

# Brokering Commerce, Brokering Culture in Medieval Europe

The Low Countries and the German Hanse

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[ P E T E R S T A B E L ]



Arrival of a wine cargo  
in the port of Bruges.

Miniature from a *Bréviaire*  
attributed to Simon Bening  
from Ghent. 16th century.

Codex lat. 23.638,

fol. II verso.

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek,  
Munich.



Jan Gossaert, *Portrait of  
a Merchant*. c.1500.

Panel. National Gallery,  
Washington D.C.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Bruges was the main international commercial hub in North-West Europe. Merchants active on the Bruges market came from every known part of Christian Europe and included traders from the Italian cities, from the Iberian kingdoms, from the French Atlantic coast, from the British Isles, from the Low Countries and from Germany. What few tourists visiting Bruges today realise is that this thriving international community traded in the midst of the most severe economic crisis Europe has ever experienced. Bruges' prosperity was built on a pragmatic reaction to economic chaos. The fourteenth century witnessed massive epidemics (the Black Death from 1348) and a complete disruption of the economy that struck the continent after a period of growth lasting three centuries. On top of which, the crisis was worsened by chronic warfare among the emerging European states.

Because the traditional trading mechanisms in medieval Europe collapsed in the first half of the fourteenth century, the overland routes and the Champagne fairs, which connected two very different systems of trade in Southern and Western Europe, were abandoned. Instead maritime trade took over. Italian and later Iberian merchants entered the Northern seas, while Flemish *active trade* disappeared from the British Isles, France, the Mediterranean and also the Baltic region. However, the growth of maritime trade also created new possibilities. In particular, Hanseatic trade profited. In trading cities such as Bruges and London, Hanseatic traders could meet with other merchants and develop close ties with the manufacturing capacity of North-West Europe (textiles, in particular Flemish and Brabant cloth). The concentration of international trade in a few cities reduced transaction costs and eased the development of and access to banking facilities. It also allowed a dramatic change in the structure of commercial firms, as merchants became more sedentary and started to rely more and more on agents.

### The German Hanse and European history

One of the key players on the Bruges market was undoubtedly the German Hanse. In recent years scholars have shown a renewed interest in this phenomenon. This revival is no coincidence. In a period when globalisation is associated with both economic change and a sense of lost identity, and when the European Union tends increasingly to dominate daily life, such an interest is hardly surprising. The more so, because after German reunification the expansion of the EU towards the countries in Central and Eastern Europe has now become a reality, and hence the geographical scope of the union is shifting in very radical way away from the heartlands of Western Europe, towards Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, this development is quite similar to developments that took place in medieval Europe, when German colonisation reached the

Anonymous (Gouda School), *Shipyards*. 1565. Panel. Stedelijk Museum Het Catharina-Gasthuis, Gouda.



Baltic region and the commercial expansion of German cities linked North and North-East Europe with the mainstream of the European economic system. And indeed scholars have not failed to point to these remarkable similarities. The more so because the medieval German Hanse proved to be a carrier not only of economic commodities and wealth, but also of language, culture and social custom, in the same way as economic globalisation and political unification in Europe is acting today. The Hanse serves as a historical example of how integration was achieved in the past.

When German merchants founded their commercial organisation in Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland in 1161, they undoubtedly failed to realise that this experiment in mutual support would start to dominate and only a few decades later would even monopolise international trade in Northern and Eastern Europe. In the beginning it was only a simple association of individual German merchants trading on the island. The risks involved in international trade required a more formal league of trading towns, however, and so in the thirteenth century the German Hanse was born. The Hanse quickly developed into a territorial power, a league of some two hundred towns scattered from the northern Low Countries (Deventer, Zwolle) in the West, via the North Sea and the Baltic shores to today's Finland and the Baltic states in the East. At the edges of its zone of influence it created trade settlements, the so-called *kontore*, in Bruges, in London (the "Steelyard") and in Novgorod in Russia and Bergen in Norway.

Hanseatic trade expanded rapidly eastward along the shores of the Baltic to Russia. New trading cities were founded along the coast, and local Slavic populations were brought under the control of German law. Rostock was founded in 1200, Riga in 1201, while Stralsund and Danzig (Gdansk) became important transit cities for inland trade. From 1230 the conquests by the Teutonic Order, a religious order of knights, were brought into the Hanseatic sphere of influence, and the towns of Torn and Königsberg (today's Kaliningrad) were founded. In Western Europe there was of course no policy of colonisation, but here trade was organised systematically in the *kontor*-cities with Flemish, English, French, Iberian and Italian merchants from the thirteenth century onwards. Hanseatic *cogs* – the most popular ship in the northern seas of medieval Europe – were ever more numerous along the shores of the North Sea, and gradually Hanseatic shipping also reached the French Atlantic coast.

