

Reflecting the Nation: The Historiography of Hanseatic Institutions

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The most important question in the historiography of the Hansa is also the most straightforward: What was it? For nearly two hundred years historians have been studying the Hansa, often known in English works as the Hanseatic League, yet its nature as an institution remains a mystery. On the surface it was an association of merchants and their cities but beyond this it has evaded more concrete and consistent definition by historians. Hanseatic literature is replete with numerous and varied explanations, and the dominant paradigms at any given time range from nationalist to internationalist and from primarily political to economically focused. But what unites these paradigms is their propensity to reflect the contemporary foci of German politics. From the early days of Hanseatic study, when a fractured Germany sat in the centre of a rapidly centralizing Europe, to the present day, with issues like capitalism and the European Union at the heart of political dialogue, analyses of Hanseatic institutions have consistently reflected the contemporary perspectives on modern institutions.

While the exact nature of the Hansa remains contentious its bounds in terms of geography, time, and membership are clearer. Though the Hansa first took shape as an association of merchants in the thirteenth century, their cities later took on a more active management role, a state which lasted until its seventeenth century collapse. Within this broader chronology, many Hanseatic studies focus on the period from 1300 to 1500, which saw the

height of the Hansa's power first economically and then politically.¹ As individuals, the members of the Hansa were primarily ethnically German and used Middle Low German as a lingua franca among themselves. Hanseatic cities were located almost entirely within the territories of the Holy Roman Empire and the Teutonic Order, but outposts of the Hansa, known as Kontor, stretched across all of Northern Europe. This wide scope, with implications for both the complexity of internal relations and impact on external events, not only contributes to the historical importance of the Hansa, but also to the amorphous nature of its institutions.

Research into the history of the Hansa began in the early nineteenth century, when Georg Sartorius published his *Geschichte des Hanseatischen Bundes und Handels*. Though academic Hanseatic studies were sparse during the next half century, they shared a common concern with the disunity of the German people. Sartorius himself wrote that "the anarchy of the German Empire and the weakness of the cities inevitably led them to mutual association with one another," while others focused on the importance of independent towns and wealthy citizens to German history and tradition.² This interest in cooperation within a nation reflected the contemporary problems of Germany, which was still a collection of small states. Another trend, namely the overwhelming focus on the formal, political aspects of the Hansa, also emerged at the time, precluding a deeper examination of economic and social structures.³ Cornelius Walford, who wrote one of the earliest English histories of the Hansa, commented in his work that "some modern writers have been disposed to lay great stress" the Hanseatic Diet's first meeting in

¹ Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction," in *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 12-14.

² "Die Anarchie des Deutschen Reichs und die Schwäche der Städte führen sie notwendig zu wechselseitigen Verbindungen unter einander," Georg Sartorius, *Geschichte des Hanseatischen Bundes* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1802), accessed November 10, 2014, <http://books.google.ca/books?id=JmIPAAAQAAJ&dq=Geschichte+des+hanseatischen+Bundes>, xi; Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Hanse," 21.

³ Gordon Harrison, "The Hanseatic League in Historical Interpretation," *The Historian* 33 (1971): 386, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6563.1971.tb01514.x.

1364.⁴ This too reflected the concerns of contemporary historians, as their political leaders searched for solutions to Germany's fractured state. In a period of German history defined by the fragmentation of the nation, consideration of how and why the Hansa brought the German people together set the tone of its historiography.

Hanseatic scholarship gained a new breath of life with the unification of Germany in 1871, but the change in the political atmosphere of Germany brought with it a major shift in the historiography. The new image of the Hansa was, not unlike the new German Empire, "an emphatically German, hierarchically organized town league."⁵ Walther Stein, a German historian from this period, considered the Hansa inextricably linked with German law and language, and others identified it as a key to the continuous development of German national history.⁶ In a period of new German unity, the Hansa came to be seen as of unity during the Holy Roman Empire's gradual dissolution. This narrative of the German Hansa also pitted its merchant members against the commercial interests of other nations; in the words of Ernst Daenell, the laws of the Hansa aimed "to assist the Hanseatic people in outstripping foreigners."⁷ The few English Hanseatic scholars of this period followed this nationalist model as well; Ian Colvin argued that the Hansa operated under the protection of the Holy Roman Empire, while E. G. Nash portrayed Hanseatic activity in London as a struggle between English and German commercial interests.⁸ In this way, contemporary international competition began to bleed into the historical study of the Hansa, casting it as a tool of German national ambition in medieval

⁴ Cornelius Walford, "An Outline History of the Hanseatic League, More Particularly in Its Bearings upon English Commerce," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1881): 97, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.2307/3677937.

