offices, warehouses and docks were located there (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

The funding of the colony's operations was taken over by Danish landowner and tradesman Jacob Severin in 1734, and a number of stations and colonies were established along the western coast. In the years leading up to the Napoleonic Wars, Greenland was colonised in earnest.

Having the Christian mission come before the trading stations is a bit unusual in colonial history. But that was soon corrected, so to speak. Ms Seiding explains: "While missionary work was the focal point in the first years, it quickly became secondary to trade."

### Wheeling and dealing

Denmark was drawn into the Napoleonic Wars by way of British attacks in 1801 and 1807 and it was a weakened Denmark that sat down at the negotiating table with Sweden and Great Britain in 1814. When Sweden, supported by the British, demanded Norway from Denmark, Denmark could not do much but concur.

But even if Norway had given Denmark its claim to the North Atlantic colonies, Sweden didn't get them in the deal. There is some disagreement amongst historians as to why. There are those who claim that neither Britain nor Sweden was interested, that Denmark kept the colonies out of weakness, because it had no other choice. Then, there are those who claim that Britain didn't want Sweden to grow too strong and saw to it that the colonies remained Danish. However, the most common and established explanation is that the Danish negotiator tricked the others by claiming that the colonies had always been Danish. This version was confirmed by the Swedish negotiator.

This wheeling and dealing with overseas territories might sound strange, even absurd, today. But such was the nature of colonialism. Most colonial powers thought that they were doing the people living in those territories a favour, or even acting out of some sacred duty, like Egede and his Christian responsibility. In their own eyes, they were civilising and developing. As the most physically brutal aspect of colonialism, slavery, had been banned by most European nations by the mid 19th century, no-one doubted the morality of colonialism's "civilising mission". And of course, as Mr Marquardt explains, having colonies didn't exactly hurt a European nation either; it contributed to its power and reputation.

We might not like the way this sounds, but it is essential to understanding why the world looks like it does today. And it also explains how and why nations traded territories.

And trading territories was exactly what Denmark did in 1917, when it sold three West

Indian islands, St Thomas, St John and St Croix, known today as the US Virgin Islands, to the US for the price of \$25 million. The colonies hadn't made money for Denmark since the abolition of slavery there in 1849, and Denmark no longer wanted the cost or the hassle of owning them.

### The difference

What is puzzling is that by this time Greenland was also costing Denmark money, after a prosperous period in the 1800s when train oil had been used to light up most of Europe. But instead of getting rid of Greenland, like it did with its West Indies possessions, Denmark used the sale to have its sovereignty over Greenland internationally acknowledged. So by the beginning of the 20th century, Denmark had two colonies running at a deficit. One was sold, but the other it tightened its grip on. Why? What was the difference?

Mr Marquardt explains: "There are several reasons for this. Firstly, as mentioned, Denmark had looked at Greenland as a crown colony since the Middle Ages, whereas the Danish West Indies didn't become Danish until the mid-1600s. Secondly, there is a great deal of international power and security policy involved: the only possible buyer after the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, when Washington declared the Western Hemisphere as its sphere of interest, was the US. The Americans would not have accepted a large European power right at its doorstep in Greenland, where they could possibly build naval, military and air bases.

"On the other hand, selling Greenland to the US, having the strategic position it has, would have upset a number of European nations. Thirdly, and finally, it is true that Greenland wasn't financially lucrative at this time, but for a long time – and even today – Denmark hoped to find riches in Greenland, especially minerals. As opposed to the small islands of the West Indies, Greenland is a huge territory known to be full of minerals. The only question was whether they could be dug out at a profit. There was always a hope of wealth there."

Ms Seiding agrees: "It is a recurring theme through the Danish presence in Greenland, the idea that something can come of this. Even if it hasn't materialised yet."



*The seal of the Royal Greenlandic Trading Company. Created in 1774, the company held the trade monopoly in Greenland from 1776 to 1950. Until 1912, it also had administrative authority (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

This is related to another factor in the Danish insistence on keeping Greenland, even if this must also be viewed as a reason in itself: the fascination with technology, science and discovery that also marked the decades around the turn of the century. Here, Greenland was the Danish ticket to play in the big leagues.

