

- LECTURE -

Lübeck and the Hanseatic League

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I

During the Middle Ages, intensive maritime networks developed in the connected space of the Baltic and the North Sea, the 'Mediterranean of the North'.ⁱ This became an organized space; that is to say, the activities of merchants were controlled with increasing attention by a loose confederation of towns that had itself emerged out of corporations of merchants. During this period, from about 1100 to about 1400, the Mediterranean became a theatre for contest between the Genoese, the Pisans, the Venetians and eventually the Catalans, who were often as keen to challenge one another as they were to join campaigns against the real or supposed enemies of Latin Christendom in the Islamic lands and in Byzantium.ⁱⁱ In the 'Mediterranean of the North', by contrast, the unity of purpose of the merchants is striking – there were, of course, rivalries, and efforts were made to exclude outsiders from England or Holland, but co-operation was the norm.

This confederation of merchants from towns along the shores of the Baltic and the North Sea, and across great swathes of the north German hinterland, is known as the German Hansa. *Hansa* or *Hanse* was a general term for a group of men, such as an armed troop or a group of merchants; in the thirteenth century the term *Hansa* was applied to different bodies of merchants, German or Flemish, from a variety of regions, for instance the Westphalian towns that gravitated around Cologne, or the Baltic towns that were presided over by the great city of Lübeck; but in 1343 the king of Sweden and Norway addressed 'all the merchants of the Hansa of the Germans', and the idea that this was the Hansa par excellence, a sort of super-Hansa embracing all the little Hansas, spread thereafter.ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase *Deutsche Hanse*; but the

official term that the early Hanseatic (or, as they are sometimes called, Hansard) merchants used for themselves in places where they successfully installed themselves, such as Bergen in Norway or the

Swedish island of Gotland, was rather different: ‘merchants of the Roman Empire’.^{iv} For even in German lands far beyond the Rhine and the Danube that had never fallen under Roman rule nobles, knights and merchants took pride in the imperial authority of the medieval German kings, most of whom received the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. The major Hansa city in the Baltic, Lübeck, was elevated to the special status of a free imperial city by Emperor Frederick II in 1226, having already received privileges from his grandfather Frederick Barbarossa in the twelfth century.

Accounts of Hanseatic history have been moulded by modern political concerns. In the late nineteenth century, Bismarck and the Kaisers dreamed of making Germany into a naval power capable of confronting the British at sea; as Admiral von Tirpitz explained, ‘Germany’s most dangerous enemy at sea is England’. The difficulty was that Great Britain appeared to possess a naval tradition that Germany lacked; with a little probing, however, just such a tradition was discovered, in the fleets of the Hansa cities. Such ideas were taken still further by historians writing under the Third Reich. By now the Hansa was associated not just with racial purity but with German conquest, because the cities founded along the shores of the Baltic by merchants and crusaders could be presented as glittering beacons of the ‘Drive to the East’ that had subjugated, and would once again subjugate, the Slav and Baltic peoples. Even after the fall of the Third Reich, the politicization of Hansa history continued, though in new directions. Since several of the most important Hanseatic towns, such as Rostock, lay along the shores of the now vanished German Democratic Republic, East German historians took an interest in the Hansa. They were wedded to Marxist ideas about class structure, and they made much of the ‘bourgeois’ character of these cities, which were by and large self-governing communities, able until the fifteenth century to fend off the attempts by local princes to draw them into their political web. East German historians also laid a strong emphasis on evidence for political protest among the artisan class in the Hansa towns, and they asked themselves whether these were places where a precocious proto-capitalism came into existence (whatever that term might mean).^v

Following the collapse of the discredited East German regime, interpretations of the history of the Hansa have swung in a different direction, with German historians once again taking the lead. The Hansa is now held up as a model of regional integration, an economic system that crossed political boundaries by linking together Germany, England, Flanders, Norway, Sweden, the future Baltic States and even Russia.

Andrus Ansip, Prime Minister of Estonia, celebrated the entry of his country into the Eurozone by declaring “the EU is a new Hansa”. Modern German accounts of the Hansa barely conceal their authors’

satisfaction that German economic dominance within Europe has what appear to be inspiring precedents going right back to the Middle Ages: the German Hansa encouraged free trade among its members and constituted a ‘super-power of money’.^{vi} There was even a degree of political integration, since over time the commercial law followed in Lübeck became standard. On the other hand, a leading French historian of the Hansa, Philippe Dollinger, took exception to the common term ‘Hanseatic League’, because the German Hansa was not one league with a central organization and bureaucracy, like the European Union, but a medley of leagues, some created only in the short term to deal with particular problems. Professor Dollinger therefore suggested, very sensibly, that the term ‘Hanseatic Community’ really fits best of all.^{vii}

In fact, all these ways of reading the history of the Hansa distort its past in a broadly similar way. The German Hansa was not simply a maritime trading network. By the fourteenth century, certainly, it had become a major naval power, able to defeat rivals for control of the waters where its members traded. Less often noticed is the significance of the inland cities that played a very important role in Hanseatic trade with England, in particular, operating under the leadership of Cologne.^{viii} Of its three major trading counters outside the network of Hanseatic cities, places where the Hanseatics were permitted to create their own towns within a town, one, Novgorod, lay inland, though the other two, Bergen and London, were only accessible by sea. The Hansa was a land-power (or maybe one should say river-power) as well as a sea-power, and its ability to draw together the interests of cities in the German hinterland and cities that gave access to good carried across the sea gave it enormous economic strength. It was a source of supply for luxury goods such as furs from Russia, spices from the Levant (by way of Bruges) and amber from the Baltic; but its members were even more active carrying uncountable barrels off herring, vast supplies of wind-dried cod, or the rye produced along the shores of the Baltic on the lands of allies such as the Teutonic Knights. Indeed, the link to this crusading order of knights, lords of large parts of Prussia and Estonia, was so close that the Grand Master of the German Order, to give the Knights their correct name, was a member of the Hanseatic parliament or Diet; as well as supplying a good part of the food the Hansa cities required if they were to survive and grow, the Grand Master was overlord of several of the towns that the German merchants had set up along the southern coasts of the Baltic.^{ix}

