A. Palmer. The Baltic. 2005.

7

Ships, Pirates and Adventurers

DESPITE ALMOST CONTINUOUS warfare around northern shores, ships plied the waters of the Baltic in ever-increasing numbers throughout the later Middle Ages. Burgeoning commerce, handled almost exclusively by the Hanse, demanded bigger and better vessels. When trading began from Lübeck in the 1160s goods were still mainly loaded into knorrs, the modified Viking longships with a cargo capacity rarely exceeding 20 tons. By the end of the century, however, the shipwrights were turning out a superior vessel, the cog, a ship originating in the northern Netherlands and carrying eight times as much as any predecessor. Cogs were clinker-built, rounded at the bow and stern, about 28 metres long and 6 metres in the beam, with fore and aft 'castles', a single heavy and cumbersome sail and a rudder. They seem generally to have had crews of ten or twelve. In good weather a cog sailed at 5 knots, rising to 10 knots with a following wind; a voyage from Lübeck to Danzig would normally take four days, with five more days needed to reach Riga.

The cog became the archetypal Hanse ship. It was depicted on official seals of cities and appears in many paintings of the time. But within the Baltic it was superseded late in the fourteenth century by the hulk, a flat-bottomed and broader-beamed vessel, able to carry more than 300 tons, but less manoeuvrable. For longer voyages out into the ocean, the Danzig shipyards built carracks, three-masted ships closer in size and design to the caravels with which Columbus, Diaz and Magellan opened up the new world. The Hanse merchant fleet – some 750 vessels at the close of the fifteenth century – included sailing ships smaller than cogs, intended for deep sea voyages but later employed on the broader rivers and for coastal trade. Galleys or longships with a sail penetrated the Elbe south of Hamburg and the upper Vistula, Niemen and Dvina, if the chronic fighting along their banks permitted. During the Thirteen Years War between Poland and the Teutonic Knights (1454–66) trains of as many as a hundred barges filled with grain were escorted down the Vistula to reach the granaries and roadstead of Danzig.

The prime objective of the Hanse was to keep trade moving, for that was the surest way to maintain commercial prosperity. Into the Baltic, Hanse vessels brought cloth and wool from England, cloth from Flanders, tin from Cornwall, lamb-skins and coney-skins from Scotland, wine from France and, increasingly in the later Middle Ages, salt from the Bay of Bourgneuf, south of the Loire estuary, and from Portugal. Salt, of course, was essential in the markets of northern Europe as the only way to preserve the food yield of summer and autumn for consumption in the ice-bound months of winter.

Out of the Baltic the ships carried furs, flax and wax from Novgorod and Livonia; amber from Königsberg; timber, pitch and resin from the forests of Lithuania and the Vistulan basin; furs from northern Sweden in ships from Lübeck; rye, wheat and barley from the plains of Prussia and Poland; and minerals and metal from Sweden and the outer ranges of the Carpathians, south of Cracow. Some cargoes served markets within the Baltic, notably butter from Stockholm and cattle from Kalmar. The Wendish towns were also markets for surplus butter and for oxen from Jutland, but agrarian Denmark, for the most part, held little interest for the Hanse.

The burghers of Lübeck were Sweden's principal entrepreneurs. From 1347, when a charter was granted specifically to the free miners of Falun, the merchants benefited in particular from the regular transport of copper through Stockholm and Lübeck itself to Flanders. Lübeck, too, played a central role in the Norwegian fish industry: dried cod and herring originally loaded in Bergen were packed into barrels and either sent in bigger vessels to other ports or transported overland to the cities of inner Germany and Austria. Some Lübeck ships would take flour to Bergen, cross the North Sea with Norwegian cod for Boston, and return to their home port with bales of cloth from Stamford or Lincoln or Nottingham.

The fur trade was always lucrative, but for English consumers the most valuable imports were timber for their ships and wax for their candles. The Hanse kept their monopoly of wax longer than for any other commodity. Baltic wax was still giving light to England's monastic cathedrals and abbeys during the first twenty years of Henry VIII's reign. Protestantism forced the trade into recession. In 1528–9, the last twelve months before the English Reformation began in earnest, Hanse merchants brought 344,080 kilos of wax into the kingdom. For 1540–44, the five years following Henry's final dissolution of the monasteries, wax imports were down to an annual average of only 83,337 kilos.

