

RUNAWAY HEURISTICS: A MICRO-SPATIAL STUDY
OF IMMOBILIZING CHAINS C. 1790

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a micro-spatial study of the trajectories of two prison breakers in 18th-century Denmark-Norway reconstructed from court documents and interrogations. Both men escaped multiple times from institutions known as *slaveries* ('slaverier') – convict labour institutions run by the army. Their repeated flights tie their stories to multiple circuits of labour and the practices of immobilization and coercion on which they rested. Thus, the article argues that the runaway can serve a contextualizing social history of coercion as a heuristic tool because the runaway moves both within, against and between regimes of immobilization, and in doing so shows us workable (and sometimes unworkable) pathways at specific historical junctures. The article proposes the concept of *runaway heuristics* to capture how following the itineraries of runaways can help us trace entangled processes of labour coercion, but can also serve in a less systematic, but no less useful, way to reveal highly situated dynamics, sometimes singular and often unexpectedly contradictory. The latter dimension highlights the need to think through a variety of disparate elements that shaped the individual trajectory, including the physical surroundings through which escapees moved, and their accumulated knowledge of those surroundings.

Keywords: Convicts, Prison, Desertion, Runaways, Denmark-Norway.

Recently, the history of labour coercion has been conceptualized as the study of assemblages of practices in which multiple processes are entangled at specific junctures in time and space. In turn, this calls for a need for empirical studies of the unstable and intricately historical character of social relations and how their asymmetries were made and re-made.¹ This

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¹ This line of enquiry owes heavily to what is known as 'global labour history' – a field of research that greatly expanded the scope of labour history beyond the traditional subjects

article is an attempt to disentangle one such historical jumble of connections by following two men whose trajectories reveal myriad social practices working in the construction of several interlocked fields of coercion. It is a history of their wandering. It draws on the emerging field of microspatial history, which rejects the macro-analytical ambitions of global history for an approach focused on “the ways in which multiple connections among places and temporalities construct spatiality” and which argues that the epistemological sensitivities of microhistory allow historians to study such processes with an eye towards the granular ways in which power dynamics were contested and negotiated (De Vito and Gerritsen 2018: 5; De Vito 2019).

The two men who are the subjects of this article performed labour as part of their punishments in late 18th-century Scandinavia. Both were named Lars, a common name. With military backgrounds and sentences for theft and desertion, both were somewhat typical of the inmates in the prison in which they served. These prisons were known to contemporaries as *slaveries* (‘slavier’) and, subsequently, 18th-century observers would have understood such convicts as *slaves* (‘slaves’), though of a different kind than the ones subjected to the plantations of the Caribbean.² Only men were subjected to this punishment. Both men made their first escape within a few months in 1785, and both ran multiple times from several different institutions, leaving in their wake a myriad paper trail of court records and correspondences from which their itineraries can be reconstructed. While the sources rarely present their words, and then only given under duress at points of failure, they still speak amply about their attempts to undo the state in which they found themselves. This was a situation of exploitability, devoid of rights. However, their stories are not ‘cases’. There are too many unwieldy variables and specificities that at once link their trajectories to those of their fellow convicts, to specific geographies and to multiple socio-economic processes relating to labour coercion, mobility, identity control and punishment. Thus, the article is structured by the notion of a ‘chain’ whose links can be thought of as forming a trajectory which is taken both in a literal and a figurative sense: as a mappable set of linkages in space and an evolving set of social relations worked to the two men’s advantage or

of waged, industrial work (VAN DER LINDEN 2008). Global labour history was heavily rooted in the analytical approaches of the social sciences. In recent years, scholars have pushed for more contextual and empiricist approaches, often inspired by microhistory. See, SCHIEL 2020; DE VITO, SCHIEL and VAN ROSSUM 2020; HEINSEN 2021b. This contextual ambition is prevalent in the research network *Worlds of Related Coercions in Work*, available at: <https://www.worck.eu> (accessed April 26, 2022).

² On the use of the word ‘slave’ in the early modern penal systems of Scandinavia see HEINSEN 2021b. To avoid confusion, I will refer to inmates as ‘convicts’ in this article.

disadvantage. The notion of ‘chain’ is derived from the sources, in which we find many actual chains as well as figurative ways of articulating lives as chains of moments. The concept is used to further the ambitions of a contextualizing history of labour coercion and to build on the theory of of “moments of coercion” at entry, during extraction and at exit as proposed by Marcel van der Linden. From the empirical data, I argue that the labour relation is as much constituted by the liminal phases between such moments.

The runaway can serve as a kind of heuristic tool in this endeavour. Runaways have received extensive attention in global labour history, but have primarily been explored as cases of how early modern capitalism needed to reign in mobilities and how workers resisted those constraints. (Van Rossum and Kamp 2016; Rediker, Chakraborty and van Rossum 2019) In that context, the question of who ran and who tried to keep others in place forms a fundamental building block of an analysis of power relations. (Heinsen 2019) But the runaway can show us more than that. Thus, this article presents an attempt to write a history of escape that is informed by the micro-spatial approach and the radically contextualizing approach to the social history of coercion. As a figure who moved at once within, against and between regimes of labour immobilization and coercion, the runaway shows situated and generative contradictions that allowed for gaps and (sometimes contradictory) autonomies. Their trajectories entangled contexts in very concrete ways, while they themselves attempted to unravel what bound them. And in those uneven processes, their specific experiences made them vectors whose accumulating knowledges altered social relations. For this reason, the following places a heavy emphasis on narrative.

1. ROAMING NORWAY: LARS HANSEN

Lars Hansen and Helge Helgesen ran from the *slavery* at Akershus fortress – in the heart of modern day Oslo, then known as Christiania – around Midsummer in 1785. The two convicts had been working as hands for a crew of carpenters deployed at the fortress. Convicts performed labour in the service of the military state or were rented out to private entrepreneurs (Heinsen 2021a). As the carpenters took a break to eat, the two convicts asked for permission to go back to the convict quarters to get some lunch as well. However, instead they snuck unto the ramparts. They went northeast through the suburb of Piberviken where they helped each other loose the fetters worn by all convicts and identifying them as such. The irons consisted of a thin waist band connected via a chain to another band around the leg.

They also left the wool ‘slave dress’ (‘slavekjole’) – a distinctively patterned coat. Rid of visual identifiers, their wanderings commenced.

