

Notes on the flags of Danish trading companies, 1616-1843

Jan Oskar Engene

Abstract

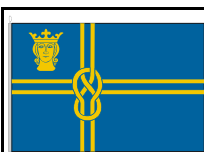
In the course of two centuries about twenty privileged trading companies were established in Denmark. From the start these were given flag privileges, initially the right to fly the Danish war ensign on certain distances, later the companies acquired the right to fly ensigns distinguished by company emblems. This article gives an overview of the basic company ensign designs, identifying some common design elements (Royal crowns, ciphers, and company initials) and two main patterns of supporters (lions or wild men). Great variations existed in the design of the company emblems, both between companies and over time within the same company. Vexillologists should take care not to assume any standard design for any of these ensigns.

Topic and aims

Vexillologists are well acquainted with the great Dutch and British trading companies of the 1600s and 1700s, notably the famous *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* and the *East India Company*. The flags flown by these companies have repeatedly been given attention by vexillologists. However, the enterprising spirit driving the Dutch and British was also shared by other Europeans. The profit made by especially the Dutch maritime merchant enterprise inspired royal authorities in Northern Europe, and in Denmark in particular, to establishing privileged trading companies of their own.

It should come as no surprise that flag privileges were among the rights granted to the companies by the crown. In this brief study, the topic is the flags of the Danish trading companies and related activities, limited in time by the year of foundation of the first Danish *East India Company*, 1616, and 1843, the year the last real Danish trading company, the *Asiatic Company*, went out of business.

A good treatment of Danish company flags is found in Henning Henningsen's study of the history and evolution of the Dannebrog (Henningsen 1969), with other and later works supplementing our knowledge on the topic under study here. The ambition in the present study is not to give definite and exhaustive answers to the many questions surrounding of the flags of Danish trading companies. Rather the aim is to collect what there is of existing knowledge on the topic of company ensigns and to systemize this into an overview of Danish trading company flags.



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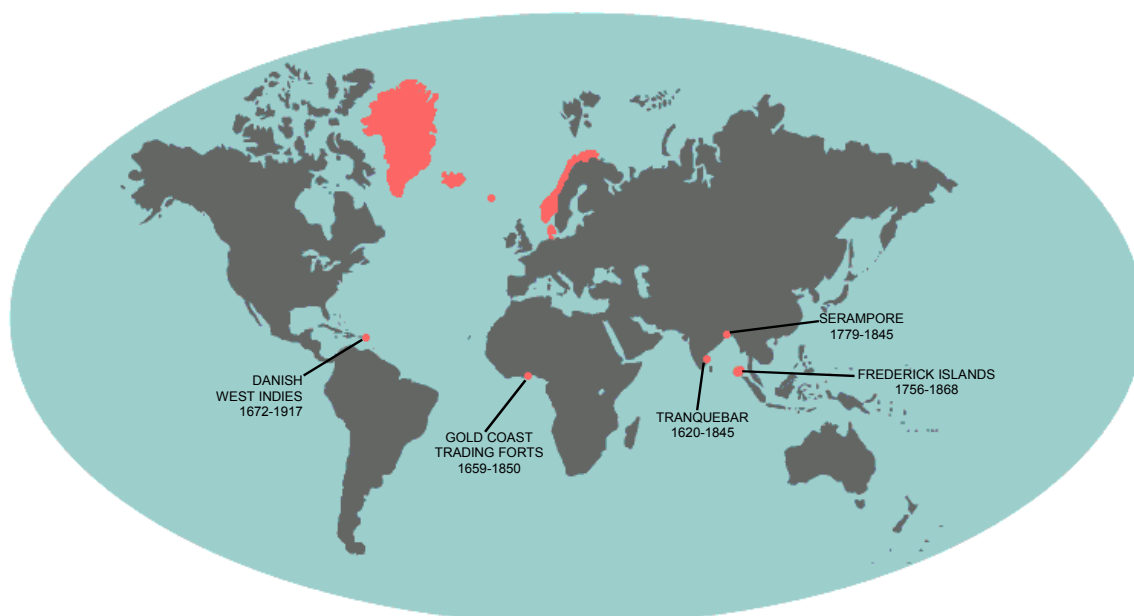


Figure 1 The possessions of the Danish crown in Northern Europe and the North Atlantic, along with its colonies overseas.

Companies and colonies

Somewhat surprising, perhaps, is the fact that Denmark had what is possibly the greatest number of chartered companies in Europe, around twenty of them in all over a period of two centuries (Feldbæk 1986, p. 9). Some of these companies operated in the Danish-Norwegian core realms, that is, in the Baltic and North Atlantic Empire that included the relatively small Kingdom of Denmark, but also the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and the Kingdom of Norway with the possessions of the Faeroes, Iceland and Greenland. This empire (Fig. 1), stretching from the continent of Europe, northwards into the Arctic and westwards over the Atlantic to the western hemisphere, held vast resources to be exploited and companies were founded to facilitate this.