Between the ending of the Crusades and the expansion of the Ottoman Turks within Europe, trade in silk, carpets and other luxuries from the

eastern Mediterranean brought wealth to Venice, Genoa, Pisa and Ragusa (Dubrovnik). But riches from the East still followed a familiar trail to the Baltic, boosting commercial enterprise in Reval, Danzig and Stettin, especially after the union of Lithuania and Poland. Some Hanse ports had local specialities. As late as 1368 Lüneburg salt was the main export from Lübeck, although the merchants had diversified and the city's prosperity was not by then dependent on the yield of the salt-pans; 680 ships entered or left the port that year. Wismar rather than Lübeck became the leading beer town of the Baltic, even though there were hop-gardens beside the Trave. In 1460 Wismar had 200 breweries and a brewers' majority on the city council, and was exporting beer around the inland sea as well as to Bergen and Flanders. But Bremen and Hamburg, Hanse ports serving North Sea trade rather the Baltic, were the main suppliers of beer to the Netherlands and to Germany as a whole.

The most concentrated specialization of all was in Skåne, the centre of Europe's herring industry at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Ships from Lübeck would bring Lüneburg salt, together with flour and beer, to Skanör, Malmö and Falster. They would return to Lübeck laden with salted herring – in 1400 some 65,000 barrels in a single year. The herring trade declined in the following century, partly because the fish migrated to the more saline North Sea, but also because of Dutch competition. At the same time, the yield of salt from Lüneburg lessened year by year. By 1450 the trade in both salt and herrings was in reverse; much more salt was brought into the Baltic from France and Portugal than left Lübeck.

Trade disputes between the Hanse and foreign rivals were generally settled by embargoes, blockade or the closure of ports. But from 1227 until 1566 there were skirmishes at sea, and occasional battles, in which Hanse vessels participated. No ships were built specifically for warfare until the sixteenth century. Fighting men embarked in cogs to serve as boarding parties; archers manned the 'castles', fore and aft. By the late fifteenth century light cannons (culverins), cast in bronze like church bells, could be placed aboard hulks, carracks and upriver barges. From about 1350 ships began to sail in convoy, with at least two escorts carrying men-at-arms. This protection was as much to fend off pirates as to counter enemy action; twenty years later, when the Hanse towns were at war with Norway and Denmark, the number of escorts was considerably increased.

There was, however, no Hanse Navy. Significantly the armed escorts were called, not warships, but 'peaceships' (*vredenschepe*). Wars with the Dutch (1438–41) and the English (1470–74) were, on both occasions, precipitated by the seizure of Hanse ships and cargoes at sea in response to trade restrictions imposed on foreign vessels in the Baltic ports. For offensive operations the Hanse merchants resorted to privateering: they commissioned privately owned armed vessels to intercept and seize enemy ships. The captain and owners of a privateer shared the value of the captured goods and any ransom money received for the release of worthies taken captive.

Some of these Hanse sea-dogs passed into legend. Among them was a Danzig privateer and city councillor named Pawest, who sailed a captured French ship on raids down the Channel as far west as Ushant. Better known, however, is Paul Beneke, whose operations were backed by Danzig's Guild Fraternity of St George. Beneke left the Baltic and sailed English waters during the 1470s, a time when rumbling disputes with London erupted into open warfare. On one occasion Beneke took prisoner the Earl of Salisbury, for whom a good ransom was paid. Early in 1471 he captured the Caen-owned *Le Cygne,* as she crossed the Channel with no less a dignitary than the Lord Mayor of London aboard.

An even more rewarding prize came his way two years later, a ship crossing from Flanders to England on the first stage of a homeward voyage to the river Arno and Florence; she carried a rich cargo of alum, silks, brocades, tapestries – and Hans Memling's new triptych, *The Last Judgement.* Beneke was not avaricious; the trappings of luxury in the cargo guaranteed good money for the owners and pickings for his crew, and he could afford to be generous with another man's munificence. Agnolo Tani, the Medici agent in Bruges, had commissioned the triptych to present to a church in Florence, at a time when the city basked under the princely rule of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Instead, Beneke presented it to the Marienkirche, Danzig's red-brick basilica, then nearing completion.

