

The Hanseatic League and Hanse Towns in the Early Penetration of the North

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The North American continent has been "discovered" two times. The first time, the son of an exile followed the route of his banished father, and continued further west. This happened in 1000 A.D., when the Icelander Leif Eiriksson failed to reach Greenland, was driven ashore at the Labrador coast, and reached Newfoundland. The second discovery was that of Christophorus Columbus. Some scholars think that 20 years earlier, about 1473 (Kohl, 1932:152-177), two privateers of the Danish king, Didrik Pining and Hans Pothorst, landed in Labrador, which seems to be hypothetical. Reliable documents tell that Pining and Pothorst followed the same path as Eirik Raudi and his son Leif Eiriksson when asked by King Christian I to look for new islands in the North (Moltmann, 1972:76).

None of these explorers set out to look for a continent, and all of them were sent by kings — or driven out by administration of justice in the name of a king — to the utmost periphery of royal power.

The extension of the known world was thus promoted by royal grace — or royal disgrace. To put it less poetically: the discovery of unknown lands elevated the glory of monarchs and won admiration for outstanding individuals.

These exceptional achievements have been more reliably reported than the less spectacular ones which, consequently, are more complicated subjects for the historian. One of these less spectacular events was the participation of merchants in the opening of the North. There is no detailed documentation of how merchants first found the coasts, bays, and sailing routes of the Arctic, nor is there documentation of the earliest Hanseatic participation in these discoveries (Fig. 1).

We have, however, some evidence of fairly early Hanseatic-northern relations. According to the earliest sources, around the end of the thirteenth century there lived in the town of Lübeck a family named "Yslander". By that time, the name of a person no longer indicated individual characteristics such as occupation, physical marks, or place of origin. It seems feasible, though, that one of the ancestors of these "Yslanders" had some close connections to Iceland.

Further evidence of this possibility is that these ancestors may have come to Lübeck from Westfalia some generations earlier: kinsmen of the "Yslander" family lived in Westfalia as late as the middle of the fourteenth century (von Brandt, 1964:nos. 56, 155, 250). One of the Westfalian towns, Soest, is well known to historians as a place of early Scandinavian trade (Süberkrüb, 1973:137-142). There is some evidence that Lübeck citizens made use of this kind of relationship when they built up their trade connections.

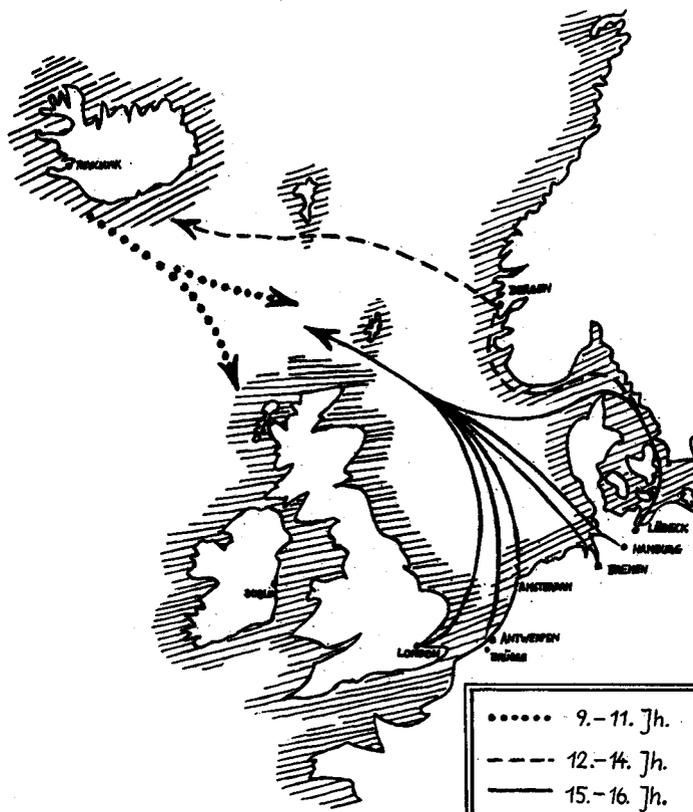


FIG. 1. Iceland, British Isles, Norway, and the Continent; trade routes, ninth century (Jh.) to sixteenth century. (K. Friedland).

A few sources reveal a little more about Lübeck trading activities. They are, surprisingly, not historical documents, but works of art and poetry dedicated to one of the most widespread amusements of the courts in the Middle Ages, hawking. Hawks from Iceland — and precious ones, we may assume — were taken aboard any trading ship leaving Iceland. The treasured white hawks are shown in the illustrations of the *Heidelberger Liederhandschrift* (so-called *Manesse'sche Handschrift*) (Fig. 2). Hawks are used as symbols of the lovers in epic poetry such as the *Nibelungen* and *Gudrun*. An Icelandic hawk as a present from a king is dealt with in an epic poem as early as 1024 A.D. (Hofmann, 1957:116, 147). It was a crowned head who wrote a book on hawking and introduced the Icelandic hawks as the best birds, and it was the same crowned head — Emperor Frederick II — who was the overlord of the Imperial town of Lübeck. In 1240, Frederick had hawks taken to Italy by Lübeck merchants. Hawks from Iceland, 12 of them every year, were a kind of annual imperial

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FIG. 2. King Conradin hawking with a friend (painting from end of thirteenth century, in Heidelberg Liederschrift).

duty the Lübeckers had to pay their overlord (Rörig, 1959:361). At the end of the thirteenth century, trade in hawks took place in the Bruges market where the Hanse merchants had their most important western agency (Hansisches Urkundenbuch III:419). In 1378, it was the business of a Lübeck trading company to sell northern falcons to Egypt/Alexandria via Venice; the responsibility of bringing birds alive from the Arctic to tropical countries belonged to the Lübeck merchants (Urkundenbuch der Stadt Lübeck IV:307).