The presence of a crusading Military Order in the deliberations of the German Hansa also acts as a reminder that the medieval conquest of the Baltic was not simply the result of merchant endeavours. Just

as the Genoese, Pisans and Venetians took full advantage of the crusades in the Mediterranean to install themselves in the trading centres of the eastern Mediterranean, the arrival of German merchants in Prussia, Livonia (roughly Latvia) and Estonia was rendered possible by the victories of the ‘northern crusades’, wars against pagans and sometimes against the Orthodox Russians in which two German Military Orders, the Sword Brethren and the Teutonic Knights, played a leading role, as did the Danish and Swedish kings. The Sword Brethren came into existence at the start of the thirteenth century, when Albert von Buxhövdn, an enterprising cleric with close family links to the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, arrived in Latvia with 23 ships, carrying 500 crusaders. His aim was always to create a permanent German presence in the area, and so he established a trading centre at Riga in 1201. This also became the base for the crusading brethren, whose mission was to convert the local Livs (a people related to the Finns and the Estonians), if need be by force. The ‘northern crusades’ borrowed concepts and vocabulary from the more celebrated crusades to the Holy Land. Without constant supplies of state-of-the-art weaponry brought across the Baltic on Hansa ships, these campaigns against wily, well-trained, obstinate native peoples had little chance of success; as it was, the ferocity of the German onslaught did more to unite the opposition than to break it down.^x

II

Why the Germans became dominant in the Baltic and the North Sea is a good question. After all, around 1100 German ships were not seen as often in the North Sea or the Baltic as Scandinavian ones, while the Flemings were a notable presence on the river routes of northern Europe, and further south in Germany there were busy communities of Jewish merchants, especially active in the wine trade; whether deliberately excluded or simply not interested in the far-flung north, the German Jews took no part in the transformation of the Baltic and the North Sea led by the Hansa.^{xi} Until Lübeck began to flourish in the twelfth century there were no German towns on the Baltic, and the area that became the German Democratic Republic did indeed have a different identity to the rest of Germany: its inhabitants were pagan Slavs, notably the Wends or Sorbians, who still survive in the Spreewald near Berlin. The predecessor of Lübeck, Liubice or Alt-Lübeck, consisted of a fortress established by a *knes* or prince of the Polabian Slavs, while not far off another very small Slav settlement lay at Rostock, in Abotrite territory; beyond lay Rugians, Wagrians, Pomeranians – Szczecin (Stettin) close to the modern German-Polish border was famous for its three pagan temples and its strong walls.^{xii} There was an enormous variety of different peoples speaking different languages or dialects, and the fragmentation into small groups

rendered all of them much more vulnerable to the organized onslaughts of the Germans and the Danes. But there was plenty of peaceful contact too; several of these Slavonic peoples were happy to trade across the sea, which was also visited by Russian merchants, who were arriving in Gotland off Sweden.^{xiii}

The transformation of this region was, however, the work of Germans, by which one means speakers of a group of languages which (in their late medieval written form) goes under the name of Middle Low German, and which, at first glance, looks more like Dutch than the High German of further south, which meant that relations with Flemings and Hollanders were easy to maintain. Two places dominated the Baltic in the early days of the Hansa: Gotland, particularly its largest town, Visby, of which more later, and Lübeck. Lübeck was not on exactly the same site as the old town of Liubice, which seemed to be more exposed.^{xiv} The foundation of the new city happened in stages, first with the destruction of Liubice in wars between Slavs and Germans, and then with the creation of a new town by the ruler of Holstein, Adolf von Schauenburg, in 1143. During the wars against the Wends the Abotrite ruler Niklot attacked Lübeck (1147); but it was already well enough defended to resist him. On the other hand, it proved more difficult to resist the growing power of Henry the Lion, the duke of Saxony and one of the greatest princes in Germany, who refounded Lübeck in 1159, and granted it the *iura honestissima*, ‘the most honourable charter of town rights’. This gave the leading citizens power over law-making, and established them as the city elite.^{xv} A German chronicler, Helmold von Bosau, was strongly of the view that Henry was only interested in making money, and did not really care whether the Slavs in the surrounding countryside turned Christian; but Henry certainly had a good sense of what was needed to make his new city flourish:

The duke sent envoys into the northern towns and states, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Russia, offering them peace and free right of access through his town of Lübeck. He also established there a mint and a market and granted the town the highest privileges. From that time onwards there was ever-increasing activity in the town and the number of its inhabitants rose considerably.^{xvi}

He was particularly keen to attract merchants from Visby, for he well understood that a network linking Gotland, situated right in the middle of the Baltic, and Lübeck, with its access to the interior, would be extremely profitable. From 1163, Gotlanders were allowed to come to Lübeck free of tolls. Lübeck grew and grew; although the size of its population before 1300 is pure guesswork, the city is thought to have had 15,000 inhabitants at the start of the fourteenth century, and in the late fourteenth century – a time when plague had depopulated much of Europe – the population may have reached 20,000.^{xvii}

Lübeck looked in two directions. Westwards, a short overland route connected the new city to Hamburg, giving access to the North Sea, and this was guaranteed by a formal agreement between the towns in