⁵ Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Close 'Other': Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Hollanders and the Hanse," *German History* 31 (2013): 454, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1093/gerhis/ght064.

⁶ Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Close Other," 457.

⁷ Ernst Daenell, "The Policy of the German Hanseatic League Respecting the Mercantile Marine," *The American Historical Review* 15 (1909): 48, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.2307/1835424.

⁸ Ian Colvin, *The Germans in England: 1066 - 1598* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1915), 36; E. G. Nash, *The Hansa: Its History and Romance* (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1929), 12.

and early modern Europe. Given the contentious and nationalistic struggle between states that consumed Europe scant years later, it is perhaps unsurprising that historians looked for similar trends in the past, but in the case of Hanseatic institutions this resulted in a historiographical paradigm obsessed with nationalistic issues.

A telltale sign of the link between early Hanseatic studies and the German imperial identity is the emphasis historians from this period place on maritime power politics. Interest in the Hanseatic merchant marine arose around the turn of the century, as Kaiser Wilhelm II became convinced that Germany needed to become a naval power to be successful in the contemporary European power struggle.⁹ Daenell, among others, took up the historical narrative of a naval Germany, arguing that the essential purpose of the Hansa was the pursuit of "a common commercial and maritime policy abroad" and that in doing so the Hansa "supplied the dismembered German Empire with a sea-power."¹⁰ Likewise, Colvin emphasized the importance of Hanseatic naval supremacy in maintaining their commercial hold on the Baltic.¹¹ In a period which saw the navy become increasingly important to German foreign policy, historians looked for similar trends within the development of the Hansa. And the relationship between contemporary German politics and Hanseatic scholarship did not go only one way; political leaders used the Hansa's medieval domination of the seas in a contemporary context to justify the need for a larger and more powerful German fleet.¹² This adoption of history for the purposes of a contemporary national focus serves to underscore the distorting effect that the German political atmosphere had on the perception of Hanseatic institutions. Clearly, during this short period, the

⁹ Harrison, "Historical Interpretation," 387-388.

¹⁰ Daenell, "Mercantile Marine," 47.

¹¹ Colvin, *Germans in England*, 63.

¹² Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Hanse," 22.

link between policies of the present and the reconstruction of the past stood out very strongly, as the common interest in politics by naval means demonstrates.

The interwar period and the rise of the Nazi Party did not diminish the nationalistic nature of Hanseatic historical research, but it did manage to shift its focus. Fritz Rörig, the leading Hanseatic historian during this time, emphasized two themes in particular: The importance of expansion to prosperity, and the right of the superior to dominate. Rörig argued that the colonization of the east was the defining factor in the establishment of the Hansa, and saw the end of this expansion as its undoing.¹³ Furthermore, he described the economic privileges given to Hanseatic merchants by other nations as "the wages for his intercession" in constructing a unified economic unit and "the tribute that he let himself be paid by non-German Northern Europe."¹⁴ This paternalistic perspective on the international role of the Hansa reflected ideas of Germany's rightful place in Europe that were in development at that time. Nazi propagandists built on trends such as these in the construction of ideas like *Lebensraum*, which ultimately used Hanseatic history to portray the Baltic as naturally German territory.¹⁵ Similar to the prewar period, this appropriation of history for political purposes demonstrates the blurred borders that existed between the present concerns of the nation and attempts to understand past institutions. As Germany adapted to the changing circumstances of Europe following World War One, ideas of Hanseatic nationalism changed to fit the new world order, but the underlying paradigm continued to influence how historians saw the Hansa as an institution.

¹³ Fritz Rörig, "Außenpolitische und innerpolitische Wandlungen in der Hanse nach dem Stralsunder Freiden (1370)," *Historische Zeitschrift* 131 (1925): 18, accessed October 16, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27605084>.

¹⁴ "den Lohn für seine Vermittlung," Fritz Rörig, "Die geistigen Grundlagen der Hansischen Vormachtstellung," *Historische Zeitschrift* 139 (1929): 242, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27606047>; "der Tribut, den er sich von dem nichtdeutschen Nordeuropa zahlen ließ," Rörig, "Außenpolitische," 2.