However, the history of the trading companies is also linked with Denmark's colonial expansion overseas in the tropical parts of the world. For instance, the mission of the first *East India Company* was to set up a colony in Ceylon. This failed, but in 1620 Tranquebar, a small village on the east coast of India, was acquired instead. This piece of land, 50 km² large and holding 20.000 inhabitants at the peak, was a possession of Denmark until 1845 when it was sold to the British along with the lodge Serampore in today's Calcutta. Denmark also established trading forts on the Gold Coast, the first one in 1659 followed by four more later on. Trading stations and plantations inland were established as well. The Gold Coast trading forts were established to exploit the slave trade to the Americas and in the Caribbean Denmark established a colony – the Danish West Indies – in 1672. In 1850 the Danish possessions in Guinea were all sold to the British, whereas the Caribbean colony was held until sold to the USA in 1917.

Some of the most prominent Danish trading companies were engaged in trade on these colonies, enjoying a monopoly on trade or certain other privileges, such as flag privileges — which are of interest to vexillologists.

General provisions on flags and company privileges

As early as 1630, merchant ships were prohibited from flying the swallow-tailed flag of Denmark (Henningsen 1969, p. 20; Bruhn 1949, p. 194; Kjølseen 1943, p. 52). This prohibition was not respected leading to repeated proclamations laying down the rules of flag flying: Merchant ships were prohibited from flying the swallow-tailed flag of the king. One exception existed, however, and naturally, the exception favoured the trade that brought wealth to the kingdom. Thus, in 1656 the *African Company* was granted the right to fly the swallow-tailed flag and in 1669 company ships sailing on the East were granted the right to fly the “Royal flag, jack and pennant” south of the Equator. Similarly, ships sailing on the West Indies got the right to fly the swallow-tailed flag, outwards bound when they had passed the Cape Verde islands, and on the voyage homewards when they had passed the Azores (Henningsen 1969, p. 38). The Royal Proclamation dated 15. July 1690 prohibits the use of the royal swallow-tailed flag by merchant ships, but with the exceptions noted above (Bruhn 1949, p. 195). The prohibition, but also the privileges for the trading companies, was also included in the flag regulations of 1741 (Bruhn 1949, p. 195).

Though the first *East India Company*, established in 1616 and going out of business in 1650, had no explicit flag privileges, the involvement of the Crown and the Navy in the activities of the companies – the first expedition to Ceylon was commanded by Ove Giedde, an admiral – meant that in all probability the companies flew the Danish state ensign on their expeditions, or the Royal flag as the term of the day was. The privilege to do so was made explicit in article 4 of the charter of the second *East India Company* in 1670 (published in Feldbæk 1986, p. 38) and also the *African Company* established in 1659 was granted this privilege. The motivation for granting such rights to private trading companies were of course the great economic importance of the companies to the Crown and country but also the need felt by mariners for a flag of greater authority.

The charter signed by Christian VI on 12. April 1732 founded the *Asiatic Company*, also known as *The Royal Chartered Danish Asiatic Company*. Article 10 in the charter gives details of the flags to be used on company ships: “10. Ships of the Company, which sail to and from Asia, or also sail in that country, may, considering the expensive loads they sail with, and the needed respect which may be impressed upon privateers, Turks and pirates, be allowed still to use Our swallow-tailed flag, jack and pennant, required, however, that they observe, as concerns the use of pennants, the regulations and the ordinance, which were issued by Us in the Admiralty under the date 4. November 1730.” (translated from Feldbæk 1986, p. 97). This privilege was repeated in the charters of 1772 and 1792 (see Feldbæk 1986, pp. 138 and 271).

Company ensigns and the Danish flag system of 1748

In 1748 a new flag system was established in Denmark. The regulations of 11. July 1748 specified the proportions of the Danish civil ensign and also introduced a special privateer flag, having different proportions from the civil ensign, producing a flag system containing a set of Danish flags for official, semi-official and private use at sea.