The Medici would not let Beneke's actions go unchallenged. Forty years of litigation won some compensation, long after Agnolo Tani, Beneke and Lorenzo were dead. But, apart from a Napoleonic interlude at the Louvre, the Memling remained in the Marienkirche. It was still there early in the Second World War, before being removed to safety ahead of the Russian invaders. They found it, however, hidden in a mine at Halle, and for ten years the triptych was again on display as a trophy of war, this time at Leningrad. At last in 1956 it was handed to the Poles, to become a showpiece of Gdańsk's National Museum. One day perhaps it may return to the chapel at the foot of the tower of the Marienkirche, where a copy now stands. Memling portrayed Agnolo and his wife on the wings of the triptych. If they look bewildered, it is small wonder.

*

Piracy – as distinct from legalized privateering in time of war – was endemic to the Baltic. It was as natural a vocation for Wendish Abotrites in Prince Nyklot's time as for seafarers along the coasts of Devon or Fife 300 years later. The scourge became especially bad in the closing years of the fourteenth century, when the Dukes of Mecklenburg – lineal descendants of Nyklot – reverted to family practice and (like Warwick the Kingmaker in England) harnessed piracy to dynastic ambition. The Hanse in the Mecklenburg ports of Rostock and Wismar connived at these activities, for self-protection and in some instances for personal gain. The island of Bornholm was seized and raids made on distant ports, from Norway round to Finland. On 22 April 1393, so an English merchant records, 'several wrongdoers and bandits from Wismar and Rostock in the Hanse sailed in a large ship to the town of Bergen, took the town by storm, seized the merchants and goods there, set fire to their houses, and demanded a huge ransom from the inhabitants'. Vyborg had already suffered similar treatment, and Malmö became the target later in the year.

The 'wrongdoers' were not smash-and-grab raiders, acting independently. In the Baltic even piracy had an embryonic trading association, the Vitalien Brotherhood (*Vitalienbrüder*). The chief lair of the Brothers was the inlet of Vivesholm on Gotland, 30 kilometres down the coast from Visby. By 1397 they formed so grave a menace that all the year's exports from the Prussian ports were sent westwards in no more than three convoys. Next summer conditions were even worse: only one heavily escorted convoy from Danzig and Elbing was able to pass safely through the Øresund with cargoes for the West.

The merchants looked for alternative routes. Use was made of the 65-kilometre, centuries-old overland trail from Lübeck to Hamburg, part of the salt road from Lüneburg; and in 1398 a canal with locks was completed to link the river Stecknitz, a Trave tributary, with the Delvenau, a tributary of the Elbe. Some goods could now be carried by water from the Baltic to the North Sea. But the waterway – which took eight years to construct – was not an embryonic Kiel Canal. Only narrow barges could pass the locks. As a commercial venture, the value of the pirate-free route was slight. Moreover both the road link and the canal only handled goods that passed through Lübeck. Ships with cargoes from Danzig and the eastern Baltic still had to run the gauntlet of pirates lurking in the sandy bays along Mecklenburg's indented coast.

By the spring of 1399 it was clear that mass piracy threatened the prosperity of the Teutonic Order's 'colonies' in Prussia and Livonia. In exasperation, Grand Master Conrad von Jungingen marshalled the knights to

resolve the problem. Four thousand men-at-arms were assigned to a fleet of eighty-four ships assembled at Danzig. A second, smaller fleet gathered in the Trave to embark soldiers at Lübeck. The Danzig fleet landed on Gotland, where the knights attacked and destroyed the brotherhood's lair at Vivesholm, while the Lübeckers denied them shelter along the Wendish coast. Klaus Störtebeker, the most impudent and enterprising of Vitalien raiders, escaped to the North Sea, probably through the Great Belt, and began to threaten the Frisian Islands; but in 1401 he was captured and, along with his followers, beheaded in Hamburg. For a few years the Baltic remained pirate free.

Piracy was, of course, also a menace to ships from non-Hanse ports. Not that there were many of them in the Baltic at the end of the fourteenth century. The Hanse fraternities were jealously exclusive. English and Dutch ships are first known to have penetrated the Baltic about 1250, braving navigational hazards along the Jutland coast before sailing down the Kattegat to trade at the annual salt fish fair at Skanör. The English sold woollen goods and cloth and returned home with herrings, salt and hides. But threats from the Hanse towns that they might suspend all trade with England put an end to these visits; any general embargo would cause a slump in the wool trade. Not until the cloth boom of Edward III's reign were English vessels again seen in the Baltic, and then only fleetingly.