Ms Seiding explains: "The Commission for Scientific Research in Greenland was founded in 1878 and the scientific interest in Greenland was huge – the big expeditions and the attention and culture surrounding them. Greenland was Denmark's place to do this, and that meant something for a nation. In this period, it probably meant as much as a surplus on the lard trade."



To stress this point, Ms Seiding cites geographer and textbook author Sophie Petersen. She wrote in 1928: “The Danish colonisation and exploration of Greenland is unmatched in the colonial history of nations. It has caused admiration and done our reputation in the cultural world tremendously good.”

And Denmark hung on: when Norway claimed parts of eastern Greenland in 1931, the issue went all the way to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which confirmed that Greenland was indeed a Danish territory. In 1953 it was reinforced in a new Danish constitution, which made Greenland an official part of the Kingdom of Denmark, giving it representation in the Danish parliament. With that, the UN acknowledged, Greenland was no longer a colony. Officially this was the case, but whether the arrangement led to actual equality between the parts of the kingdom is at best doubtful. But that is another story for another day.

### Sentimentality

Finally, in the question of “why did Denmark hold on to Greenland?”, Mr Marquardt has one last, but equally important, point to make: “We should also remember that many Danes really like Greenland, both the island and its population. It’s sentimental, emotional, if you will. Quite a large number of Danes have some sort of connection to Greenland.”

And the bonds aren’t just about economics, religion or politics; blood and family are involved. “There has always been significant intermarriage,” Ms Seiding says. “Almost all those employed as tradesmen, especially in the lower ranks, married Greenlandic women. That obviously creates a very close relationship, which means that Danes were very present, even if the number of Europeans in Greenland was relatively small, they very quickly became family. Thus, this distant Arctic country became very close to Denmark.”

She makes another point about the sentimental bonds: top officials and political advisers in the Danish political administration of Greenland, located in Copenhagen, were often people who had lived and worked there for many years. So the people formulating the Danish Greenlandic policy had a sentimental connection to Greenland.

And speaking of emotions and sentimentality, with the emergence of romantic nationalism in the 19th century, emotions and emotionality became political currency. Ms Seiding says: “The play on emotions becomes valuable. Danish nationalism takes this part of identity to heart, equal to the way people speak sentimentally about their native regions. Greenland becomes a part of this phenomenon as well. The blows suffered by Danish pride in the wars of the 19th century were partially remedied by the pride that was mobilised as a colonial power in Greenland.”

And sentimental bonds only get stronger with time; the longer the relationship, the more connections, exchanges, mixed families. Initial footsteps in the snow, if you excuse the analogy, have been trampled into an ever deeper and wider track.

So there you have them, the reasons why Greenland is a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. It’s not simple. It never is. Rather, it is a mix of economic interests, colonial logic, sentimentality and power politics. But the relation has never been, and nor is it now, at a standstill. The latest major development was the transition to Self-Rule in 2009 a feature of which is Greenland’s right to leave the kingdom if it wishes. What the future holds for the Danish realm is up to its individual parts.

*The article above is the first in a series published in collaboration with **Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute**, which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.*

*The articles are based on the institute’s **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

*The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series are available for download from most podcast platforms, including **iTunes** and **Soundcloud**.*

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### Gudbrandur Jónsson

Now, Icelanders can start reclaiming there colony from Denmark. Danish Greenland is Herjólfssnes of the Eastern settlement, belonging to Herjólfur Bárðarson in the year 985 and together with Eiriksey, belonging to Eirik the red, is the Eastern settlement, also in the year 985. Eiriskey and Herjólfssnes is the Eastern Settlement if you read the litterature; Grönlands Historiske Mindesmærker. Then Baffin Island is Eiriksey in the middel of Eiriksforden with Snow mountain, " Snæfell", in the bottom of the fjord, today's Devon Island at the place called Nordurseta, in the litterature. Denmark never found the old Icelandic settlement, Old Greenland. Only the eastern part of it.

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