The state ensign, swallow-tailed, had already been regulated and specified in

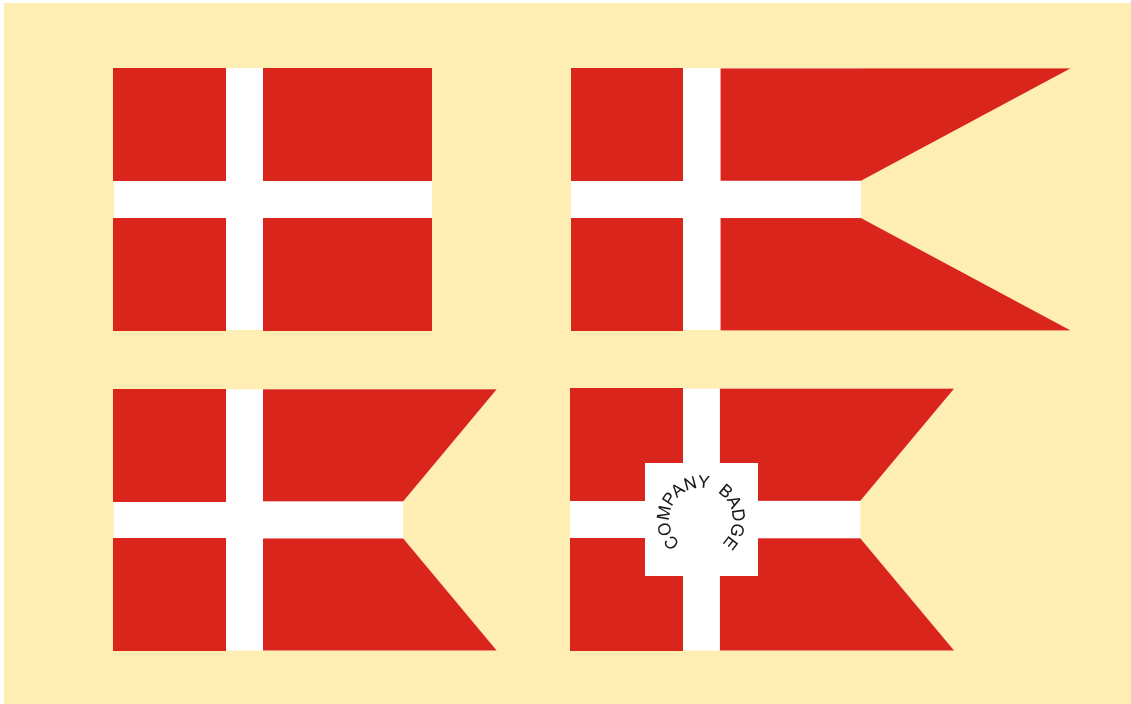


Figure 2 The Danish flag system of 1748: The civil ensign, top left, for use by civilian shipping and, top right, the war ensign, was supplemented by a special ensign for privateers, bottom left. According to regulations, the privateer ensign was to serve as the basis for company flags, bottom right.

1696, and specifications for the civil ensign followed in 1748 completing the system (Fig. 2). In addition to the state and civil ensigns, the 1748 regulations established a special ensign for privateer ships commissioned to take enemy ships as prize. This was swallow-tailed like the state ensign, but shorter. At the same time it was decreed that all chartered companies were allowed to fly flags based on the privateer ensign. According to article 8 in the *Regulation on the flags, pennants and vanes of merchant ships, privateers, and the ships of chartered companies*, dated 11. July 1748, “The Royal Chartered Companies shall fly the privateer ensign from the stern and privateer jack from the bowsprit, but in both shall be a white panel in the centre, which shall be 3 times the breadth of the cross, in which they shall place the arms of the Company.”

The 1748 decree allowed for a host of different swallow-tailed company ensigns, differing only in the badges that defaced the flags. Nevertheless, company flags show some common elements to the badges. In most cases the company badges consisted of certain elements reflecting the royal privileged status of the company, notably crowns and royal ciphers. While many elements of the design were common to ensigns, a company was identified by its unique initials.

Two main groups of company ensigns may be distinguished on the basis of a fourth design element, namely the supporters used to hold up crowns and frame ciphers and initials. Again, these design elements are of royal origins, drawing on the national heraldry of Denmark. Supporters were either lions, from the lesser coat of arms of Denmark, or wild men from the greater arms of Denmark. The third, remaining

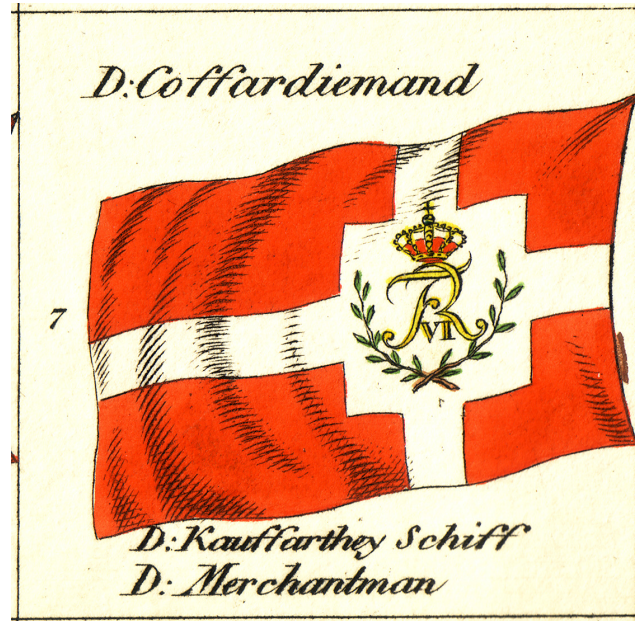


Figure 3 Company ships were not alone in flying ensigns defaced by badges. From 1757 to 1867 Danish ships sailing in the Mediterranean were required to fly the civil ensign defaced by the Royal cipher. Shown here is this ensign from the flag book by Hjorth, published in 1820, showing the ensign from the reign of king Frederick VI (1808 to 1839).

group consist of badges made up of only selected elements or just initials.