1241; by the fourteenth century, the narrow sea passage through the Øresund, or Sound, between Denmark and what is now southern Sweden took priority. Naturally, use of that route depended on the approval of the king of Denmark, and relations between Lübeck and the Danes were not always easy. There was always the danger that the king of Denmark would come to regard these shores as his own little empire. One important result of these conquests was the foundation of satellite towns within the commercial orbit of Lübeck, towns that followed the Lübeck legal code: Rostock, Danzig (Gdansk), and so on. This 'Drive to the East' *Drang nach Osten*, in older parlance, was both maritime and terrestrial.^{xviii}

Lübeck enjoyed special status as a free imperial city, master of its own destiny. Its triumphs were expressed in the handsome Gothic buildings that the Lübeckers constructed out of brick, an expensive way to build at that time; there were grand churches, such as the Marienkirche and Sankt Petri in Lübeck itself, but also streets of gabled merchant houses, and these became the model copied by the masons of Rostock, Greifswald, Bremen, and of city after city along the great arc that stretched from Bruges to Tallinn. The design of these houses was determined by the simple need to incorporate a warehouse as well as an office and living quarters, because the Hanseatic merchants looked after their own goods rather than depositing them in central warehouses, as often happened in the Mediterranean.

III

Late medieval Lübeck gloried in the title *Caput Hanse*, 'head of the Hansa', but it is a mistake to write the history of the Hansa as the history of Lübeck. In the early days of the evolving network of what was to become the German Hansa, Gotland exercised more influence than Lübeck, benefiting from its excellent position in the middle of the southern Baltic.^{xix} It had long been a centre of Viking activity, and is the source of many of the finest images of Viking ships, carved on memorial stones. The Gotlanders laid the basis for the later successes of the German merchants who made Gotland their base.^{xx} For it was as a German base that it really flourished, and it owed a great deal to Henry the Lion's insistence that its merchants should work closely with those of Lübeck. Here, a self-governing community of German traders began to coalesce; on its seal it proudly proclaimed itself to be the 'the corporation of merchants of the Roman Empire visiting Gotland'. In the thirteenth century, enough Germans had settled permanently on the island to form a second, parallel, self-governing group, with a similar seal, but the

word ‘remaining in’, replacing ‘visiting’. The Germans had their own very magnificent church, St Mary of the Germans, which now serves as the cathedral of the island; the Germans also, as was typical at the time, used it as safe place to store goods and money. In addition to a quite formidable line of walls, more than two miles (about 3.5 km) in length, Visby contains over a dozen sizeable medieval churches, but following the city’s decline at the end of the Middle Ages, all but St Mary’s have been allowed to fall into disrepair.

One of Visby’s grandest churches, Sankt Lars, betrays the influence of Russian architectural styles; there was also a Russian Orthodox church in Visby, though this is now buried underneath a café. For Gotland was the great emporium where Russian goods such as furs and wax were received, having travelled part of the way by river, through Lake Ladoga and up the Neva into the Baltic, and then across what could be dangerous waters to Gotland itself. At the other end of the route, in Novgorod, the Gotlanders possessed their own trading colony or ‘Gothic Court’, which included a church dedicated to the Norwegian king St Olaf, in existence by about 1080.^{xxi} Novgorod was not an ancient city, as its name, ‘New City’, suggests.^{xxii} The Baltic connection was thus of great importance to Novgorod, just as the Russian connection was of great importance to Gotland; and Henry the Lion and the Lübeckers were keen to tap into that. At first, the Germans rode on the backs of the Gotlanders. In 1191 or 1192 Prince Yaroslav III of Novgorod entered into a treaty with the Gotlanders and the Germans.^{xxiii}

Within twenty years another prince of Novgorod, Konstantin, granted the Germans the right to operate from their own courtyard, dedicated to St Peter – the *Peterhof*. Actually they had already set themselves up there, and had built a stone church. The use of stone was a necessary luxury, since here too the merchants stored their wealth, carrying the chest containing the funds of the community back to Visby at the end of each winter, since there was a close period during which no German merchants were living in Novgorod, between the winter, when trade in ermine and other Arctic goods was brisk, and the summer, which was a good time to collect wax.^{xxiv} There was enormous demand throughout Europe for high-quality wax, most of which evaporated into the atmosphere when it was used in church ceremonies; and the range of furs that could be obtained from Russia and Finland was unmatched elsewhere in the north: not just plenty of cheap rabbit and squirrel furs, but pine marten, fox, and at the top of the scale white ermine (*de rigueur* at princely courts). Rising standards of living meant that demand for these products did not waver very much.

IV

Contact with Russia provided essential priming for the rise of the German Hansa; but the Baltic and the North Sea became increasingly important to the Hanseatic traders, as England and Norway became the prime focus of their longer-distance sailings, while within the Baltic rye, herrings and other basic foodstuffs became ever more important as the German cities grew, and as their persistent demand for food outstripped local resources. These towns had been founded as centres of trade and industry, but their very success turned them into major consumers of agricultural goods. This was greatly to the advantage of those who produced such food, above all the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, who was also master of extensive estates where subject Prussians and Estonians laboured on behalf of the Christian conquerors they would rather have seen defeated. This was also greatly to the advantage of the German traders, so long as their agreements with the Grand Master and other great lords enabled them to buy large quantities of rye.^{xxv}

The ships that the Hansa merchants used were, in the early days, mainly the cogs, with their shallow draught but generous cargo capacity; they had developed in the North Sea and the Baltic over several centuries. The humble cog represents the simple realities of Hansa seafaring; silk and spices certainly reached the ports of northern Germany, whether they had been carried all the way from the Mediterranean down elongated sea-routes favoured by the Venetian, Catalan and Florentine galleys of the late Middle Ages, or humped overland from the warehouse of the Germans in Venice, over the Alpine passes until they reached the rich cities of southern Germany and then embarked on further travels to reach Lübeck and its neighbours. A modern visitor to Lübeck would be missing a great treat if he or she did not visit the famous marzipan emporium of the Niederegger family, founded in 1806; but before Niederegger the city attracted ginger, sugar, cloves as well as almonds, and – most probably during the golden age of the Hansa – the north Germans discovered how they could manufacture sweetmeats and spicy sausages from the exotic trade goods that reached their cities.