The institution they left behind them had existed since around 1740, but was modeled on a form of prison coupled with labour in military infrastructure that developed in the 1560s in Copenhagen. *Slaveries* existed throughout the realm, and similar institutions existed elsewhere in Scandinavia and Northern Germany. It was a form of prison defined by labour in chains. Because of the irons, convicts were also referred to as “iron captives” (*jernfanger*). The institutions co-existed with prison workhouses, but did not share the rehabilitative powers projected unto that institution (whose inmates were typically unchained). The *slaveries* were for felons, many of whom served life sentences, often as a commutation of death sentences. There was a clear aim of productivity to the labour, and convicts were often envisioned as key in the establishment and maintenance of military infrastructure (Heinsen 2018).

Lars Hansen and Helge Helgesen walked together for the summer and into the autumn making their way to the area around the village of Lier west of Christiania, offering themselves as day labourers to various farmers. They took the main roads through the valleys of the uneven Norwegian landscape. This was a part of Norway with a relatively rich agricultural production, and they found enough work to sustain themselves. We don’t know how they identified themselves to others, but casual labour was only legal for certain occupational groups, so it is likely that they presented themselves in specific ways, perhaps as mercenary soldiers with permits to roam for civilian work for a certain duration – a common practice that helped alleviate the upkeep of the standing army. Vagrancy was illegal and anyone could be forced to produce identity papers or passports from masters, but in the territories through which they moved such requests seem to have been rare.³ After the harvest, the two then travelled to Hølen east of Christiania. There, Helgesen was employed on his own, so the two split. Hansen travelled back west, going to the mining hub Kongsberg. There he worked until the following spring, before returning to Lier where he met Helgesen again. For almost a year, the two men had subsisted on casual labour. This allowed them to make a living without binding themselves to a master in a longer term contract of service. It was a strategy that rendered a person liable to prosecution for vagrancy, but which, as historian Vilhelm Vilhelmsson has shown for Iceland in the period, worked if one’s labour was useful (Vilhelmsson 2020).

Now Helgesen proposed to head north, back to his hometown in the district of Ringerike. Hansen came from a small village near Jevnaker,

³ On the emergence of forms of identity control see KROGH 1987.

further north in the district of Hadeland, adjacent to Ringerike. Having walked the approximately 50 kilometres along one bank of Tyrifjorden, they reached Helge's home parish where they stayed a few days before taking to the road again heading further north towards Hansen's birthplace in Jevnaker. It is unclear if Helgesen talked to anyone he knew in Ringerike, but arriving in Hansen's home parish they worked a strategy of laying low when there was a chance of being identified. Now, they veered away from the main roads. They found a barn where they hid. They discussed going further North to places where they would not be known, and further away from the administrative and agricultural centre in and around Christiania, in which work was ample, but in which the risk of discovery was also greater. However, that plan never materialized: one of the following days they came upon a farm, Igelsrud, where Helge proposed that they could break in. Hansen, according to his own testimony, was averse to the idea, so Helgesen did so alone in the night, but afterwards shared the goods with his fellow wanderer as they went back to rest in the barn. This is where they were arrested by local men (Court minutes, fol. 38ff, L0015b: Justisprotokoll 1785-1808, D: Sakarkiv, Akershus Festning Auditøren, Forsvaret, Rigsarkivet (Norway). Henceforth L0015b).

Itineraries of Lars Hansen

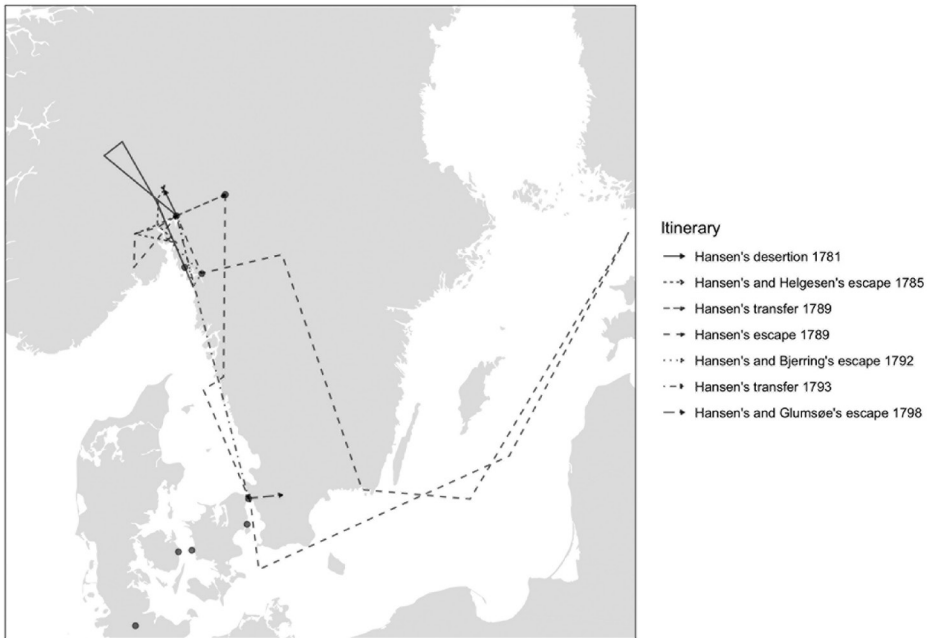


Fig. 1. Map of Lars Hansen's travels.

Hansen was brought before a garrison court at Akershus in January 1787. As the *slaveries* were run by the army, convicts fell under military jurisdiction.⁴ From the proceedings we learn that Lars reckoned himself to be 27 year old. Five years prior, after a handful of years serving as a mercenary soldier in the *Nordenfeldske Gevorbne* Infantry Regiment, he had been sentenced to penal labour. According to that sentence, he had already run the gauntlet once for committing petty theft when he had escaped the regiment in August 1781, roaming until late December that year when he was caught. In that timeframe, he and his brother Thomas, who had been his travel mate for the occasion, had roamed widely. They had stolen from several farms. With the spoils, they had crossed the border into Sweden and let themselves be recruited, before deserting with the recruitment fees. Going back to Norway, they stole more in their home district, before going back to Christiania, where they departed. Lars Hansen was arrested after having then returned to his native parish. In fact, he was apprehended breaking into a farm only a couple of kilometres from where he would be caught five years later with Helgesen. He was sentenced to another series of passes at the gauntlet, before facing a life time as a convict in Akershus. While Hansen was young, he was too much of a danger to “the public security”, meaning private property, to be spared. However, he remained untouched by the executioner. This was crucial as convicts who were pilloried or branded by a hangman were seen as perpetually dishonoured and thereby outsiders to society until (and even after) death. Hansen’s honour could still be saved, and so an eventual pardon remained a possibility (Book of sentences: 287, Justisprotokoller for Generalauditoriatet, 1777-1794, L0022, Generalauditøren, Forsvaret, Rigsarkivet (Norway). Henceforth L0022). Again, in 1787 his honour was spared, though only by royal commutation.