A Royal Decree dated 25. March 1757 created a similar defaced ensign for ships sailing on the Mediterranean. Ships sailing in these waters were to place the royal cipher on a white panel in the intersection of the arms of the cross (Fig. 3). This was done in order to distinguish Danish ships from those sailing under the flag of the Order of Malta. Ensigns of this kind were used until 1867 when they were abolished following the subduing of the North African states (Henningsen 1969, pp. 32-36). However, this regulation affected other shipping than company ships.

Asiatiske Kompagni (Asiatic Company)

The *Asiatic Company* was established in 1732 to trade on China and India. Its monopoly on this trade was lifted in 1772, but the company continued its business until 1843. *The Asiatic Company* acquired the privilege to fly the state war ensign in its original charter of 1732, a privilege renewed in the charters of 1772 and 1792. Further, as explained above the flag regulations of 11. June 1748 gave the *Asiatic Company* the right to a defaced flag.

The company's badge consisted of a royal crown over the royal cipher with the company's crowned initials and lions for supporters (Henningsen 1969, p. 41), as shown in the drawing from Hjort's flag book published in Copenhagen in 1820 (Fig. 4). In Hjort's illustration of the flag, the company's initials – DAC, standing for *Dansk Asiatic Kompagni* or *Danish Asiatic Company* – are intertwined, a reminder that the

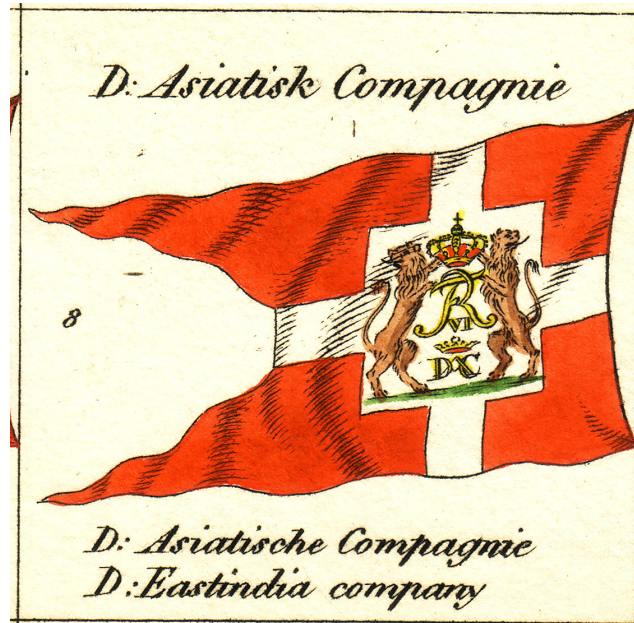


Figure 4 The Asiatic Company ensign with its lion type badge as shown in the flag book by Hjorth, 1820.



Figure 5 Danish royal ciphers appeared in different styles even for a single reigning monarch.

names and initials of these companies varied a great deal. Further, in this particular drawing we can see the cipher of Frederick the 6th who reigned from 1808 to 1839. Because of the long existence of the company, the flag of the *Asiatic Company* also took the ciphers of other kings, to be specific those of Frederick 5, Christian 7, and Christian 8 who was king when the *Asiatic Company* went out of business in 1843 (Fig. 5).

As always some care and caution is needed when dealing with illustrations of trading company flags from books and charts. For instance, in the British flag book by Norie and Hobbs, published in 1848, the *Asiatic Company* flag is shown with the inscription D'C (Norie and Hobbs [1848] 1987, plate IX, No. 112). This is no doubt a case in which the middle A has been corrupted into an apostrophe, a confusion perhaps created by a misinterpretation of intertwined initials.

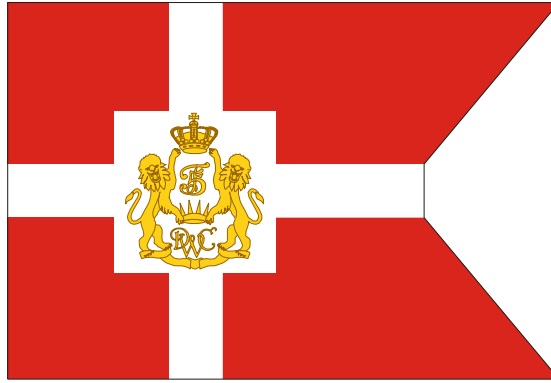


Figure 6 Author's reconstruction of the ensign of the West India Company.