The fortunes of the Hansa were not, however, built out of marzipan and gingerbread. Fish, grain and salt, apparently humble animal, vegetable and mineral staples, were not quite such modest sources of profit as might be supposed when they were traded in the astonishing quantities handled by the German Hansa. Herrings had a special place in the diet of European Christians, as far away as Catalonia: when Lent arrived, they provided the perfect substitute for forbidden meat, all the more because methods of preserving them became more sophisticated. The difficulty with herring is that it is a very oily fish, and

oily fish rot much faster than those with a very low fat content, notably cod. For this reason it was possible to produce wind dried cod, which remained edible for a good many years (after soaking), whereas herring had to be salted and pickled as quickly as possible after it was caught.^{xxvi} Tradition records that a Dutch sailor, Willem Beukelszoon from Biervliet in Zeeland, transformed the future of the herring fisheries in the fourteenth century, when he devised a method of pickling partly eviscerated herrings and placing them between layers of salt in great barrels.^{xxvii} Pioneer or plagiarist, Beukelszoon has been rated as the 157th most important Dutchman in history, not surprisingly in a nation that loves its *Nieuwe Haring* so much, but also in tribute to the fortune that the Dutch made out of exporting this humble fish in later centuries.

Nothing, though, compared to the quantities of herring to be found in the Baltic when the fish spawned off the coast of Skania, now the southernmost province of Sweden but during the Middle Ages generally under Danish rule. It was said that you could wade into the sea and scoop them out of the water with your hand; rather than sea, there was a mass of wriggling fish: ‘the entire sea is so full of fish that often the vessels are stopped and can hardly be rowed clear through great exertion’, to cite an early medieval Danish writer.^{xxviii} All this gave great impetus to the fair held on the shores of Skania, which dealt in many goods, but was most famous for its herring market; temporary shacks were set up along the shore which provided not merely housing for the thousands of people who came to the fairs, but factory space for the labour force that cured, dried, salted and in a myriad of other ways treated the fish. Visitors arrived from northern France, England and even Iceland.^{xxix} But at its peak it was not unusual for 250 ships all loaded with herring to come into port at Lubeck alone, as happened in 1368.^{xxx} Yet none of this could have happened without the availability of salt to preserve the silver harvest of herrings – indeed, some Dutch observers went further, and less poetically called it a ‘gold mine’. Here lay Lübeck’s great advantage. Not far away, near Lüneberg Heath, there lay very extensive supplies of salt.^{xxxi} As these supplies ran out they penetrated to salt-flats along the north coast of France, and eventually all the way to Portugal, in search of yet more salt for yet more herrings. This meant that their trading world embraced a great arc stretching from the Baltic through the North Sea and the English Cannel to the open Atlantic.

V

Late medieval Europe needed feeding after the calamity that struck first the Mediterranean and then northern Europe from 1347 to about 1351, followed by further periodic visitations of bubonic and

pneumonic plague. The heavy toll of the Black Death, as much as half the population in some areas, reduced pressure on supplies of the most basic foodstuffs, notably grain, but had distorting effects on the production and distribution of food. Land went out of cultivation as villages lost their manpower and became unviable; migration to the towns, where artisans were in short supply, shifted the balance between urban and rural population, so that it was no longer broadly true that up to 95% of the population of western and northern Europe lived and worked in the countryside; and even those peasants who remained in the countryside often managed to cast off what remained of the shackles of serfdom. This was the beginning of a great economic transformation, but the reconfiguration of the economy depended on the easy movement of large quantities of food. Here, transport by sea was of crucial importance, since it rendered possible the movement of really substantial quantities of grain, dried fish, dairy goods, wine, beer and other necessities or desirables, and the ability of the Hansa merchants to exploit these opportunities meant that the years around 1400, often characterized as a period of deep post-plague recession, were for them, as for merchants in many other parts of the Atlantic and Mediterranean, a time when it was possible to reap handsome profits and to answer back rulers who up to now had seen them as rather troublesome creatures, valuable as sources of supply of prestige items, but otherwise greedy and unreliable.

It comes as no surprise, then, that within a few years of the Black Death the Hansa merchants began to organize themselves much more tightly, holding regular Diets, or *Hansetage* (which were also an opportunity for Lübeck and some other leading cities to throw their weight around). This has generally been characterized as a shift from the 'Hansa of the merchants' to the 'Hansa of the Towns', even the true creation of what one might call a 'Hanseatic League'.^{xxxii} The first Diet was held at Lübeck in 1356, mainly to deal with the growing threat of piracy; by 1480 seventy-two Diets had been held. It is no surprise that fifty-four of these gathered in Lübeck; and, apart from a single meeting in Cologne, they were always held in towns next to or quite near the sea.^{xxxiii} This development did not mean that the Hansa had become a state-like body; it remained a loose super-league, bringing together groups of allied cities from regions as diverse as the Rhineland, where Cologne dominated, the southern or 'Wendish' Baltic, which was Lübeck's informal *imperium*, and the newer cities of the eastern Baltic, of which Riga was the most important. Minutes of the Diets were kept; but there was no administrative super-structure, and there were no formal treaties that members signed to gain entry to the Hansa. Maybe, indeed, this was one of its sources of strength. On the other hand, the lack of a constitution allowed the citizens of Lübeck to turn their *de facto* leadership of the Hansa to their advantage, and, despite grumbles

from Danzig and Cologne, the special status of Lübeck was never really in doubt; its size, wealth and location gave it formidable advantages. Including every city that at some stage was regarded as a Hansa town, the total comes to about 200, far too many to fit in the assembly hall provided by the good burghers of Lübeck; most were far too small to exercise any political influence, and what they sought was tax advantages and trading opportunities. This was particularly true of the horde of inland towns, such as Hameln of Pied Piper fame, or Berlin, as yet not a place of great significance.^{xxxiv}