¹⁵ Wubs-Mrozewicz "The Hanse," 22.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Hanseatic historiography split into two distinct streams that mirrored the divide of the nation itself. In East Germany, the influence of Communism had a clear impact on Hanseatic scholarship, which followed two broad trends throughout the period. First, in contrast with developments in the West, the hierarchical model of the Hansa as an urban league remained dominant.¹⁶ In a more rigidly ordered society like the GDR, a hierarchical Hansa still held appeal, whereas scholars in the West moved towards a more decentralized community model. Unsurprisingly, Hanseatic scholarship in East Germany also tended towards a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of its institutions. In the introduction to the 1970 *Neue Hansische Studien*, Eckhard Müller-Mertens wrote that the Hansa "acted as a specific organizational form of Lübeck-Hanseatic-urban commercial capital and as an instrument of the ruling oligarchy in the Hanseatic cities."¹⁷ It is no secret that Communist doctrine impacted the historical perspective of Soviet-bloc countries, and East Germany was certainly no exception in this regard. This led to a paradigm which confirmed Marx's analysis of history through the interpretation of Hanseatic institutions. In these ways, East German Hanseatic scholarship remained distinct from the patterns emerging in the West, which created a division in the understanding of the Hansa's institutions that lasted throughout the Cold War.

In the West German branch of Hanseatic study, two new trends also emerged, the first of which was an internationalist model of the Hansa in the vein of the developing European Union. As Europe moved towards closer integration, many individuals noted the parallels with the Hansa in terms of the aim of cooperative economic and social exchange, and the wide but non-

¹⁶ Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Close Other," 459.

¹⁷ "die Städtehanse, die als spezifische organisationsform des lübisch-hanse-städtischen Handelskapitals und als Instrument der in den Hansestädten herrschenden Ratsoligarchie handelte," Eckhard Müller-Mertens, "Zum Geleit: Fragen zur Städtehanse und Stand der Hanseforschung in der DDR angesichts des 600. Jahrestages des Stralsunder Friedens," in *Neue Hansische Studien*, ed. Konrad Fritze et. al (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970), ix.

hierarchical membership.¹⁸ Several prominent Hanseatic scholars, among them Philippe Dollinger and Ahasver von Brandt, began to push for the term community (*Gemeinschaft*) to replace the old idea of a Hanseatic League (*Bund*). This new term mirrored the replacement of older more structured international alliances with the new European Economic Community.¹⁹ In addition to emphasizing the mutual support of the Hanseatic towns and merchants within a fluid organization, Dollinger also posited that although it was primarily economic in express purpose "the Hansa played an important part in the formation and propagation of the cultural unity of northern Europe."²⁰ This bears a marked resemblance to contemporary efforts to unite Europe socially and politically through economic cooperation. Gordon Harrison, who wrote a historiography of the Hansa during the 1970s, argued that this trend towards what he called the "European interpretation" implicitly tied the Hansa to the emergence of contemporary integration efforts.²¹ In this framework, the Hansa was not merely a similar historical effort, but actually a direct predecessor to the institutions that developed in twentieth century Europe. Indisputably, the emergence of a more internationalist understanding of the Hansa's role and institutions matched Europe's modern move towards a more cooperative international society.

The Hansa continues to draw comparisons with the European Union today, though some criticism of the trend has emerged among Hanseatic scholars. Historians like Alexander Fink and Carsten Jahnke still note the structural similarities between the two institutions, particularly their shared emphasis on consensus rather than tight, hierarchical organization.²² This examination of

¹⁸ Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Close Other," 23-24.

¹⁹ Rhiman Rotz, "The Lubeck Uprising of 1408 and the Decline of the Hanseatic League," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 121 (1977): 7, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986565>.

²⁰ Philippe Dollinger, *The German Hansa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 260, 370-371.

²¹ Harrison, "Historical Interpretation," 393.

²² Alexander Fink, "The Hanseatic League and the Concept of Functional Overlapping Competing Jurisdictions," *Kyklos* 65 (2012): 195, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1111/j.1467-6435.2012.00534.x; Carsten Jahnke, "The City of Lübeck and the Internationality of Early Hanseatic Trade," in *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz et al. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 38.

institutional organization continues to facilitate discussion of how decentralized institutions fit into the constellation of individual political units. Popular historical outlets like *History Today* are less reticent in drawing direct parallels between the Hansa and the EU, but some degree of academic pushback has emerged in response to this.²³ In the opinion of Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, these comparisons can be misleading as they fail to note the greater cultural and social unity of northern Europe during the medieval and early modern periods.²⁴ While historians continue to see similarities in the political models of the Hansa and the EU, they have become more reticent towards the idea that medieval and early modern Europe matches the current social conditions of the continent. In a trend not dissimilar to popular opinion on the EU today, contemporary scholars are divided on the issue of the Hansa's internationality, underscoring its unifying political structure while questioning its true multiculturalism.