We know very little about Helgesen’s past, except that he was a tailor. This was remarked in court by Lars, prompted by the fact of them having been in possession of a pair of scissors when caught. The reason we know so little, is that Helgesen was missing at the time of Hansen’s interrogation in early 1787, having managed to escape. He walked the same territories as he had with Hansen, and stole along the way. He met up with several other escapees on the roads. One night, rummaging through a smallholder’s house, he got in a drunken quarrel with a fellow runaway before being chased from the house by the tenants. Outside, Helgesen pulled a knife only to be killed in self defence by his fellow burglar. The smallholder, for unknown reason’s, helped the other runaway drag Helgesen’s body to a lake, before letting him walk (Court minutes, fol. 87, L0015b; Sentence book: 584ff., L0022).

⁴ On military jurisdictions in early modern Denmark-Norway see PETERSEN 2002.

Meanwhile, in March 1789, Lars Hansen was transferred to the Fortress of Kongsvinger, approaching the Swedish border. The fortresses by the border functioned, in a sense, as satellites of the fortress in Akershus. It is unclear if this transfer was motivated by a need for labour in Kongsvinger or was a measure to cope with runners from Akershus, as both logics caused convicts to circulate between prisons. One day in August that year, while working with two other convicts inside the fortress, Hansen and his workmates ran during a moment of slack supervision. The three managed to traverse the ramparts and went straight for the border. Arriving in bustling Gothenburg, Hansen along with one of his running mates enrolled as sailors for the Swedish navy. They went, together, to the Baltic Sea in 1790 by then a main theatre in Sweden's war with Russia. We do not know if they participated in any of the naval battles that ensued there in May of that year (Court minutes, fol. 104, L0015b).

As peace was negotiated in August, the two runaways were laid off at Karlskrona. Then they were arrested, apparently because the local authorities suspected their origins. They were transported all the way across Sweden to Carlstad where they were interviewed by the magistrate. However, they were then let go, and Lars Hansen was given a passport under the name of Lars Jensen. While there were intermittent attempts to institutionalize exchange of deserters and other runaways between Denmark-Norway and Sweden, this only became common practices in the 19th century. Hansen stayed in Sweden until the autumn of 1791, at some point during this interim splitting from his friend. Late in 1791, Hansen returned to Norway. The sources are unclear if he went first to the Frederiksten Fortress by the Swedish border, or to Christiania. Possibly, he might have gone back and forth. Leveraging his Swedish passport, he successfully passed himself off as someone he was not, and received communion in the church of Christiania, only a stone's throw from the Akershus fortress. Subsequently, he managed to exchange the Swedish document with Norwegian ones, though still under his new name. He used a forged attestation from the priest in his home parish of Jevnaker to support his identity. For the forgery of this paper he had paid a deserted soldier from Akershus, whom he met in Sweden. Hansen himself was illiterate. From testimonies of runaways, we find such forgeries to be exceedingly common, and people with writing skills could make good money in a social geography framed by the institution of service, which extended the power of the employer over the employee to the extent of a parent over a child, and controlled their mobility as a consequence.⁵

⁵ For more on service in early modern Denmark-Norway see ØSTHUS 2015; 2017; ÅGREN 2017.

Hansen was working constraints that many other occupational groups also challenged, and by similar means. With both money and documents in his pockets, Hansen had a leg up. In Christiania he invested in handkerchiefs, ribbons and needles. He then walked the vicinity of Christiania peddling (Court minutes, fol. 104ff, L0015b; Book of sentences: 673, L0022).

He used roads he had known from his prior escapes. He made new friends, among them a servant by the name of Gunild Hiermundsdatter in whose company he travelled from Kongsberg to the town of Bragnæs. Their companionship was important enough to be brought up in later interrogations, but it is unclear exactly why. One possibility is that she was also embroiled in the burglary at a nearby farm before Christmas of 1791 or perhaps that which happened in the house of a merchant in Bragnæs on 21 January 1792. Lars placed responsibility of these acts on Tolluf Olsen and Thomas Halvorsen, two men whom he met at Bragnæs, and whose company he admitted having enjoyed intermittently. Olsen was a prison breaker from the prison workhouse in Christiania, and Thomas Halvorsen had been an inmate there before being released. Both knew Hansen under his adopted name of Jensen. However, according to the testimony of Olsen, he and Hansen had stayed for a while with Hansen's nephew Ernst Børgesen. They also visited Børgesen's father in law at whose house Hansen kept some of the goods he had been selling. The nephew later testified that they had brought stolen goods to his house on the night of the burglary at the merchant's house, after having been chased through the streets where Halvorsen was caught. Eventually, Hansen and Olsen were apprehended too, apparently at Christiania, still in possession of some of the stolen goods (*ibid.*)

For a while, Hansen refused being a convict. He stuck to his adopted patronym Jensen and the identity of being a wandering merchant born in Sweden. However, in the jail cell, he was spotted by two guards from the fortress and subsequently handed over to the military authorities. Eventually, he caved in and related his travels. He now reckoned that he was 34 years old, though his calculations do not add up. He was found guilty of theft, partly affirmed by testimonies, partly inferred from the fact that "Lars Hansen's previous life course is a chain (*kjede*) of bad actions" as the sentence framed his life before recounting the series of punishments he had until this point endured. Here we find the notion of the chain articulated as a life course made up of misdeeds. This chain was tied to a notion of descent built into the law in which repetition of transgression carried immense importance and in which punishment was tiered. In this way, judges evaluated crimes in light of where in this chain the individual was. Their evaluations hinged on knowledge, both that which came from interrogations and that which could be conjured through the state's administrative

circuits of paper. Every link in the chain made the offender liable to new aspects of punishment. He was again sentenced to flogging and branding of his forehead, but this time, he was *not* to receive royal mercy and spared the branding iron as he had been in 1787. Instead, he was to be forever marked as an outsider, the product of his chain of misdeeds readable on his forehead (Court minutes, fol. 104ff, L0015b).

