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The Hanse in medieval and early modern Europe

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HANSE historiography may well be one of the strangest subjects for a historian working on medieval or early modern history. It has been perceived as something particular (and peculiar) right from the start, revolving around its own journal (*Hansische Geschichtsblätter*), which now is into its 132th issue. The Hanse crosses easily periodical, geographical, political and, not the least, multidisciplinary borders. Most research definitely has an economic historical perspective. The source material, which can be found in abundance in many archives all over northern Europe, however, allows for a variety of social, cultural, political, legal and other investigations. As a result, there are libraries full of research written on the Hanse. Yet still, one of the most pressing questions for Hanse historians is the altogether simple quest for the core: what was the Hanse? How did an organizational structure that baffled even the contemporaries for its oddness survive for centuries? As a matter of fact, it still exists today, because it was never formally dissolved.

These peculiarities might very well explain the rather strange approach that the editors of the volume on 'The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe' chose. They start with an overview of the state of the Hanse historiography, obviously in an effort to present the mostly German-speaking research for an English-speaking audience. 250 pages later, the book concludes with another kind of summary, which focuses on the many open questions that Hanse historians have to tackle in the future. In this summary, Stuart Jenks discusses network theories, internationality, finances, and logistics as main challenges for further research.

In between these two different introductions there are nine highly specialized articles that describe the border line between the yet unknown, or more often the previously known but at a closer look rather questionable

knowledge, and the sources. That certainly is the greatest strength of this volume; the search for answers with the help of archive material as well as elaborate and critical assessments of previous research in the light of new methodological approaches. This volume is not meant for the beginner – a very good choice in times of an over-abundance of shallow handbooks for students' use.

A perfect example for this approach is the highly interesting article by Mike Burkhardt on the reliability of the pound toll lists for investigations into the Hanse trade, in his case the trade with Bergen. Previous generations of historians relied heavily on these lists, whereas Burkhardt convincingly shows that this research was based on poor source criticism. The toll lists do not offer enough data to describe the Hanse trade with Bergen (or other places) in detail. All we can gain is a rather general picture of the range of commodities that was traded.

A similar endeavour can be found in the article by Sofia Gustafsson. She questions the long-established idea that Lübeck law influenced the legal systems in all cities within the Baltic area. This idea still mirrors the notion of the German merchants as bearers of light and as cultural emissaries. It is not simply wrong; however, it is based on a German understanding of the Hanse and fails to consider alternative lines of reasoning. These and other problems of interpretation have to be understood in the light of Hanse historiography, which for a long time had been part of a nationalistic German reading of the past.

Other articles focus more on questions of trade organization and institutional structures (see Marie-Louise Pelus-Kaplan's contribution). Hanse trade was organized in very small structures, based on family and personal relationships, thus in many ways differing from the southern European large-scale companies and financial institutions. There was no Hanse bank, no common sea law (as Edda Frankot argues) no big trading companies (according to Stuart Jenks). In spite of these facts, or possibly just because of this lack of 'modern' organizational structures, Hanseatic trade dominated northern Europe's trade for more than 500 years, much longer and much more resistant to historical change than trade organized in other parts of Europe. The so-called downfall of the Hanse since the early 15th century must be explained with regard to the inability to create lasting political structures. This fact has lured previous researchers into describing the Hanse as a state-like organization, which eventually failed to deliver. This argument fails to convince most researchers as the Hanse probably never was an outspoken political project.

On the contrary, today's predilection for network analysis has changed the ways in which the Hanse is perceived by historians, thus downplaying its political aspects and ambitions. This turn might have gone too far and the editors question this swing of the pendulum openly. That –and their sense of humour– if anything demonstrates the vivacity of the Hanse as a research subject and the openness of the editors. They seem to have had fun while working on this volume, whose articles repeatedly take their starting point in a critique of the established research. The volume is therefore highly recommended for every expert on Hanse history, who has the necessary background to fully understand all references and debates. It will also make sense for the beginner, although it is not easily accessible – but that might just be another advantage. Even the beginner needs to know that things are more complicated than they appear from the outset.

The Hanse still exists, in a mixture of economic exchange, cultural heritage and tourism. Current research on the Hanse is vibrant and deserves wider international resonance and participation. The volume is number 60 in a series on 'North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 A.D. Peoples, Economies and Cultures'. Within this series it is the first book on Hanse history. There is room for many more.

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