Vestindiske kompagni (West India Company)

While the *Asiatic Company* traded on the East, a succession of companies was set up to participate in the triangular trade between Europe, Guinea and the Americas. One such company was the *West India Company*, or formally the *West India and Guinea Company*, established in 1671. This company was abolished in 1754 only a few years after the issuance of the flag privileges that granted defaced flags to chartered companies. This means that the *West India Company* could only fly the defaced company ensign from 1748 to 1754, in the reign of Frederick 5. Like that of the *Asiatic Company*, the *West India Company's* badge was of the lion type (Henningsen 1969, pp. 41-42), as shown in the reconstruction in Figure 6. In this drawing the royal cipher consists of a single F and 5 overlaid, whereas other versions of the cipher is in the mirror style with double Fs and 5s. This is again a reminder that ciphers in this group of flags probably varied a great deal, as did other design elements, and we should be careful not to assume any fixed designs for these flags when it comes to details.

Kongelig Østersøisk og Guineisk Handelsselskab (Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company)

The Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company was founded in July 1781 to do trade in the Baltic, in Guinea, and in the East and West Indies. This was a short lived company, as it disappeared as soon as 1787. Nevertheless, the *Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company* has left us one of the very few company ensigns still preserved. The flag, kept in the Royal Army Museum of Stockholm, was taken from the ship *Rio Volta* which used to be a slave ship for the *Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company*, but which had been leased to the Russians as a supply ship when in 1788 the Swedes captured her and the old company flag kept in a locker (Danielsson 1969; Henningsen 1969, p. 42). The badge is of the second main pattern, that is, wild men support the crown, cipher and initials. Once again we can expect to find in the company's flag only the cipher of one king, Christian 7, as reconstructed in Figure 7.

The Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company participated in the triangular trade, calling on West Africa and the Gold Coast with the Danish trading forts. The

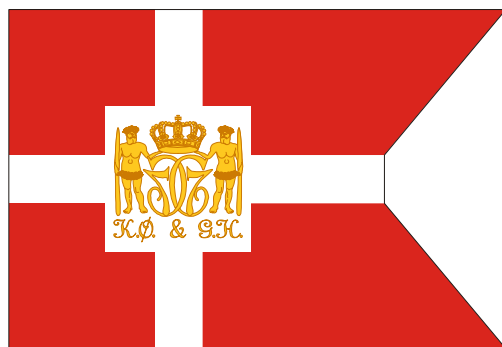


Figure 7 Author's reconstruction of the ensign of the Royal Baltic and Guinea Trading Company.

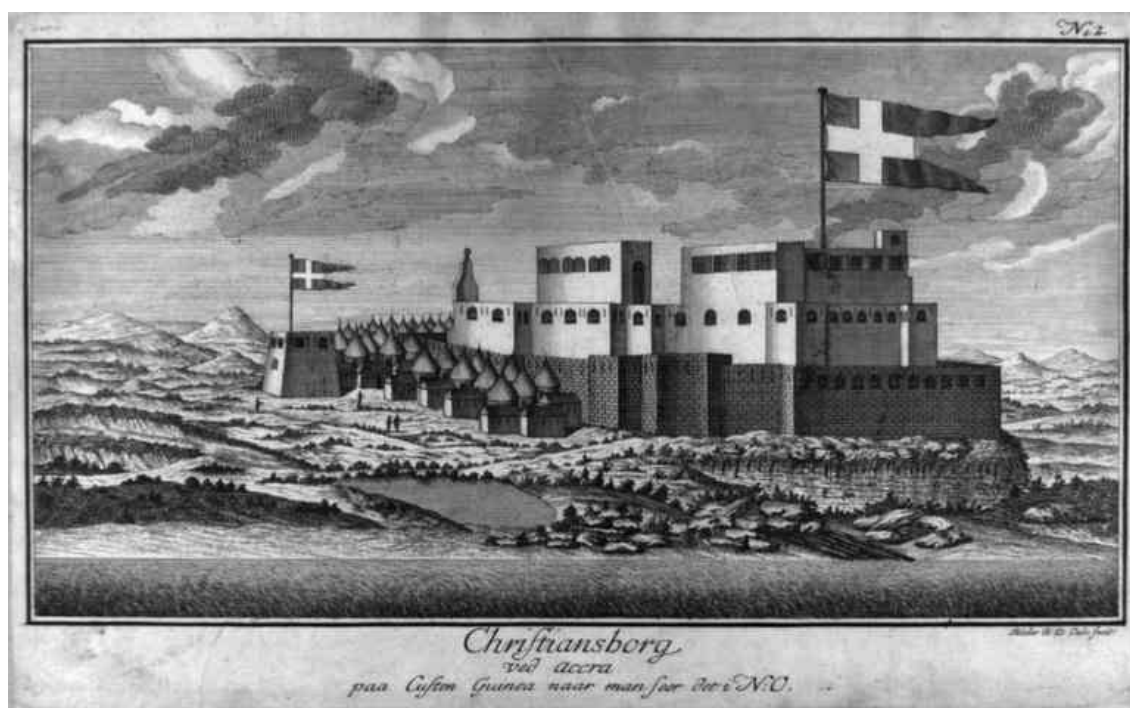


Figure 8 The Dannebrog flies from the main Danish trading fort in Guinea, Christiansborg. About 1750.