Legally, a branding marked a point of no return. It would entail that, besides death, Hansen could no longer expect any legal way out of penal labour. It was a moment in which an irrevocable perpetuity of status was to be written on the body. Thus, like the chains worn, it worked first and foremost as a signifier. It signified that the chain could no longer be broken and that there was no possibility of becoming anything but a convict. Thus, it reduced the individual to their legal status. As social historians, we have a long history of doing a similar reductive writing. Labour historians have traditionally gauged the lives of people on the basis of what happened in the labour relations in which they found themselves. After his sentence, Hansen was a “forced”, “coerced” or even “unfree” labourer. Labour history is littered with such nomenclature, equating people with fixed, analytical statuses. However, as highlighted by global labour historian Marcel van der Linden, it is often vague what is meant by such allusions to force or coercion. As umbrella terms they come to include so much as to border meaninglessness. As an antidote, van der Linden, has proposed to “dissect” such labour relations into “moments of coercion” relating to three axes: entry, extraction and exit (van der Linden 2016a). This allows for a level of analytical clarity, because we might then identify how coerced labourers were not always coerced in the same way. In the life of Hansen, there was a clear difference between his initial entry into military labour and his later sentence to penal labour, even if both led to extraction underpinned by the discipline of a military state and meted out by officers. Convicts were deployed as part of a composite labour force that also included mercenary soldiers. And both convicts and mercenaries found themselves in labour relations that they were unable to terminate, formally, even if there was a dramatic difference between the eight year contract of a mercenary and the perpetuity graphed on the convict by the branding iron. Yet, taking cues from the notion of a “chain” summoned by the officials examining Hansen, the possibility of doing more than dissecting status in terms of discrete moments presents itself. Instead, we might ask how moments of coercion linked together. Doing that, the lives lead *within* labour relations become irreducibly tied to the possibilities presented as workers explored the liminal spaces that could open up after an illicit “exit”. Thus, the notion of a “chain” suggests for a way to see how practices of coercion shaped lives.

Hansen did not wait for the perpetuity of the branding iron to set in. While awaiting confirmation of the sentence, he was in heavy irons chained to the wall inside of the prison sleeping quarters in the fortress. He sat there along with another convict, Hans Jonsen Bjerring, who was also a serial runner. In the morning of 8 November 1792, the two men were gone, having seemingly exited out a window by the wall to which they had been fastened. The bars in the window had been broken, but the two men had left behind the rest of their heavy irons, unbroken except for a small nail holding a rail of iron to their legs. The bolts in the wall had, however, been enlarged. Neither the guards on duty outside, nor several convicts, who had been up late working on wooden spoons meant for private sale, had heard anything. The sleeping quarters had been lit throughout the night and the guards had continually heard convicts talking inside. The soldier on duty from 3 am, however, noticed no chatter. One convict who had stayed up late, remarked that he had only noticed, on a few occasions, that “the irons clanged which often happened when convicts moved in their sleep”. Another convict helped the court deduce that they had been present at least till 1 am, because he had stayed up till this point and had only then left his shoes by the bunk. Those shoes had been gone in the morning. A convict who slept close to where the two were placed, awoke a little past 4 and reached for his snuff box in the dark, he found it to be missing along with his shirt, a scarf, and a few coins. So were Hansen and Bjerring (*ibid.*, fol. 108ff).

For several nights, they had worked the irons and the window, the bars of which they had loosened, but kept in place using resin. Yet, when Bjerring exited through the opening at around 3, Hansen was asleep and according to Bjerring slept so deeply that he was unable to wake him up. So, Bjerring had been alone as he snuck through a fog so thick that he got lost. By early morning he had made his way to a field at the edge of town. There he hid for the day in a pile of gravel. He was wearing the clothes and shoes he had stolen from the sleeping convicts. He then made his way into populated territories to the west via Drammen, towards Kongsberg finding himself at a hamlet called Aspeseter where he was known. He was fed and changed into another set of clothes, before he continued to roam. Bjerring had grown up in these parts and had been to confirmation in Kongsberg as a youth. He too knew the work of a tailor, as he had walked with a traveling tailor as a kid. He had also been a sailor, before being caught stealing and sentenced to life in chains. He had been branded after having run. In 1788, he had escaped the fortress at Frederikstad, but been caught stealing in Røgen. Around Whitsun 1791, he had been in Kongsvinger, when he managed to escape again. On that occasion he had run to Sweden, serving in the Swedish army, but had deserted and gone back to Norway. Then, he

had also been at Aspeseter. In fact, some of the clothes he was now wearing appear to have been goods stolen during a previous run. Now Bjerring roamed the area from Kongsberg west of Christiania to Frederikstad in East. At one point, he briefly crossed over into Sweden. Everywhere, he stole and fenced. He was eventually caught in Larvik, on the coast. The exorbitant value of the goods he had appropriated along his way ran in the thousands of rixdollars. Linking the facts established in court, the judge concluded that “from all this data one is convinced that this dishonoured slave, Hans Jonsen Bjerring, is not only the most daring and capable thief imaginable, but also a person so cunning that he cannot be held safely in any Southern Norwegian fortress as a slave” (*ibid.*).

Bjerring had left Hansen sleeping on the bed they shared, but he apparently woke up soon after, and had exited through the window at around 4 am. Through the fog and the dark, he made his way to a forest by the village of Lysaker just outside of Christiania. The following night he ventured back through the city going southeast. He eventually made his way via Halden to Strømstad in Sweden. At Halden he had received a credit note and in Strømstad, he got ready money that had been owed him during his previous escape. He bought a black shirt and stayed in Sweden until the middle of December when he ventured back towards Bragnæs where he had been caught during his previous escape. He was caught in Hurum southeast of Bragnæs and brought back to Akershus to be interrogated on 16 January 1793. Hansen had not seen Bjerring during his escape, but locked up in Bragnæs, he was told that Bjerring was at Kongsberg, relatively close by. More intriguingly, he had been told that Bjerring dressed himself in women’s clothes and that he had also been at Bragnæs just before Christmas. Eventually, Bjerring confirmed having dressed in women’s clothes, though assured the court that it had only happened in jest, as one night at Kongsberg, he had swapped his clothes with a woman named Karen and visited her uncle dressed as her for a good laugh. However, the minutes of Hansen’s interrogation presents the story in way that suggests that he did not find it implausible that a convict might hide as a woman (*ibid.*).