For much of the 1350s the merchant adventurers unloaded cloth and took aboard grain, timber and copper at Danzig, Elbing and Stralsund. Several of the adventurers even rented houses and shops and English registered ships are known to have sailed from Danzig to Hull, Boston, Ipswich and down the Channel to round Land's End and land the last of their cargo at Bristol or at Newport, where customs duty was lower. But outside competition – whether English, Dutch or Novgorodian Russian – alarmed the Hanse, and by 1357 Danzig and Elbing were again closed to foreigners, though the English connection with Stralsund lasted longer. There was a brief thaw when English knights arrived to support the Teutonic Order in Lithuania and by 1390, the year that Derby's expedition reached Danzig, the merchant adventurers were allowed to elect a governor who controlled business with the Hanse in the port. Friction between grand masters and merchants hampered the English traders. They found themselves challenged by new regulations that changed the sizes in which cloth might be cut, forbade wives and families from joining them in Danzig, and prevented the governor from convening assemblies to assist him. Not until 1579 were merchants from the newly chartered Eastland

Company allowed to settle and establish a depot, and then at Elbing rather than Danzig. Even this concession was of limited value, for the working of the port was already hampered by silt brought down-river by the Vistula and its tributaries. 'Our ship passed through the mud like a plough upon land,' wrote Fynes Moryson, disembarking at Elbing fourteen years after the company began trading there.

The Dutch had greater success than the English in challenging the Hanse hold on Baltic trade. By 1497 more ships registered in the Netherlands were passing through the Øresund than from any other country. Seventy years later, on the eve of the Dutch revolt, nine in every ten ships leaving Danzig was a Hollander. There were five reasons for Dutch success: good seamanship; the building of ships especially suited for Baltic conditions; a willingness to meet market demands by undercutting rivals and bringing cheap salt from the Bay of Bourgneuf and cloth from both Flanders and England; new shipboard techniques of gutting and preserving herring; and sheer enterprise and persistence – Dutch traders reached Novgorod as early as 1432, purchasing flax and wax there. Moreover, after 1466 the Dutch were the first people to take advantage of Danzig's new status as a Free City in special relationship with the Polish Crown. The Polish landowners sent their grain to the port for shipment to Zeeland, Holland and Flanders. During the summer of 1471 1,000 ships left Danzig with corn for the cities of the Netherlands. A hundred years later more than 2,000 ships headed westwards through the Danish Sound in the seven months that the sea was free from ice. The Baltic, so often perceived as a backwater, remained a thriving waterway for Europe's commerce, even though by then the navigators of Portugal had opened up new routes to more distant shores.

8
The Chimera of Kalmar

As masters of the Øresund and the Belts the political vagaries of Denmark's kings were a matter of prime concern to all who traded in the Baltic. So, too, were the affairs of neighbouring Sweden, where the ambition of patriarch landowners and the persistence of narrowly regional loyalties had delayed the emergence both of centralized royal government and of a unified economy. The possibility of a Scandinavian empire or confederation seemed remote. Disunion benefited the Hanse. No trading league within the inland sea wished to see entry into the Baltic monitored by a single unified power.

Few Danish kings in the late Middle Ages ruled with character or determination. The challenge of Valdemar II, who had understood sea power and planted the Danish colony in Estonia, was checked in 1227 after the battle of Bornhöved, although in the last year of his reign he fitted out a fleet to support the Teutonic Knights and his colonial vassals in their war with Novgorod. His five successors were hampered by internal conflict between crown, bishops and baronage and it was not until the early fourteenth century that a combination of shrewd diplomacy and blatant aggression allowed Eric VI to seize and briefly hold Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock and Stralsund. But on Eric's death in 1319 Denmark lapsed once more into anarchy, with the elective character of the monarchy exploited by neighbouring princes in northern Germany. Three claimants jostled for the Danish throne: each was deposed – two of them twice over – before an eight-year interregnum brought a pause in the wearisome game of crown grabbing. Only in 1340 was Denmark's decline arrested, with the accession of Valdemar IV, the most far-sighted of Eric VI's many nephews. 'Another day (*Atterdag*) will come,' the young king reputedly declared, confident he could restore Denmark's unity and authority; and it is as 'Valdemar IV Atterdag' that Danes remember him.

The young Atterdag was a patient ruler, not prepared to risk war to restore Denmark's authority until his finances and his army were in good order. Crown lands appropriated during twenty years of anarchy were