## Hanseatic trade

In this way the German Hanse became a unique creation of the Middle Ages, because of its dimensions, its political aspirations, and its commercial impact. Despite the fact that international trade was dominated by the technically advanced Italian merchants, and that it was the North Sea region (with the urban- and rural-based export industries of the Low Countries) which provided the setting for exchange between Southern and Northern Europe, the North German merchants were able to develop international trade in North-East Europe and to integrate this area economically into the mainstream of the European economy.

The key to the Hanse's success was the matching nature of the trade flows between Central and Eastern Europe, and Western and Southern Europe. This

complementarity was based on the balance between an advanced commercial and industrial system in the West and a less advanced mainly rural economy in the East. Very quickly, exchange between these systems became the Hanse's monopoly and from the fourteenth until well into the sixteenth century exchange centred on the commercial networks around Bruges, Antwerp and London. Differences in economic organisation in the two economic systems led to different patterns of demand, hence the Hanse supplied the West (and the Mediterranean) with raw materials for its industries (furs, wax, timber, mining products) and gradually also with grain. In return textiles, salt and luxury goods manufactured in the Flemish and Italian cities were brought to the urban consumers in the Hanseatic towns and to the wealthy landed aristocrats of Eastern Europe.



A merchant bargaining  
in his warehouse. c.1440.  
Flemish miniature illustrating  
a French translation of  
the *Decameron*. Ms. 5070,  
fol. 314 recto. Bibliothèque  
de l'Arsenal, Paris

At the international market par excellence in Western Europe, Bruges, the Hanse was undoubtedly the most privileged trading community, which gave them serious advantages over the competition. These concerned mostly the legal status of the Hanseatic merchants and the juridical authority of the Hanse officials abroad, but they also dealt with the course of international commerce (matters of debt, taxation) and with social life. The privileges were considered as crucial to the interests of the merchants and they were fiercely defended. The Hanse did not hesitate to threaten with embargo of trade and on occasion actually transferred the seat of their *kontor* to nearby commercial cities.

In Bruges the Hanseatic community was governed by a council of merchants. They defended their members' general interests. But the Hanse was certainly not a monolithic organisation. From the beginning it became clear that Lübeck was the most influential city in the organisation and there were a considerable differences between the various regions and cities in the Hanseatic sphere of influence. Such differences related to political status, economic competition among Hanseatic cities, and even cultural interests. Lübeck, the semi-official capital of the Hanseatic League and because of its central location on the shores of the Baltic Sea the concentration point of Baltic trade before it reached Western Europe, had a very similar function to Bruges, but on a less cosmopolitan level. It was, like Bruges, an active trading city, but with very few foreign merchant colonies. Other cities were less influential, and their trade did not carry so much weight.

Claims by historians that a high level of solidarity came naturally to the Hanse's members because of their common commercial interests and their shared political urban ideology, have been put in perspective by recent research. It was rather self-interest, the search for commercial gain, clear-cut pragmatic policies of jealous advancement of each city's privileges that directed decision-making within the league (as they do in the European Union today, of course). Only at the end in the sixteenth century, when the glory days of the Hanse had long gone by, were attempts made to create a more solid organisation, with an internal tax system; but that came much too late to change the course of history.



Pieter Pourbus,  
*Brotherhood of the Holy  
Blood in Bruges. 1556.*  
Panel.  
Heilig Bloedkapel,  
Bruges.

## Hanseatic merchants in Bruges

Hundreds of Hanseatic merchants were present during the trading season in Bruges. Usually at any given time there would be 40 to 50 merchants, but at the height of the trading season their number could easily rise above 200, coming from the major trading cities of Lübeck, Danzig, Hamburg, Bremen and Cologne, but also from smaller towns such as Riga or Stralsund. A pageant in Bruges in 1440 included an official delegation of no fewer than 144 merchants, dressed in red-and-black liveries (in the same pageant there were about 160 Italian merchants). Even when Hanseatic trade was already declining, the pageant in 1468 on the occasion of the marriage of Duke Charles the Bold with Margaret of York (which is still celebrated in Bruges as the 'Golden Tree') included 108 Hanseatic merchants.

These merchants, however, very rarely became citizens of Bruges. This would have denied them the use of their commercial privileges. The status of temporary visitor did not prevent merchants being able to develop strong ties with the Bruges, Flemish and Burgundian elites. Merchants became members of religious and cultural guilds, they were buried in Bruges churches and monasteries, and they had close links with leading Bruges politicians and financiers.

In general, Hanseatic merchant companies were family-based, and trust among merchants was considered as one of the preconditions of successful trade. Merchants like Hildebrand Veckinhusen had partners, usually family or friends, scattered all over the Hanseatic area. As most merchants remained in Bruges only for a limited period they usually rented houses, rooms and storage space. There were no separate residential areas in the city, but merchants usually lived close together in the commercial heart of the city near the harbour and the central market area, and, of course, at close quarters with the other foreign merchants in Bruges. We have very little information about the contacts between these various nationalities, but these must have been very frequent. They often shared the same space for their reunions, burials and ceremonies. Contacts with Bruges citizens are better documented. Most merchants stayed in hostels and inns owned by wealthy and politically influential Bruges citizens. This had obvious advantages for both parties. For the merchants it offered a highly flexible system of storage and accommodation. Moreover, the local hostellers and brokers acted for them as agents, trading experts and bankers. This stimulated close and long-lasting personal ties between local elites and foreign merchants.