Hansen was brief during this interrogation, avoiding saying why he had returned to Bragnæs where he was well known as a thief. Thus, we are left to make a qualified guess. In August 1793, two convicts by the names of Bertel Olsen Grinerud and Svend Andersen escaped Akershus fortress. Grinerud was caught later that month. He disclosed that he had been in Bragnæs too. There he had been aided by a man called Tore Land, in whose house he had been released from his neck iron. Tore and his wife then housed the fugitive for several days. Grinerud sold them some stolen goods. A small bottle with a bird figurine on the cork was gifted to the couple’s child, who was so delighted that she displayed her trinket as the household had visitors

that Saturday, during which time Grinerud remained hidden in the attic. He later disclosed that present in Land's house during those days had been none other than Lars Hansen's old acquaintance from his walks, the servant Gunild Hiermundsdatter. She had witnessed Grinerud's release from the collar in Land's kitchen. And Grinerud knew this woman, because he had seen her "here at the fortress where she has been to visit Lars Hansen" (*ibid.*, fol. 117-120). Thus, Hiermundsdatter's relation to Hansen had been such that she visited him after he had been caught stealing in Bragnæs. For this reason, it is not out of reach to interpret his return to Bragnæs in late 1792 as a visit to her.

Now Hansen was at Akershus again. While he had been gone, the sentence of branding for his previous escape had been confirmed and on 18 January 1793, the dishonouring stigma was executed (*ibid.*, fol. 104ff). Having escaped three times, Hansen was now deemed too great a risk to public security. Along with Bjerring, Hansen's ways required action on account of the "knowledge about these parts of Norway as well as the refuge and assistance they understand how to acquire". The two men possessed courage "to dare anything", as the general judge advocate put it. Thus, in June 1793 the commander at the fortress of Kronborg at Elsinore, Zealand, received notice that he was to expect two Norwegian convicts and that he was to keep them "under the strictest watch so that they have no opportunity to escape" (letter from Kongelige Generalitets og Commissariats Collegium to the commander at Kronborg, June 8, 1793, F. Slavesager 1698-1794, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark); Book of sentences: 712, L0022). Hansen and Bjerring arrived via ship the following month. When Grinerud told the court about his meeting with Gunild Hiermundsdatter, he also noted that Hansen was by then at Kronborg, knowledge he had likely relayed her.

Up until this point, Hansen's life reads with a stuttering cadence. We cannot understand his status as an immobilized convict without taking into account the relative ease with which he suspended it. Thus, while he underwent moment after moment of coercion meant to chain him down, he had kept working links to elsewhere. State officials and prison administrators knew that convicts understood their penal labour in light of the possibilities that confronted them if they ran. And they adjusted accordingly. The practice of displacing convicts who had challenged their confines was common. Convicts circulated regularly between the fortresses along the Swedish border for this reason. Similarly, convicts in Denmark, circulated between the main *slavery* in Copenhagen and those at the fortresses of Kronborg, Nyborg and the King's fortress of Rendsburg in his North German possessions. Early in the century, the Baltic outpost of Christiansø, a small windswept rock, had served a similar purpose of serial escapees (Heinsen

2018). Circulations between Denmark and Norway were rarer, but not unheard of. Sometimes the labour and the conditions were also harder in these places. In Norway, convicts who ran from the fortresses at the border, complained that conditions there were worse than in Christiania.⁶ Similar testimonies are found from Kronborg, where the labour often consisted in securing the fortress from the onslaught of the sea by hauling rocks in the construction of the coastal perimeter (Hansen 2018).

From yearly accounts of the cost of feeding the inmates at Kronborg throughout the 1790s, we know that Hansen stayed put. So did Bjerring. This is significant. Kronborg was not harder to escape than the Norwegian fortresses, and over the years Hansen witnessed many of his fellow convict workers disappear. But Hansen and Bjerring did not know the roads that exit might lead them unto. Hansen's only prior experiences in those territories had happened during his second escape, when he had passed Kronborg as a sailor onboard a naval vessel *en route* to the Baltic. The earliest known escape of Bjerring from Kronborg came only in 1801, when he ran with a Danish convict. Lars Hansen ran before Bjerring – but only after five years. This happened in the summer of 1798. We have no notices in the archives of how he escaped, only that he left with a convict by the name of Niels Hansen Glumsø – a native Zealander. The fact that his escape was not advertised in the Copenhagen newspapers might suggest that the officials did not think he would go anywhere near the capital or indeed stay in the country. Seemingly, he was never apprehended again as he does not turn up in the sources from Kronborg [Expenses 1794-1798, F. Slavesager 1795-1815, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)]. The most likely interpretation is that he went to Sweden.

If this interpretation is correct, he beat the odds. Like convicts in the Norwegian fortresses, runaways from *slaveries* on Zealand dreamt of Sweden. In Sweden, they could pass for regular army deserters and let themselves be recruited into the Swedish mercenary army, establishing new identities in the process.⁷ Thus, the border offered opportunities of breaking the chain by becoming someone else. The opportunity was so common that convicts who ran from *slaveries* and instead roamed Danish territories sometimes made themselves out to be Swedish deserters, forging a passable identity on which to build new social relations (Heinsen 2018). At Kronborg, neighbouring Sweden was tantalizingly close, visible on the other side of the Sound. However, the maritime geography made it much harder

⁶ E.g. court minutes, p. 307ff, L0015a: Justisprotokoll, 1764-1772, D: Sakarkiv, Akershus Festning Auditøren, Forsvaret, Rigsarkivet (Norway).

⁷ This structure of desertion is explained, though in a different context, by KAMP 2016.

to reach than from Norway where the border was so permeable as to allow many to cross back and forth. Norwegian convicts could leverage the border, using it to cover their tracks. Crossing the water from Denmark was a different matter, not only because of the physical constraints, but also because of how that constraint was leveraged in a social geography. Ferry-men were bound by law to check the documents of all they ferried across. Fishermen were forced to chain their vessels to land or otherwise make sure that they were not left in a seaworthy state (*Royal statute on deserters*, 13 October 1703). A ship patrolled the Sound regularly, just as soldiers patrolled the beaches and, on the winter occasions when the sea froze, the ice (Petersen 2002). While convict runaways were common enough to warrant frequent moral panic – upwards of 20 per cent off all convicts escaped at least once during their punishment (Heinsen 2018) – this geography of constraint served to hold back a much larger population of potential runaways, including servants and apprentices, soldiers and sailors, and even farmers bound to estates. Even prison guards ran sometimes [Expenses 1801, F. Slavesager 1795-1815, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)]. 18th-century Denmark was a geography of immobilization – somewhat more so than Norway where the peasantry had been less bound to the land. It was standard practice to pay bounties for runaways and to advertise them in newspapers.⁸ From interrogations of failed runners from Kronborg it appears that fishermen and peasants along the coasts were on the lookout for runaways, unlike their Norwegian counterparts, or people in other parts of Denmark. Besides, the physical features of this territory also worked to constrain: not only was Zealand an island, it was also densely populated relative to Norway and almost completely deforested. Migrant soldiers in the mercenary army were under special surveillance. While the regiments in Norway were made up of natives like Hansen, the bondage of the Danish peasantry in the eighteenth meant that Danish peasant sons were not illegible to “capitulate” as the signing of the mercenary contract was known. Instead, soldiers were recruited abroad, most from the international labour market for military labour in major German cities. They were recruited to a life of urban poverty (Krogh 2018). Consequently, they were heavily overrepresented in the Danish *slaveries*. Convicts on the run were sometimes apprehended on suspicion of them being army deserters. This meant that many of the men alongside whom Hansen toiled, did not know the geography

