The Dynamics of Economic Culture in the North Sea- and Baltic Region

in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

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Introduction

The dynamics of economic culture in the North Sea and Baltic region during the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods

The late medieval and early modern history of the North Sea and Baltic region has for decades attracted the attention of historians. The region is most frequently perceived as a cradle of modern capitalist economy. Some historians have seen it as the northern, colder and poorer reflection of Braudel’s Mediterranean. Historians interested in Dutch and British history of the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods cannot ignore the region, as without dealing with the connections and interdependency occurring within it they would not be able to grasp their subject. In addition, the economic development of the Baltic region cannot be understood without taking into account its interplay with the coastal areas surrounding the North Sea.1

What made the region unique was the complexity of its relationships. On the one hand, the North Sea and Baltic regions functioned as a well-integrated economic area, with voluminous flows of commodities and significant migrant currents between more and less developed areas. It was also a space connected by sea lanes, which made transport cheap, safe and fairly rapid. This commercial exchange also entailed an exchange of ideas, art objects and cultural influences. The ports that arose along the North Sea and Baltic coasts particularly shared in these various currents, and traces of the resulting common characteristics are still visible today.2 The shared elements, however, did not prevent astounding differences occurring between ports and regions, even within small areas, which adds to their complex relationships.3 On the other hand, the region was characterized by religious conflicts and protracted warfare between the Hanse, the Habsburg Empire and Scandinavian

states, and later between early modern fiscal-military states. Military conflict re-shaped the political map of the region on various occasions and contributed to fundamental changes in the balance of economic power. Though new economic powers arose and others vanished, the many wars never brought the long process of economic integration to a halt.

The present volume attempts to bring a new perspective to the region’s history by employing the unifying concept of economic culture. It is argued that the region shared – and in some sense still shares – a common or at least similar economic culture. The origin and development of a unifying economic culture must be understood as a spin-off effect of the integration of the Baltic and the North Sea regions in the period between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its dynamism is manifest in the expansion of economic and social networks, commercial and technical innovation, the mobility of goods, capital and labour force, and even in diplomacy and the mobilization of coercive means. In our view, economic culture also includes the continuous exchange of knowledge, ideas and values as vehicles facilitating the creation of commercial contacts and social integration. Such elements are therefore considered to be the formative elements of economic culture in the region under consideration. The economic-cultural perspective allows us to utilize differing approaches, including diplomatic, legal, social and economic histories, to look at the region as a whole. The volume’s essays represent several of these differing approaches.

The volume consists of three parts with the essays organized both thematically and the chronologically. It covers the region’s transition from the Late Medieval period of Hanseatic dominance to the rise of the Dutch, British, Danish and Swedish Early Modern states. The three contributions in the first section, written by Jan Glete, Sven Lilja and Erik Lindberg, look at the long-term structural factors involved in the region’s development. The essays deal with the complex relationships between the cities, the states and economic resources in the region. Lilja’s contribution confirms that the position of the region’s states within the European state system was dependent on varying levels of economic development and on the capacity of the states to accumulate sufficient resources. Glete’s and Lindberg’s contributions point to the significance of institutional preconditions for the region’s history. Jan Glete sees the successful economic development of the region in terms of a transition from an economy of high transaction costs, typical for the Hanseatic times, to an economy of low transaction costs created by the powerful mercantile states of the Early Modern period. According to Glete, this factor explains the different trajectories of development in the Mediterranean compared to the Baltic and North Sea regions. Erik Lindberg focuses on the impact of merchant

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guilds and their role as vehicles for economic growth in the Baltic towns. His conclusions are rather negative since he perceives the relative decline of the former Hanseatic towns in the region as a consequence of ossified institutional systems. The three perspectives adopted in these essays share the view that institutional arrangements and the rise of the early modern state are the most significant factors in the development of the North Sea and Baltic regions.