After 1356 the Hansa did show much more muscle, resisting predatory pirates known as the *Vitalienbrüder* who made a nuisance of themselves at the end of the fourteenth century. The *Vitalienbrüder* preyed on Hanseatic and other vessels in the Baltic. The herring fisheries were placed in danger, and for a few years supplies to the rest of the world faltered. Over the centuries the *Vitalienbrüder* have acquired a more romantic image; plenty of novels and films present one of their pirate leaders, Klaus Störtebeker, in a better light than he deserves. Before they were checked, they were well enough organized to grab hold of Gotland for a time and then, when conditions in the Baltic became too risky, they decamped to the East Frisia in the North Sea and carried on marauding there. Störtebeker was captured, and in 1401 he and his close companions underwent a grim execution at the hands of the resentful citizens of Hamburg. Such problems meant that the Hansa Diets did have matters of real political and military (or rather naval) importance to discuss, and this helped it to coalesce as a ‘Hansa of the towns’; but there was no sense in which the cities sought ‘ever-closer integration’ after the manner of the European Union.

Beneath the level of the grand Diet, there existed other regional groupings of Hansa towns that met regularly, and here, as might only be expected, petty local rivalries transcended the major issues such as relations with Denmark or the competition of Dutch and English merchants.^{xxxv} In addition to internal tensions, there was the problem that the Hansa Diet expected to make its decisions unanimously, and that delegations would often insist that they had no authority to support a particular position; the Diet was not a parliament where common problems were aired, discussed and resolved, but a place where decisions (often those of Lübeck and its major allies) were recorded and announced – that, indeed, was how a good many late medieval parliaments functioned. Cities might or might not bother to send delegates to the *Hansetag*, though not surprisingly the larger and more powerful ones were more careful to do so. But this did not make it easy to address the issues that were in the air. It must at time have seemed that this was Lübeck’s opportunity to show off its commanding position. The effectiveness of the

Hansa lay in the expertise of the merchants who inhabited its cities rather than in its institutional structure, which remained fragile.

VI

The different communities that made up the Hansa were bonded together by the presence of travelling merchants, some passing through briefly and others settling alongside their fellow Lübeckers (or whoever they were). Members of the Hansard family felt at home in the ports of a great swathe of northern Europe. In the early fifteenth century, two brothers, Hildebrand and Sivert von Veckinchusen, worked with family members and agents in London, Bruges, Danzig, Riga, Tallinn and Tartu (also known as Dorpat), as well as Cologne and distant Venice, sharing the same work ethic, business methods and cultural preferences. In 1921, a mass of over 500 letters between members of the family was found buried in a mass of peppercorns within a chest that is now in the State Archives of Estonia at Tallinn. In addition, their account books survive. No other Hanseatic family is as well documented. The Veckinchusens are of interest precisely because they were not always successful, and their careers show clearly the risks that needed to be taken if the trade routes were to be kept alive at a time when piracy remained a constant threat, when the Danes were still flexing their muscles in the Baltic, when English sailors were trying to carve out their own niche in the market, and when internal tensions within the Hansa towns threatened to upset the apple-cart.^{xxxvi}

The Veckinchusen brothers originated in Tartu in what is now Estonia, although they eventually became citizens of Lübeck.^{xxxvii} They are known to have been based in Bruges in the 1380's. They therefore operated between the two most important trading centres of northern Europe, which were linked by the Hanseatic sea-route through the Øresund.^{xxxviii} The Hansa community in Bruges operated rather differently from Novgorod, London and Bergen, where the German merchants possessed a reserved space and were closely concentrated together. The concentration of merchants of different backgrounds provided Bruges with its *raison d'être*. Although a very large city by medieval standards, with up to 36,000 inhabitants of the eve of the Black Death, Bruges itself was not the prime target of all those traders who came there, though the arrival of large amounts of Baltic rye and herring did help to keep the citizens well fed. Particularly in the fifteenth century, one of the main functions of the merchant communities in Bruges was quite simply to settle bills. The city became the major financial centre in northern Europe, which meant that even as its port silted up and fewer goods actually passed through the city, there was

for a time still plenty of work for those well practised in the art of accounting. The Veckinchusens were primarily dealers in commodities, but currency exchange and the provision of letters of credit was a source of profit for them and their peers, even though the Hansards left the creation of international banks mainly to the Italians – the Medici had an important branch in Bruges.^{xxxix} Generally, the Hansards showed a suspicion of reliance on credit that meant their financial methods never reached the sophistication of those achieved by the Florentines and Genoese. Even so, late medieval Bruges was to the economy of large swathes of Europe what modern London has become within the global economy.^{xi}

The Veckinchusens were not wedded to Bruges. Indeed, when Hildebrand found a bride, she was a young woman from a prosperous Riga family.^{xii} Going to Riga for his wedding, which had been arranged by one of his brothers, gave him the chance to experience the route to Novgorod, where the Hansa *Kontor* continued to flourish, and where he brought for sale thirteen bolts of cloth of Ypres, the total length of which would have been about 300 metres, in other words a sizeable quantity of some of the best woollen cloth Flanders looms were then producing. This he sold for 6,500 furs, which gives some idea not just of the high value of Flemish cloth but of the easy availability of squirrel, rabbit and finer skins in fifteenth-century Russia.^{xiii} In good years, the Veckinchusens could hope for profits in the range of 15 to 20%.^{xiiii} Meanwhile his brother Sivert, now living in Lübeck, warned him that he was taking too many financial risks – ‘I’ve warned you again and again that you stakes are too high’ – which led him to send his wife and children to live in Lübeck; but he was convinced he could make money by staying put in Bruges.^{xlv} This obstinacy in his business dealings was to cost him dear over the next few years.