⁸ For an example of such advertisements see Anders Dyrborg Birkemoses dataset of runaway advertisements, available at: <https://ubib-sfb1288-appsrv03.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/?q=dataset/runaway-advertisements-eighteenth-century-copenhagen> (accessed April 26, 2022).

they had to work upon escape either. The fact that Hansen found a native running mate might have been what finally allowed him to move in 1798.

2. ROAMING ZEALAND: LARS BRYNILDSEN

In the spring of 1785, Lars Brynildsen was part of a crew of convicts assisting in construction work at the southernmost outwork of the fortified capital of Copenhagen. The outwork carried the official name of Kalvebod Kigkurre. A *'Kigkurre'* was a lookout post. This small fortification sat as an appendage to the regular bastions of Christianshavn watching over the eastern shore of the southern exit of Copenhagen's channel. Standing on top of the bulwark facing away from the city's crowds and busy streets, one could see the island of Amager to one's left with open uncultivated commons and, further inland, fields and a series of small villages strewn along the main road. Directly in front was the slender channel widening the further the eye could travel. And on the right was Zealand with the suburbs of Frederiksberg. This was the very edge of the city.

During their morning march from the prison on the opposite side of the city, just as the convicts crossed the channel at Langebro in the morning of 28 April 1785, someone in Brynildsen's crew spotted two boats by the shore of Amager, far beyond the perimeter of the fortifications. Walking to the worksite the men were chained together, a precaution taken after a series of unrests in the early 1730s (Heinsen 2018). However, upon arrival they were separated and left to work under the guidance of the construction workers. Over the next hours, the sighting of the boats was communicated among a subset of the convicts. Brynildsen was central to the plan that formed. He was Norwegian, in his mid-thirties carrying a life sentence and had been dishonoured on account of having been part of a plot involving the theft of uniforms and other goods while he was still serving as a horseman in 2. *Sjællandske Regiment* garrisoned at the town Næstved. He had conspired with several others to steal from the regiment storage as well as having committed a few other accounts of theft totalling the value of 76 Rixdollars. He had then deserted the regiment, walking across Zealand to the fishing village of Humlebæk near Elsinore, but had then – probably because of having no way of crossing the Sound – returned to Næstved where he was caught (Book of sentences, #206, F. Justitsprotokoller R 1771-1796, Generalauditøren, Rig-sarkivet). Brynildsen was not native to these roads, yet his former profession had given him enough local knowledge of Zealand that he could promise the rest of the small party that he could guide the way. Their plan was to go south, through Zealand to the market town of Vordingborg. From there they would cross over to the adjacent island of Falster and then get a vessel

and go to Femern in Holstein and then on to Hamburg, thereby leaving the territories of the Danish King. It was quite uncommon for convicts in Copenhagen to aim for Germany, but perhaps this owed to Brynildsen's knowledge of these specific roads. Having been stationed at Næstved, he knew Southern Zealand well, including the road to Vordingborg.

There were five in the group, all with somewhat similar life trajectories and all somewhat representative of the typical prison breaker. Besides Brynildsen, there was Johann Henne, who had arrived within days of Brynildsen with a life sentence for desertion. Born in Hessen in Germany, he had been a soldier in *Sjællandske Regiment*, but had apparently not served long enough to acquire the geographical knowledge held by Brynildsen. They were joined by Johan Friedrich Müller from Lübeck and Franz Buurmann from Mainz, both of whom were former soldiers sentenced for theft. Buurmann had also deserted his regiment several times. He had been stationed in Viborg in the faraway province of Jutland. Finally, the sole Dane in the party was Jens Bollsen Tostrup, who was from the province of Jutland and had served in a conscript regiment before acquiring a life sentence for theft, leaving behind a wife. Only Brynildsen, who was a widower, had any children. They were all in their thirties, except Henne who was 28 years old. Henne was also the only one among them who had not been dishonoured. Tostrup had served the shortest time, having arrived in September of 1783. Brynildsen had served the longest having arrived in March of that year. If their many similarities made them band together is unclear, but not unlikely. Having entered the prison within a few months meant that they had shared the experience of being new arrivals. And the five men are likely to have known and trusted each other, having at this point worked and lived together for many months (Prison entry book, Slaverulle 1774-1826, 34-35, Københavns Stokhus, Landsarkivet for Sjælland m.m.). They had shared chains. According to a later testimony by Brynildsen, it was Müller and Buurmann who had presented the idea of running. He also argued that "he and his companions had heard that the following Monday they were again to be handed over to work on Holmen, and that out of fear thereof they had decided to desert". Why they feared this labour is unclear, but the word "again" suggests that they had been there before. A likely explanation is simply that the labour performed by convicts sculpting the artificial islands Holmen was harder. Or perhaps they feared it because they could not swim. It might also simply have been an excuse [Court minutes, 29 April 1785, Justitsprotokoller 1783-1791, 21, Auditøren for Københavns Garnisonskommandantskab, Forsvarets Auditørkorps, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)].

At four in the afternoon, the bricklayers sat down to eat. Buurmann asked the guard Dallinger if he and his comrades could be allowed to buy some bread and brandy to consume during the break. In the outwork was a

small house in which a woman sold the workers food and drink. Dallinger granted Buurmann permission. The gang then walked towards the house, but in a split second jumped up on the brick bulwark. Müller managed to tear off his convict dress there and then, while the five men grabbed a bunch of tools they had seemingly prepared during their day at the work-site: Brynildsen and Henne each had a boathook, while Tostrup and Müller had each their Dutch hoe which they had planned to use in lieu of oars. Buurmann also had a mattock to be used in case the boats were chained up. Transcending the barrier, the convicts were able to leave the outwork by the small isthmus joining Christianshavn and Amager. At this point, Dallinger had noticed that they were gone. He told another guard to stay behind with the rest of the convicts in the work gang, while he sprinted the few hundred metres to the city gate of Amagerport. He alerted the soldiers guarding the city gate. Six soldiers and a petty officer, a 19-year-old German called Theodor Nübling was dispatched immediately to pursue the five escapees by the shore. Meanwhile, Dallinger himself took the main road to Amager, raising the alarm and alerting the farmers in the villages to assist in the chase (*ibid.*).