main Danish establishment was the fort Christiansborg, located in today's Accra, capital of Ghana. As can be seen from engravings from the mid 1750s (Fig. 8), the forts flew the swallow-tailed Danish state or war flag. This was the normal situation on land, even in periods when the forts and other colonies in the East or West Indies were entrusted to company administration. In other words, company flags were used only at sea. On land, the standard Dannebrog flew alone.

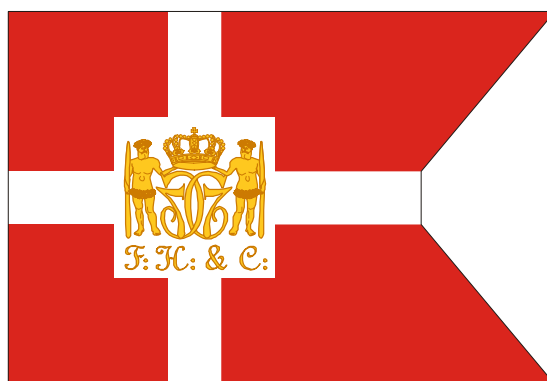


Figure 9 Author's reconstruction of the ensign of the United Trade and Canal Company.

Forenede Handels- og Canal-Compagni (United Trade and Canal Company)

In the time period we are dealing with here, Denmark controlled the duchies to its south, Schleswig and Holstein. *The United Trade and Canal Company* was established in 1782 to exploit the possibilities for trade expected from the opening of the Ejder Canal in the duchies, a canal connecting the Baltic and the North Sea. Its fortunes did not prove long lasting and the Danish state bought it out in 1784 and formally abolished it in 1787. The company flag shown here in Figure 9 is a reconstruction based on secondary reports (Henningsen 1969, p. 42). The badge is of the wild men type, with the cipher of Christian 7 and the initials F. H. & C. Some reports add an extra C at the end (Henningsen 1968, p. 135).

In the discussion so far, four company ensigns have been presented, two from each main category with either lions or wild men as supporters in the badge. However, more companies and related flags existed that do not fit into these two main groups.

Kongelig Dansk Manufaktur Handel (The Royal Danish Dry Goods Trading Company)

The *Royal Danish Dry Goods Trading Company* was in business from 1788 to 1817. According to a report from 1803 (Garde 1833, p. 389, also see Henningsen 1969, p. 42) this company acquired the right to fly an ensign consisting of a crown over the initials D.M.H. as reconstructed in Figure 10. This privilege was connected with the fact that the company was put in charge of fitting out packet ships which were to sail on the colonies in India since the *Asiatic Company* was unable to provide regular shipping services (Feldbæk 1969, pp. 225-227). It is possible, though, that some sort of misunderstanding occurred, because the packet ships, six of them in all over the period from 1803 to 1806, are reported with different flags (Henningsen 1969, p. 42). These are flags of the lion type and with the inscription reading DOP, for *Dansk Ostindisk Paketfart*, or just the word *Paquet*. In either case the cipher of Christian 7 was the one for the period in question (Fig. 11). The attribution by Smith (1975, p. 216, plate LV-b) of the DOP inscription to the *West India Company* is in any case mistaken.

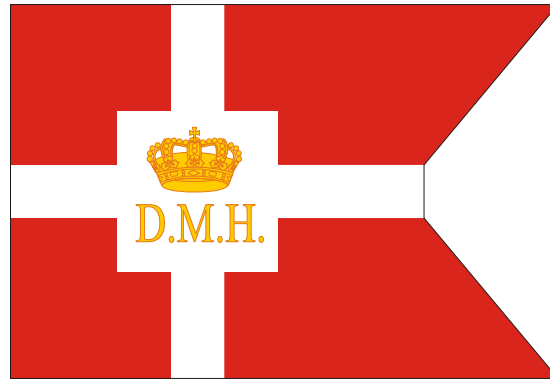


Figure 10 Author's reconstruction of the Royal Danish Dry Goods Trading Company ensign.