## Trade and culture

The commercial cities of Western Europe were not only places for business transactions. They also became places that allowed cultures to interact and smoothed the way for a shared urban culture that was expressed in various cultural organisations, social practices and even visual arts. In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries not only economic, but also cultural differences between North-West and North-East Europe became smaller, without, however, getting to a point of integration. Nonetheless, Hanseatic urban culture was strongly influenced by Flemish, Italian, Spanish, English and French elements. Bruges functioned not only as an economic, but also as a cultural trans-

mitter. The Hanse not only exchanged luxury goods, spices and textiles, it also proved to be one of the highways of cultural transfers in Europe. It stimulated the exchange of ideas, (urban) ways of life, literature, art and architecture. Hanse merchants became keen consumers of Flemish paintings, sculpture and fashion. Although only very few Hanseatic works of art could be found in the Low Countries, it was artists from the German Empire who came over to the cities in the Low Countries. Hans Memlinc came from Seligenstadt in Central Germany and his most important pupil Michael Sittow came from the Hanse town of Talinn.

One look at the actual cityscapes of Hanseatic cities and of North-West European cities demonstrates this exchange all too clearly. Bruges, Lübeck and Gdansk have many architectural elements in common: the extensive use of brick, typical decoration of facades, various examples of civic architecture. The



The Hanse  
Oosterlingenhuis  
in Bruges, as portrayed  
on a 16th-century  
painting in the Bruges  
beguinage.

hospital in Lübeck and the town halls of Talinn and Gdansk still remind us of this phenomenon. Lübeck had a civic organisation which organised and staged cultural events, such as jousts, which resembled similar organisations in fourteenth-century Bruges, while other cultural groups helped to spread French court culture. But this exchange of information, of perceptions of the world, of political ideas was not only a one-way system. The famous story of Till Eulenspiegel was probably introduced to the Low Countries through an early printed book from Lübeck.

## The end of a commercial empire

The developments triggered by the Hanseatic expansion towards the East did not always go unchallenged, nor was the League bound to last long into the Early Modern Period. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

the growing Dutch and English maritime powers and the rising trade cities of southern Germany took over. These new rivals could no longer be scared away by an aggressive foreign policy or by war, and Hanseatic merchants relied too much on their traditional monopoly trades; they also failed to realise that general commercial axes, and with the rise of nation-states also the general political situation in Europe, had changed drastically. In reality, Hanseatic trade was in decline from the fifteenth century. Gradually new systems of fairs become more important in Southern Germany and Brabant (Antwerp, Bergen-op-Zoom). There were gradual but structural shifts in commercial routes, with greater use, once again, of overland routes.

For a long time the Hanse was able to resist these tendencies and to remain a leading trading force, willing to defend its interests with armed might, as



Danish and Dutch competitors more than once found out. But competition from Holland, Normandy and England became stiffer, and from the late fifteenth century Hanseatic trade was in full decline. In sixteenth-century Antwerp the Hanse was only of marginal importance, despite the League's tradition of trading in the Low Countries and its ostentatious new building in this commercial metropolis. When the 'common interest' of the community failed to produce results, the individual cities chose to go their own way. A few were successful and managed to thrive (Hamburg). But the Hanse as an organisation gradually dissolved between the 1630s and the 1660s. ■

*Anonymous, Market on the Antwerp Meir. Late 16th century. Panel. Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels.*



## A Businessman's Thoughts on Concentration Camps and Capitalism

Two Extracts from Hellema's *The Wrath of the Wind*

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*Hellema – aka Alexander Bernard (Lex) van Praag – is a master of letters who has remained unknown – a writer's writer. Van Praag (1921-2005) was a member of the Resistance during the Second World War who ended up in a number of German concentration camps. After the war, he travelled as a businessman through Europe to obtain orders for a textile factory. In doing so, he also had to do business with the very same people who had once consigned him to Buchenwald. Life goes on.*

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I have worked for fifteen, twenty years – or even longer – in a biotope where such concepts as return on investment, positive cash flow and the entire caboodle of capitalist expletives were living conditions. For the person who does not guzzle from the pot of capitalism, drinks from the cup of death. By so doing, I have contributed more to the clothing of the naked than if I had continued to run around waving a red flag.

*Quia absurdum.*

From *The Wrath of the Wind* (De woede van de wind)

Amsterdam: Em. Querido's Uitgeverij BV, 2003. pp. 21-22 & 97

Translated by John Irons