At some point, the five chained ex-soldiers must have noticed their pursuit. Having made their way approximately three kilometres from the city and approaching the spot where the boats had been in the morning, however, they were disappointed. The vessels were gone. Nestled behind the ramparts, they had not been able to get a view of their destination during the day, and now their exit was a dead end. Behind them, they sensed the soldiers in pursuit, according to later testimony they were at this point only some 100 paces behind. On the other side of the channel, about 1,500 metres away, was Zealand. The channel was known to be shallow. The five convicts therefore decided to try their luck in passing the water and began wading, having quickly left behind their wool coats. Arriving at the shore, Nübling ordered his soldiers to wait. Soon they were joined by farmers from the village of Tårnby, alerted by Dallinger. The small crowd watched as the five chained men made their way further and further into the sea (*ibid.*).

Evidently, the convicts did not know that while the channel was shallow, there was a slender trench at its middle where it was too deep for a person to reach the bottom. When they realized their mistake, it was too late. One after another they lost footing, then air, some of them having before that point attempted to turn around. Brynildsen had lagged behind. He watched as “one after another of his companions” slipped beneath the surface, not to reappear. The chains were dragging them down, aided by the currents and the exhaustion from the preceding sprint. Brynildsen cried out for help. A smallholder from Tårnby, Jens Olsen, then entered the sea and made his way to Brynildsen who was losing consciousness. He dragged him back to shore, assisted for the last stretch by one of the soldiers. In his

memoirs, penned 24 years later, Nübling likened the image of the unconscious convict body dragged ashore to “a log of wood”. Brynildsen was still clinging to the boathook (*ibid.*).

As the highest-ranking person on site, Nübling was in charge of bringing back Brynildsen. Apparently, there was also a discussion among those present about getting a boat to recover the bodies. Meanwhile, Brynildsen slowly came to. Nübling wanted to bring Brynildsen to the village of Tårnby, but “the guy resisted so vehemently that we could hardly bring him 50 steps forth. Just as soon as we pulled him to his feet, he threw himself to the ground and proclaimed that he would not walk one step”. Euphemistically, Nübling described the ensuing beating. “When my soldier saw that it was not a lack of strength, but his evil that was the problem, they treated him in ways that were not the most gentle”. Nübling then tried to use a horse to transport Brynildsen, but “even with all our strength united we could not hold that evil boy on the horse. When we lifted him up on one side, he fell to the other. It was maddening”. Nübling then had one of his soldiers fetch a cart. Meanwhile, Brynildsen “lay on the ground, rolling back and forth wild with anger”. It was getting dark when the cart came and Brynildsen was brought back to Copenhagen [Petersen 2005: 63-66; Court minutes, 29 April 1785, Justitsprotokoller 1783-1791, 21, Auditøren for Københavns Garnisonskommandantskab, Forsvarets Auditørkorps, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)].

Itineraries of Lars Brynildsen



Fig. 2. Map of Lars Brynildsen's travels.

When, the following day in court, Brynildsen highlighted his role as a pathfinder, he touched directly on the question of knowledge. He thus evoked a dimension of escape that in Hansen's story had only been articulated by authorities and their strategy of displacement. Thus, he evoked a theme that echo through interrogations of escapees. For instance, a former mercenary soldier, Johann Schönhausen, originally from Poland, escaped from the Copenhagen *slavery* in May 1790. He also walked South to Vordingborg, choosing his route because a fellow convict "had told him that was the easiest way to get away". He was caught in Vordingborg in possession of a fake passport, which he seemingly had planned to use to be ferried across the sea [Court minutes, 14 June 1790, Justitsprotokoller 1783-1791, 21, Auditøren for Københavns Garnisonskommandantskab, Forsvarets Auditørkorps, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)]. Other convicts leveraged their own knowledge from prior lives in ways similar to Brynildsen: The German convicts Johann Bluhm and Gotlieb Steinert ran from the fortress of Nyborg in July 1770 with the intention of returning to Prussian Pommern. Nyborg was located on the Eastern tip of the island of Funen, but going back towards Germany was mainly possible by leaving the island at its Western point near the town of Middelfart where the Little Belt separated the island from the continent. Before doing so, they would have to traverse Funen itself. They planned to do so with knowledge Bluhm had acquired eight years before, when he had walked across the island. The most likely reason he had done so was that all foreign recruits were transported on foot to Copenhagen upon recruitment [Court minutes: 253, F. Justitsprotokoller 1760-1786, 3-4, Auditøren for Nyborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)]. A fellow convict, a former naval sailor of Norwegian descent, Sivert Larsen, had even less to go on when he ran from Nyborg in 1771 hoping to go to the Netherlands or England. He explained that he had only known from his fellow convicts that Funen was an island and that he had been told that one could find fishing vessels around Middelfart (*ibid.*: 24). Even native Danes could encounter the problem: when in the spring of 1782 Jens Graae and Poul Hansen were caught after having run from Nyborg, Graae, a native of the distant province of Thy in Jutland relayed a snippet of their dialogues leading to the escapes, in which Poul Hansen, a native of Funen, had proposed that they run together since "I know my way around here in Funen, and you know Jutland" (*ibid.*: 333). Of course convicts, wanting to run were not alone in their need for knowledge. Thus, knowledge could be leverage as when the convict Jens Pedersen convinced a soldier at Nyborg to run together, because the soldier was a stranger to Funen, but the convict could guide them all the way to Kiel in Germany where "he had been before and where they were free" (*ibid.*: 44). Unfortunately for the soldier, Pedersen abandoned him shortly after exit as they hid from a search patrol.