Developing in parallel to the internationalist model of the Hansa, a proto-capitalistic paradigm of its institutions also emerged. Only 6 years after the end of World War Two, John Gade had already begun to describe the Hansa as a "merchant union" which controlled northern European trade through economic means.²⁵ Von Brandt, among others, built on this image of a Hansa of mutual economic interests, as he argued that cooperation only emerged if and when it benefitted the individual member cities.²⁶ According to this theory, economic forces led German merchants to cooperate, resulting in the creation of social and political institutions driven by mutual economic interest. M. M. Postan wrote even more directly, stating that "the League was little more than a federation which the German towns established among themselves to maintain

²³ Stephen Halliday, "The First Common Market?" *History Today* 59 (2009): 37, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hft&AN=504300998&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁴ Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Hanse," 24.

²⁵ John Gade, *The Hanseatic Control of Norwegian Commerce During the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1951), 88.

²⁶ Rotz, "The Lubeck Uprising," 7.

by political action that place in European trade which they had won for themselves in the course of the economic changes of the preceding epoch."²⁷ From this perspective, the question of nationalism or internationalism was secondary to the ways in which the economy drove political and social organization. As a capitalist way of life took root in the FDR, a paradigm of the Hansa arose in parallel as the result of pure economic interest .

This model of the Hansa as a predecessor of modern capitalism is the strongest paradigm of its institutions in recent historical works. Characteristic of this trend is the assertion that simple economic advantage drove the creation of the Hansa and all its institutions; to use Kurt Braunmüller's words, the Hansa "was in fact a rather loose community of merchants with strong common economic interests but nothing beyond that."²⁸ Other historians like Mike Burkhardt and Alexander Fink have also espoused this idea that economic factors played the largest, or even exclusive, role in the Hansa's formation.²⁹ While previous periods of Hanseatic scholarship acknowledged the role of trade and business within the Hansa, this singular focus on economic factors emerged in the past 50 years of Western scholarship, contemporaneous to the rising emphasis on the role of capitalism in European society. Within this paradigm, an important new area of research is the influence of business networks on the Hansa's development. Several historians have posited in the last several years that the origins of the Hansa can be found in social institutions that developed around short term, cooperative business relationships.³⁰ In contrast, Jahnke argues that the need to defend common interests brought together disparate

²⁷ M. M. Postan, *Medieval Trade and Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 192.

²⁸ Kurt Braunmüller, "Communication strategies in the area of the Hanseatic League: The approach by semi-communication," *Multilingua* 16 (1997): 366, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1515/mult.1997.16.4.365

²⁹ Mike Burkhardt, "The German Hanse and Bergen - new perspectives on an old subject," *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 58 (2010): 62, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1080/03585520903561201; Fink, "Functional Overlapping Competing Jurisdictions," 204.

³⁰ Burkhardt, "Hanse and Bergen," 77; Warwick Funnell and Jeffrey Robertson, "Capitalist accounting in sixteenth century Holland: Hanseatic influences and the Sombart thesis," *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 34 (2011): 567, accessed October 15, 2014, doi:10.1108/09513571111139102.

groups of merchants to form the Hansa.³¹ Despite this disagreement, these studies share a common conviction in the importance of business and the economy to the formation of socio-political organization, a sentiment shared by many modern political scientists. With the role of money in society prominent in modern thought, historians have begun to search for the roots of capitalism in historic institutions, fuelling a new interest in the mercantile aspects of Hanseatic institutions.

Though conceptions of Hanseatic institutions moved from paradigm to paradigm through the years, the most common way of understanding the Hansa has remained in lockstep with the contemporary German political issues and frameworks. From the pre-unification political focus to the nationalistic undertones of the imperial German period to the divergence of opinion following the division of Germany itself, each era of Hanseatic scholarship has understood the Hansa at a fundamental level in the same ways the contributing scholars saw the political landscape in their own time. A better understanding of these changing perspectives on the institutions of the Hansa will aid future scholars in getting to the root of what the Hansa was, and perhaps also shed light on how contemporary situations bias historical study in a wider context.

³¹ Jahnke, "The City of Lübeck," 51.

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