Hildebrand returned to Bruges and tried to keep himself afloat with Italian loans, but he began to realize he could not repay them, and fled to Antwerp in the vain hope of escaping his creditors. Lured back to Bruges by promises that his friends would help him sort out his affairs, he soon found himself in the debtor’s prison, where he lingered in misery for three or four years.^{xlv} Conditions in the prison were not too bad, if means could be found to pay for food and the rent of a private room; but by the time he was released, in 1426, Hildebrand was evidently a broken man. One of his old partners wrote in pity: ‘God have mercy on you, that it has happened to you this way’.^{xlvi} He set out for Lübeck but he died within a couple of years, no doubt worn out by his trials.^{xlvii} His ambitions had never been matched by his success.

By the end of his life Hildebrand had been let down by his family, but family solidarity was the key to the success of these Hanseatic trading families. None is quite as well documented as the Veckinchusens, but there is no reason to suppose their rise and fall was unusual; trade was about risks, and in an age of piracy

and naval wars the chances of always making a profit were slim. Interestingly, the places that attracted the strongest interest of the Veckinchusen clan were cities on or close to the sea, with the exception of the Hanseatic outlier Cologne and their mistaken ventures overland through the south German cities to Venice. This suggests that the routes across the sea carried the lifeblood of the Hansa, and that the many towns of northern Germany that became members were mainly interested in the goods that traversed the Baltic and the North Sea. In other words, when the Kaiser's historians laid all the emphasis on the Hansa fleets and ignored the inland towns, they were not completely distorting the character and history of the German Hansa.

VII

The Veckinchusens differed from many Hansard contemporaries in their lack of strong interest in fish and grain. Making a fortune from fish was possible outside the Baltic too, and success did not depend entirely on humble herrings. The cod fisheries of northern Norway, and the opportunities for catching the same fish out in the open Atlantic off Iceland or even Greenland, also brought prosperity to the willing partners of the Hansa and the Norwegian monarchy. There were several types of dried and salted cod, but the development of wind-drying in little harbours along the coast of Norway, where Atlantic winds turned the supple flesh of these large fish into leathery triangular slabs, created an article of trade that lasted for years without rotting, and that satisfied the increased demand for high protein foodstuffs that the smaller post-Black Death population found itself able to afford. Norway also became a good source of dairy goods for grain production was poor, while mountain pastures were abundant, and dairy products were exchanged for imported rye and wheat. As diet improved, so did the revenues of the Hansa merchants and the king of Norway. But even before that, the German merchants had identified Bergen as the obvious centre in which to concentrate much of their North Sea business. It was the seat of a royal palace, and not much could be achieved without the king's protection. The town had emerged by the twelfth century – tradition recorded its foundation by King Olaf the Tranquil in 1070, but evidence from excavations shows that the wooden structures that lined the shore began to be constructed around 1120, though again and again (even in very modern times) fire has laid waste this cluster of buildings, the Bryggen or 'wharves' that became the home to the Hansa merchants in the city. Judging from this evidence, it is now clear that the prosperity of Bergen was not created by the German merchants, but that they chose this site as their base because it was already a flourishing centre of exchange for furs, fish, seal products, and all the other products of the forests, fjords and open sea further to the north; as has been

seen, it was already the harbour to which ships moving back and forth to Iceland would come, a 'natural gateway' and 'nodal point of trans-shipment', to cite a Norwegian historian of the city's origins.^{xlviii}

By 1300 the German community in Bergen consisted not just of those who arrived by sea each spring, but the 'winter-sitters' who took up residence over the winter, and alongside them there were shoemakers and other German craftsmen who had been settling in the town since at least 1250. By 1300 the Hansa merchants in Bergen had learned how important it was to work together in the face of the combination of suspicion and welcome that they faced in their dealings with the kings of Norway. Within Bergen, a corporate identity emerged, and this was recognized by the crown: in 1343, for the first time, the Hanseatic traders were described as 'the merchants of the Hansa of the Germans' (*mercatores de Hanse theotonicorum*). What came into being over the next few years (certainly before 1365) is known as the *Kontor* or 'Counter', a tightly controlled organization that negotiated for and managed the lives of the German merchants trading through Bergen. It was, in effect, a body of Lübeckers, operating under the commercial law of Lübeck, though there were also members from Hamburg, Bremen and elsewhere: 'the counter was a branch office of Lübeck', in effect an extra-territorial enclave.^{xlix} The fact that the Germans lived under their own law is just one sign of their separation from the other inhabitants of Bergen, but after the middle of the fourteenth century the great majority of Hansa merchants lived in Bryggen, in the closely-packed wooden houses right by the harbour that formed a German enclave.¹