Brynildsen was done sketching out routes. By January 1786, he was transferred to Kronborg [Court minutes, 9 August 1787, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1752-1770 mm., 3-4, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)]. From there he escaped on 7 November 1786. This time he only had one running mate, another Norwegian. His name was Peder Pedersen and he had been a farmer in Norway, but had stolen from a church and had been sentenced to Akershus Fortress then transferred to Kronborg due to a sudden need for labour in coastal protection. At 51, Pedersen was older than Brynildsen. The two had worked in laying out stones on the south side of the fortress before sneaking off. They made use of the military training grounds known as Grønnehave which stretched from the fortress along the coast to the edge of the city as an open field. From there, they snuck through the town “past the windmills into the forest and hid during the days on hay lofts and in the woods”, as Brynildsen would later detail in court. Pedersen told how they “broke their chains in the forest and that the deponent had [until then] put the chains under his pants, while Brynildsen had tied a scarf to his”. Having left the town, Brynildsen was the pathfinder. Pedersen argued that while he did not want to place the blame on his running mate, he would not have been able to run without him, as he himself did not know any of the roads beyond Elsinore (*ibid.*, 14 November 1786). Brynildsen relayed how he had led them around Zealand. They had subsisted on things they bought in inns, as Pedersen had ready money on hand. They had tried to find a boat to go to Sweden but had found none. Instead, they roamed for days, making their way towards Western and Southern Zealand approaching the town of Næstved. These were territories “where the deponent [Brynildsen] was known”. One night, in a small village called Gødstrup, they had entered a hayloft to rest. However, a villager spotted them, “and alarmed people who sieged the house. They were forced to come down”. They were then escorted back to Kronborg [Court minutes, 14 November 1786, Court minutes, 9 August 1787, F. Justitsprotokoller, 1752-1770 mm., 3-4, Auditøren for Kronborg Fæstning, Generalauditøren, Rigsarkivet (Denmark)].

We do not know when exactly Brynildsen ran for the third and last time. However, it must have been in the summer of 1787, because when his last running mate, Jens Jensen – about whom we know very little – was apprehended in February of 1789, he explained that they had been gone for a year and a half. The brief report on the interrogation of Jensen, does not allow us to say which worksite they exited, but they had managed to find a boat at the fishing village of Hornbæk, making their way to Sweden across the Sound. Brynildsen was recruited by the Swedish army and left Jensen, whom the recruiters, for unknown reason, “would not take into service”. Jensen then took odd jobs as a labourer, but also began stealing for which

he was caught and punished in Sweden. He had, however, hidden some of his stolen goods, which he fetched as he was released. He then returned to Denmark in order to sell them but was identified and apprehended upon arrival (*ibid.*, 3 February 1789). Jensen never saw Brynildsen again. The archives are silent on what became of him, suggesting that his third attempt was successful.

CONCLUSION

The stories of Lars Hansen and Lars Brynildsen never touched directly, though among the convicts and guards that Hansen met upon arrival at Kronborg in 1793 were men that had known Brynildsen. Their trajectories, however, are entangled through the knowledges that shaped them. These were the kinds of knowledges that circulated among convicts in prisons. They were about places to go and how to go there – about passports, pathways and hiding places.⁹ And that knowledge was linked to other sites of knowledge creation and fields of circulation such as barracks or even the roads themselves. In that way, they were linked to the stories of not only convicts, but other illicitly mobile workers. The trajectories of both men show illicit knowledges – of pathways and ways to use them – transferred and used. They share enough traits that we can argue that they are of a kind, yet it is perhaps in their specificities and peculiarities that they tell us the most: in the dramatic realization that one's friends are drowning before one's eyes or in the runaway relaying news to a person that their loved one has been displaced across the Kattegat Sea. In this way, tracing the paths of runaways and exploring the chains that made up their social histories of coercion enables us to grasp the making and manipulation of structures, as well as the flux with which those efforts were entangled.

The narratives pieced together can be read as more than the stories of two 'convicts'. Instead, they can be used to break down what such a status meant at specific points in time and along situated trajectories. If we adopt Marcel van der Linden's notion of "moments of coercion", we can identify coercion at work in both entry, in extraction and at exit: at entry convict status was produced in gestures of juridical knowledge production that were often entangled with displays of physical and/or symbolic violence and with practices of physical immobilization in specific locations; in the extraction of labour it was always undergirded by the threat of the lash; and at exit coercion was defined by impediments that meant that formally

⁹ A similar argument in a very different context is made by MAXWELL-STEWART 2008.

there was no termination of the labour relation by means other than death or flight. Hansen and Brynildsen shared such moments with thousands of others. Yet, the two men's stories highlight the need for a situated and diachronic look at how such moments linked together to form the chains of coercion which these men attempted to loosen. In this capacity they generate questions about how moments came together and what that chaining meant in their specific contexts.

The literal chains worn by convicts can be studied in this context. They were put on the convict at entry, ritually marking their becoming convicts, to the point that release was often referred to have being let go of "iron". Primarily though, they served to reinforce the constraints placed on exit, by rendering convicts identifiable as such. Paradoxically, they were light enough so as not to get in the way of the labour extraction – a feature that, again, helps explain why they were often not hard to loose upon escape into that liminal gap between exit and re-entry into new social relations. However, the theme of chaining also appears figuratively in their stories: in the way that specific trajectories formed chains, in which what had happened before defined what could (or could be imagined to) happen later, both in positive ways – as when preceding knowledge could be leveraged in an escape – but more often in negative ways – such as when displacement rendered the convict alien to an environment, lacking geographical knowledge and personal relations. In this way, in studying chains we are examining diachronic entanglements of moments. And we become aware of how much does not fit in our analytical models of labour relations, including all the liminal spaces in-between that are of crucial importance to the stories of Lars Hansen and Lars Brynildsen, and which impacted on how they experienced their status. Most importantly, in that regard, we can infer that entry into processes of labour coercion meant something completely different depending on whether a person possessed the knowledge with which to imagine a plausible escape route or not.

Finally, a focus on the diachronic aspects of such histories of entangled (and disentangled) moments of coercion, should remind us that this act of chaining moments to form narratives of the individual life course was itself a constitutive feature of the power exercised by authorities over these men, as they judged and evaluated their actions. This is the meaning of the chain of bad actions articulated in the sentencing of Lars Hansen. Such chaining, as a process, was the building blocks of punitive archives. To punish a person based on their individual trajectory, judges needed knowledge to circulate and be stored in a linkable form, such as those written and copied sentences that followed convicts to the prisons to be kept there as an administrative tool and to which new elements could be added, forming a

narrative sequence that the convict had no control over, but which could be leveraged against him or even signified on his body. This links the sentence book index, the prison register, or the references in the margins of documents to the writing done by the branding iron, or the social indexing of the pillory.¹⁰ Retracing convict lives as chains, we are even more dependent on those linkages than the authorities themselves, because we cannot initiate new paper trails. This means, that the moment the runner becomes someone else and evades that cumulative process, the chain breaks – in the story we tell, but also in those told in paperwork by coercers. The emic character of the chain as an analytical concept, thus, entangles our historical writing with both the knowledges leveraged to bind and those which could be used to challenge bondage.

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¹⁰ On punitive indexing, see GELTNER 2014.

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