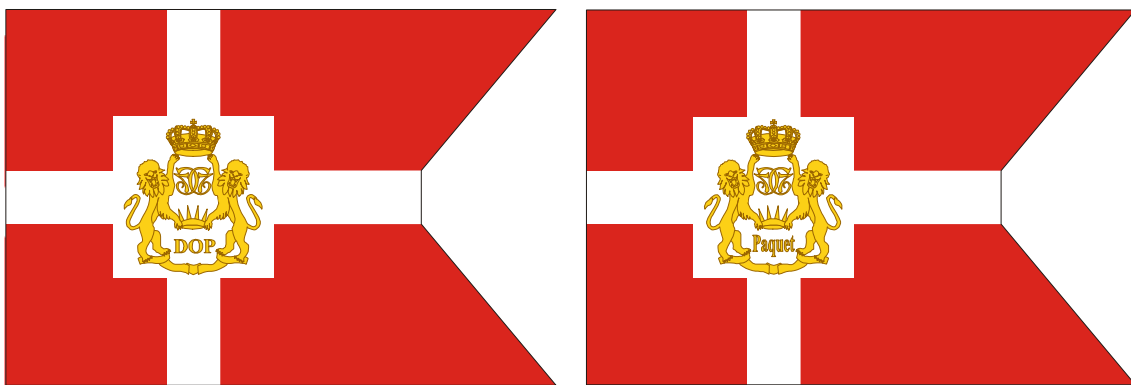


Figure 11 Author's reconstruction of the ensigns used by Danish packet ships sailing on the East.

Almindeligt Handels Compagni (General Trading Company)

The simplest form of company flag consisted of just the initials placed on a white panel in the centre of the cross. Munksgaard (1983, pp. 17-18) discusses a drawing made by a mariner from Bergen who sailed on a ship belonging to the *General Trading Company* that did business in the North Atlantic but also in the Baltic and the Mediterranean. In 1769, on a journey to the Mediterranean, North Africans captured the artist's ship and he was imprisoned for two years in Algeria. After returning home the sailor made a drawing of his ship flying a long swallow-tailed Dannebrog with simple company initials, AHC for *Almindeligt Handels Compagni*, as reconstructed in Figure 12. The long tails remind us that regulation specifications were not necessarily respected and that variation is to be expected also in the overall makeup of ensigns.

Similar initial badges may have been used also by other companies, including those mentioned above with badges consisting of crowns, ciphers and supporters, and perhaps even for ships trading under royal trade privileges like those granted for the Faeroes, Iceland or Greenland. A piece of Chinese porcelain, dated to about 1755, and in the collection of the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen, attests to this. An *Asiatic Company* ship wearing an ensign displaying only the initials DAC – *Dansk Asiatisk Compagni* – features as part of the decoration.

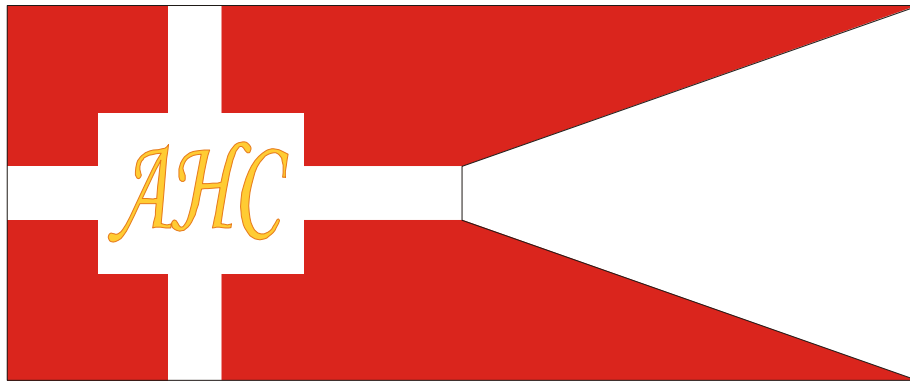


Figure 12 Author's reconstruction of the ensign of the General Trading Company.

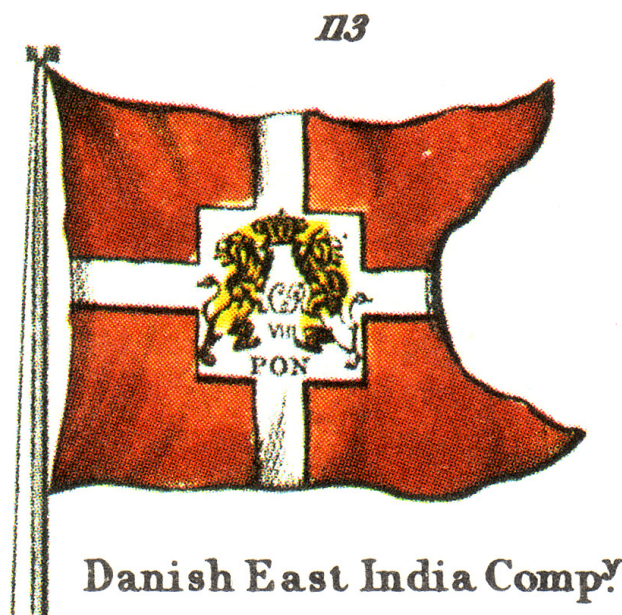


Figure 13 Ensign erroneously attributed to the East India Company by Norie and Hobbes, 1848. The initials should read POH for Particulær Ostindisk Handel (or Private East India Trade).