The Bryggen area was a tight fit; around 1400 there were about 3,000 Germans in a city of 14,000 inhabitants, but of course some were seasonal visitors. Many were quite young apprentices and journeymen who faced a tough life during the seven to ten years that carried them up a strict hierarchy from the modest status of *Stubenjunge* through the honourable status of *Meister*. Living conditions were strictly controlled, and for part of the year apprentices were largely confined to the house where they were attached. They were male-only settlements, and the apprentices lived in narrow dormitories, working a twelve-hour day, excluding meal-times. The fact was that many crept out at night, finding their way to the red light district that lay just behind the Hansa quarter; but to do so meant avoiding massive guard dogs that were placed around the outer edges of the Bryggen houses, to deter not just intruders but escapees. Fear of liaisons with Norwegian women was stimulated by the assumption that people living in the *Kontor* would give away to local wives or to whores all the trade secrets they had learned: they might 'tell the native woman under the influence of her charm, as well as that of liquor, things she had best not know.' On the other hand, the fine for being found with a 'loose woman' was a keg of beer – the woman suffered much worse, by being thrown into the harbour. Journeymen were subjected to

brutal initiation rituals, which might include such wholesome entertainment as being roasted by a fire while suspended in a chimney, being half-drowned in the harbour and being ceremonially flogged.ⁱⁱ Life in the *Kontor* can best be described as harsh and hard, but not insufferable. The *Kontor* was a place where German merchants learned the art of honest trade, and where they were made fully conscious of the fact that they were Hanseatics (mainly Lübeckers) first, and inhabitants of Bergen second. Moreover, as in Novgorod, the Bergen *Kontor* provided access to lands and products far beyond the intricate network of Hansa members. Novgorod, Bergen, London and Bruges were not members of the Hansa; but these and smaller centres outside the Hansa area were vital components in the Hanseatic system.

VIII

London, by far the largest city in England, was, not surprisingly, their headquarters. There, they operated from their *Kontor* next to the Thames at what was known as the *Stahlhof* or 'Steelyard'. The name seems to be a corruption of the term *Stapelhof*, 'courtyard for trading staple goods', and has nothing actually to do with steel. The site of the German *Kontor* in London has been covered over by Cannon Street Railway Station, constructed in the middle of the nineteenth century; the builders swept away entire Steelyard, down to its foundations. There were three gateways, the largest of which was rarely used, and there was a great hall; there were warehouses and sleeping quarters, as well as administrative offices. Nonetheless, the Steelyard was not a particularly imposing place, compared to the courtyards and quadrangles that existed elsewhere in London, such as the Inns of Court, by now an enclave for lawyers. Rather, the Steelyard was a packed space, a business quarter where hardly an inch of space was wasted. The Hansards wanted privileges, not fine buildings.

As in Bergen, the London *Kontor* formed a privileged enclave, enjoying both royal protection and self-government. England was a highly desirable market for both Flemish and German traders. The country supplied excellent wool, which was hungrily consumed by the looms of the Flemish cities, while the English developed a taste for Rhineland wines by the late eleventh century, and probably much earlier. Yet wine was by no means the most important item to cross the North Sea from Germany. So strong was demand for English produce that silver flooded into the kingdom, which was able to maintain a high-quality silver currency in the thirteenth century while other parts of Europe constantly devalued their silver coinage by adding base metals. No other European kingdom was as rich in silver and of no other no other kingdom can it be said that the silver content of its coinage remained stable all the way from the

ninth century to 1250. By 1200 the influx of silver, mainly from the rich mines that had been opened up in Germany, led to quite serious price inflation that affected basic commodities such as foodstuffs.^{lii} ‘Sterling silver’, today set at a standard of 925^o/oo, has a long history. There were ugly moments when Germans were accused of piracy against ships bearing English wool across the North Sea, leading to exemplary confiscations of German property in the kingdom. The relationship between the Hansa and the English crown was not, then, a smooth one, and there were quarrels that led to Hanseatic boycotts, or royal arrests of Germans. But on balance the two sides needed one another.

In the fifteenth century, the entire space between England and the eastern Baltic was abuzz with trade, and, more than ever, it makes sense to describe this area as the ‘Mediterranean of the North’.^{liii} And what is really striking is that – by contrast with the heavy involvement of the Italian merchants in the Mediterranean in luxury trade – the Hansards were, by and large, making their money out of humbler products where quantity rather than quality was the real source of profit. But in the process they created a commercial network that dominated the seas of northern Europe for hundreds of years.

ⁱ P. Dollinger, *The German Hansa* (London, 1970), p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Abulafia, *Great Sea*, pp. 287-369.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. xix-xx..

^{iv} G. Graichen, R. Hammel-Kiesow, A. Hesse, N. Mehler, J. Sarnowsky, *Die Deutsche Hanse: eine heimliche Supermacht* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2011), p. 115.

^v J. Schildhauer, K. Fritze, W. Stark, *Die Hanse* (Berlin DDR, 1982); J. Schildhauer, *The Hansa: History and Culture* (Leipzig, 1985).

^{vi} Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, p. 6.

^{vii} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. xx.

^{viii} See the EU-funded *Hansearte, Map of the Hanseatic League* (Lübeck, 2014).

^{ix} J. Sarnowsky, ‘Die Hanse und der Deutsche Orden – eine ertragreiche Beziehung’, in Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, pp. 163-81.

^x Kasekamp, *History of the Baltic States*, pp. 12-13.

^{xi} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. 4.

^{xii} Christiansen, *Northern Crusades*, pp. 29-31.

^{xiii} Schildhauer, *The Hansa*, p. 20.

^{xiv} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, doc. 1, p. 379.

^{xv} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. 22.

^{xvi} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, doc. 1, p. 380; Schildhauer, *The Hansa*, p. 19.

^{xvii} R. Hammel-Kiesow, ‘Novgorod und Lübeck: Siedlungsgefüge zweier Handelsstädte im Vergleich’, in N. Angermann and K. Friedland, *Novgorod: Markt und Kontor der Hanse* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Hansische Geschichte, neue Folge, Bd 53, Cologne, 2002), p. 53.

^{xviii} Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 31-35; R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950-1300* (London, 1993).

^{xix} D. Kattinger, *Die Gotländische Gesellschaft: der frühhansisch-gotlandische Handel in Nord- und Westeuropa* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Hansische Geschichte, neue Folge, Bd 47, Cologne, 1999).