The second part of the volume, entitled ‘The Hanseatic Period’, collects essays related to the period between c.1350 and 1550. The striking feature of this part of the book is the close connection between politics, diplomacy and trade. The essays written by Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, Mike Burkhardt and Hanno Brand deal with this issue from various points of view. The first author tackles the topic from the angle of commercial rivalry between Lübeck and Amsterdam in the Bergen market. Through an analysis of the commercial and diplomatic strategies deployed by Amsterdam, Lübeck and the Norse crown, changes in the short-term and long-term relationships between the rival parties in the Bergen market are examined. Mike Burkhardt offers a long-term analysis of the commercial relationship between Lübeck and Boston between c.1370 and 1470. He points to the causal connection between political incidents and fluctuations in the trading relations between Lübeck and Boston on the one hand, and the failure of English local merchants to gain control over the Boston cloth market on the other. Hanno Brand also emphasizes the role of diplomacy in the redefinition of the trade relationship between the Habsburg Low Countries and the German Hanse in an analysis focusing on the resolution of the Sound Conflict of 1532.

Security and the protection of property are the main issues in the contributions by Louis Sicking and Edda Frankot. In his contribution, which examines the navigation ordinances of 1550 and 1551, Sicking offers various explanations for the exclusion of Holland’s eastbound overseas trade in the convoy regulations issued by the Habsburg central government. His thesis is that an unusually high degree of risk-spreading on the one hand and the concentration on the transport of low-value bulk products on the other, explain Holland’s refusal to invest in additional protection measures. Frankot’s essay exemplifies the significance of a legal-historical approach in our understanding of the economic integration of the region. Considering the judgments of five Baltic and North Sea towns in relation to jettison and salvage, she stresses the lack of commonality between the verdicts, and therefore doubts the existence of a common North European tradition in the emergence of law at sea.

The third part of the volume, including essays on the Early Modern period, shifts the focus from the interaction between politics and economy to mainly economic factors. It appears that in the period of Dutch dominance, the space encircled by the two seas functioned more as an integrated market economy, with the fairly free movement of commodities, people and investment. These are apparently the qualities stressed in Christiaan van Bochove’s and Jelle van Lottum’s essays. The former examines the issue of the North Sea as a separate economically integrated space. Referring to extensive series of price data, the author argues that Amsterdam’s leading
position in the North Sea region was basically insular during the seventeenth century and only became more international as its economic focus shifted towards London after 1700. Van Lottum investigates the link between the separate migration flows and the labour market mechanisms of the North Sea migration system and emphasizes the pivotal role of the Low Countries in this.

Philip Kelsall’s and Michiel de Jong’s contributions point to the significance of political factors in economic exchange. Kelsall’s paper looks into the Danish-Norwegian efforts to break free from Dutch hegemony in the seventeenth century, which was mirrored in political conflicts over levels of taxation and methods of ship measurement. De Jong’s contribution unveils how the fortunes of the Dutch entrepreneurs investing in foreign states, for example, Denmark and Sweden, were dependent upon the political situation in these states. Bo Poulsen’s essay traces long-term changes in the development of markets for herring and other fishing industries within the region. Poulsen pays attention to consumption patterns and mercantile policies against the background of long-lasting Dutch dominance in the sector and region. Finally, Andrej Kotljarchuk’s essay highlights Riga’s commercial role in the second half of the seventeenth century during Swedish rule. Focusing on the efforts of the Lithuanian nobility and merchants, he concludes that despite foreign occupation, trading conditions in Riga remained favourable.

The volume presents a selection of papers presented at workshops organized within the programme entitled ‘The dynamics of economic culture in the Baltic and North Sea regions, c.1250-1600/1650’. The programme was initiated by the Hanze Research Centre at the University of Groningen and the Dutch Research School for Medieval Studies. The project fits within the programme of internationalization being undertaken by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and was co-sponsored by Södertörns högskola and the Danish Research Foundation MAST. The core of the programme consisted of cooperation and exchange between Syddansk Universitet in Esbjerg, Södertörns högskola in Stockholm and the University of Groningen. Its purpose was to create a platform for exchange between junior and senior scholars within the region. It allowed the organizers to include scholars from universities in Copenhagen, Århus, Stockholm, Uppsala, Leiden and the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. It also invited them to extend the chronological focus of the project, allowing long-term perspectives reaching into the eighteenth and in some cases even into the nineteenth century.

The papers collected here were presented at two workshops organized in Esbjerg in October 2003 and Stockholm in October 2004. We wish to express our gratitude to the institutions and staff who participated in the organization of the events. Special mention should be made of Poul Holm and Lex Heerma van Voss, whose contributions to the workshops and to the overall definition of this project were an inspiration to all participants. The work of the University of Groningen Language Centre added to the quality of the English texts. However, none of this would have been realized without the participation of the scholars who presented their current research during the workshops and prepared their papers for publication in this present volume.