Private trade and the abolishment of privileged companies

In 1772 the trade on India and the Far East was liberated, that is the company monopoly on this trade was lifted. At the same time, individual privately owned ships sailing on the east were issued with a privileged type of flag modelled on company flags. A flag preserved at Kronborg in Denmark is a late example of such a flag, from the reign of Frederick 7 (1848-1863). Again we find the Danish lions as supporters and the royal cipher together with the initials POH – *Particulær Ostindisk Handel* (Henningsen 1969, pp. 42-43). And once again we find these initials corrupted in the illustration in Norie and Hobbes, the letters have been transformed from POH to PON (Fig. 13). Furthermore, the ensign is erroneously attributed to the *East India Company* (Norie and Hobbes [1848] 1987, plate IX, No. 113).

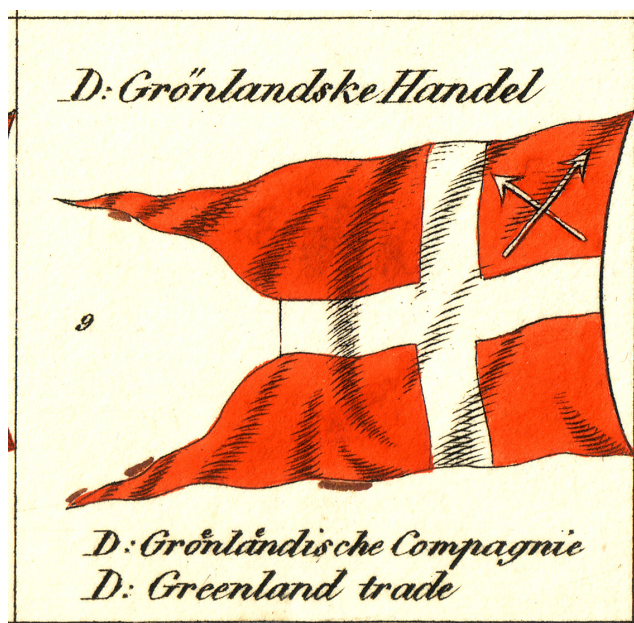


Figure 14 The Royal Greenland Trading Company flag as shown by Hjorth, 1820.

The flags referred to here, bearing the ciphers of Frederick 7 (1848-1863) and Christian 8 (1839-1848) respectively, were more or less anachronisms at this late date, the mid-19th century. Trade was free and companies were all gone. The final blow to these flags, if one was needed, came with the Shipping Registry Act of 1867 that prohibited all defaced flags for civilian shipping (including the special civil ensign for the Mediterranean which had the royal cipher). So, the era of company flags seemed to be over. But not entirely. Company flags continued to live in memory and thus Danish 'colonial trade flags' appeared in flag literature as late as the 1920s and 1930s. In the German navy's *Flaggenbuch* of 1926, for instance, appears a flag of the company type, labelled *Kolonialhandelsflagge*, and featuring a lion badge with initials DOP (*Flaggenbuch* 1926, pl. 25).

However, there was one real company flag that survived until quite recently. In 1795 a Royal Trading Company had been established to exploit the rich natural resources of Greenland, a Danish possession. This was the *Royal Greenland Trading Company*, known by the initials KGH for *Kongelig Grønlandsk Handel*. Originally meant to have those initials in the horizontal arm of the cross, it was the harpoons that came to represent the company in the flag, and the initials quietly disappeared – if they had ever been used (Gad 1972, pp. 357, 360-361), as shown here in a drawing from the 1820 flag book by F. Hjorth (Fig. 14).

Though its origins and flag dated from the time of other Danish trading companies, the *Royal Greenland Trading Company* evolved into an instrument of colonial administration and so parted way with the classical trading companies. And when other trading companies disappeared from the world's oceans, the harpoon flag continued to fly as a house flag of the *Royal Greenland Trading Company*. The company was finally entirely taken over by the Greenland home rule government in 1986 and the harpoon flag then disappeared and with it the last actively used remnant of the great Danish trading company flags.

Conclusion

Great variations existed in the design of the company ensigns: Royal ciphers changed with the succession of kings. Fluctuations of style and taste influenced the flag makers' rendering of crowns and ciphers, lions and wild men, and the lettering making up company initials. Thus, company ensigns varied, both between companies and over time within the same company. In fact, company ensigns were probably all individual in execution, made according to on some basic design elements and patterns, but being more or less different from each other in the end result. Vexillologists should take care not to assume any standard design for any of these ensigns.

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