- xx Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. 7.
- xxi Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 7-8, 27; North, *Baltic*, pp. 43-46.
- xxii M.W. Thompson, *Novgorod the Great: Excavations at the Medieval City 1951-62 directed by A.V. Artikhovskiy and B.A. Kolchin* (London, 1967), p. 12; Hammel-Kiesow, 'Novgorod und Lübeck', p. 60; E.A. Rybina, 'Früher Handel und westeuropäische Funde in Novgorod', in Angermann and Friedland, *Novgorod*, pp. 121-32.
- xxiii Dating revised from 1189: A. Choroškevič, 'Der Ostsee Handel und der deutsch-russisch-gotländische Vertrag 1191/1192', in S. Jenks and M. North, eds., *Der Hansische Sonderweg? Beiträge zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Hanse* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur Hansische Geschichte, neue Folge, Bd 39, Cologne, 1993), pp. 1-12; also B. Schubert, 'Die Russische Kaufmannschaft und ihre Beziehung zur Hanse', *ibid.*, pp. 13-22; B. Schubert, 'Hansische Kaufleute im Novgoroder Handelskontor', in Angermann and Friedland, *Novgorod*, pp. 79-95; E. Harder-Gersdorff, 'Hansische Handelsgüter auf dem Großmarkt Novgorod (13.-17. Jh.): Grundstrukturen und Forschungsfragen', *ibid.*, pp. 133-43.
- xxiv Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 27-30.
- xxv North, *History of the Baltic*, pp. 40-43.
- xxvi Fagan, *Fish on Friday*, pp. 51-56.
- xxvii J. van Houtte, *An Economic History of the Low Countries 800-1800* (London, 1977), p. 90.
- xxviii Saxo Grammaticus (c.1150-c.1220), cited by J. Gade, *The Hanseatic Control of Norwegian Commerce during the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden, 1951), p. 17.
- xxix Gade, *Hanseatic Control*, pp. 17-18.
- xxx Schildhauer, Fritze, Stark, *Die Hanse*, pp. 99-100.
- xxxi A.R. Bridbury, *England and the Salt Trade in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 94-8.
- xxxii H. Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors: an analysis of systems change* (Princeton NJ, 1994), pp. 109-29; T. Brady, *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450-1550* (Cambridge, 1985).
- xxxiii Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 88-93.
- xxxiv Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. 91.
- xxxv Dollinger, *German Hansa*, p. 96.
- xxxvi W. Stieda, *Hildebrand Veckinchusen: Briefwechsel eines deutschen Kaufmanns im 15. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1921); M. Lesnikov, *Die Handelsbücher des Hansischen Kaufmannes Veckinchusen* (Berlin, 1973); M. Lesnikov and W. Stark, *Die Handelsbücher des Hildebrand Veckinchusen* (Quellen und Darstellungen zur hansischen Geschichte, Band 67, Cologne, 2013); A. Lorenz-Ridderbecks, *Krisenhandel und Ruin des Hansekaufmanns Hildebrand Veckinchusen im späten Mittelalter: Untersuchung des Briefwechsels (1417-1428)* (Hamburg, 2014), pp. 13, 15, 27, 32-33; Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, pp. 222, 233 [illustrating the chest full of pepper].
- xxxvii Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, p. 223.
- xxxviii Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, p. 227; Lorenz-Ridderbecks, *Krisenhandel und Ruin*, p. 25.
- xxxix Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, pp. 231-2.
- xl Van Houtte, *Bruges*, pp. 41, 57-8; J. Murray, *Bruges, Cradle of Capitalism, 1280-1390* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 244-5.
- xli Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, p. 229.
- xlii J. Martin, *Treasure in the Land of Darkness: the Fur Trade and its Significance for Medieval Russia* (Cambridge, 1986).
- xliii Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, p. 234.
- xliv Gies, *Merchants and Moneymen*, p. 206.
- xlvi Gies, *Merchants and Moneymen*, p. 214; Graichen et al., *Die Deutsche Hanse*, pp. 240-2; Lorenz-Ridderbecks, *Krisenhandel und Ruin*, pp. 69-95.
- xlvi In modern German: *Gott erbarme, daß es mit Dir so gekommen ist*: Lorenz-Ridderbecks, *Krisenhandel und Ruin*, p. 13.
- xlvii Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 165-6, 173-6; Gies, *Merchants and Moneymen*, pp. 209-14.
- xlviii K. Helle, 'The emergence of the twon of Bergen in the light of the latest research results', in A. Graßmann, ed., *Das Hansische Kontor zu Bergen und die Lübecker Bergenfahrer – International Workshop Lübeck 2003* (Veröffentlichungen zur Geschichte der Hansestadt Lübeck herausgegeben vom Arciv der Hansestadt, Reihe B, Band 41, Lübeck, 2005), pp. 12-27; also A. Nedkvitne, *The German Hansa and Bergen 1100-1600* (Cologne, 2013).
- xlix Gade, *Hanseatic Control*, p. 55.
- ¹ G.A. Ersland, 'Was the Kontor in Bergen a topographically closed entity?', in Graßmann, *Das Hansische Kontor zu Bergen*, pp.41-57; Gade, *Hanseatic Control*, p. 51.

ⁱⁱ Gade, *Hanseatic Control*, pp. 74-7, 80-81.

ⁱⁱⁱ P.D.A. Harvey, 'The English Inflation of 1180-1220', *Past and Present*, no. 61 (1973), pp. 26-27.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Richards, 'Hinterland and Overseas Trade', p. 19; W. Stark, 'English Merchants in Danzig', in Friedland and Richards, eds., *Essays in Hanseatic History*, pp. 64-6; Fudge, *Cargoes, Embargoes*, p. 10.