The trade in Icelandic hawks could be perceived as relevant only to the pleasures of the courts, and not to the penetration of the North. This would be only half the truth. Hawks, tercel, formels — and whatever else they were called in the late Middle Ages — are an indication of the approximate value of goods imported to Iceland, i.e., flour, timber, and wax. As these goods are mentioned fairly often in the literature of medieval economic history, without sufficient information concerning trade routes and destination, they are not a clear indication of the average demand for staple imports of the Iceland settlers. Hawks, on the other hand, provide such indications. The price for 12 hawks — the number the Lübeckers annually sent to the emperor — was nearly 350 aurei; this was the value of approximately 50 tons of cereal grains, which would mean the livelihood of 100-200 people a year (Urkun-

denbuch der Stadt Lübeck IV:307, XI; Abel, 1974:26). Given that the 12-falcon duty was only a part of the annual Lübeck hawk import total, and given that the Lübeckers were not the only Hanseatic merchants who traded in Icelandic hawks, it appears that a considerable proportion of the Icelandic population secured their livelihood by importing food on the Hanse trade routes.

Hanse towns such as Lübeck, Rostock, Wismar, Stralsund, and others on the continental coast of the Baltic were particularly active in bringing the urgently-needed cereal grains to Scandinavia. Undoubtedly these activities were indispensable to the penetration of the North, and the "Yslander" family seems to have been heavily involved in the trading.

There is, however, something strange about the name. As a rule, Hanseatic merchants did not sail to Iceland before the fifteenth century. The first people to establish trade on the island were the earliest settlers, who travelled to Dublin as early as 900 A.D. (Hofmann, 1957:146). During the eleventh century, Norwegians began to monopolize Icelandic foreign trade and continued to do so through the following three centuries. Icelandic hawks and Hanseatic grain went via Bergen, where Norwegian and Hanse merchants exchanged goods from the continent for those from Iceland. The presence in Lübeck of the name "Yslander" is a clue to the Westfalian ancestry of Lübeck immigrants, indicating that in the thirteenth century, people in western Germany remembered people with close personal connections to Iceland. This is, of course, rather slim evidence concerning merchants' participation in the early penetration of the North; however, there is more.

When new coasts were discovered by Eirik Raudi in 986 and by his son Leif about 15 years later, missionaries followed. It is worth noting that the church did not consider these new regions as something surprising and unexpected, but rather as a part of God's unique world in need of care (Nottarp, 1964:5). The name chosen by Eirik Raudi for the icy region was intended to be a positive name, the name of a green land, the name of a known and familiar land. "Greenland" originally was the name of the middle Norwegian landscape.

Early civilization and organization of the new settlements has been a much-admired achievement of the church. Scholars have called it "the most astonishing foundation that took place in a solitary region of ice, which even lasted for half a millennium and was active and busy in its trade connections with the northern countries of Europe" (Nottarp, 1964:5). The history of the episcopate Gardar is well known. It is less well known that the bishops of this episcopate for the first seven decades of its existence — 1055-1124 — were regional bishops (Nottarp, 1964:8, 16): "*episcopi regionalii Groenlandiae regionumque finitimarum*". Bishop Arnald, consecrated in 1124, was the first to enjoy the regular status of a diocesan head. His predecessors were the ecclesiastic heads of a region which lacked exact limitations.

The situation of the bishopric within these first decades was provisional both personally and regionally. The bishop was the head of northmen wherever they were in the country, even before they definitely settled in an area. Obviously some of these people played an important role in the opening of the newly

Christianized and civilized regions. The first were people called "Frisians" — meaning "merchant, trading man", rather than being an indication of regional origin. These "Frisians", in 1040, reported in Bremen that the Greenland settlers lacked sufficient ecclesiastic support. Their report initiated the activities of one of the most ambitious men of the medieval northern church, Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen. Adalbert's plan of a great northern patriarchate is well known to scholars of our day; around 1050, it became known to the Iceland-Greenland settlers through merchants from Bremen — possibly the same people who 10 years before had carried news of the Greenland settlers' religious needs to Bremen. Now, in the middle of the century, deputies of the Greenland and Iceland population sailed back with the merchants to Bremen and asked the Archbishop to appoint bishops for them. This he did: Adalbert consecrated three bishops — for Greenland, Iceland and the Orkney Islands (Nottarp, 1964:4, 7ff.).

The merchants from Bremen, an old metropolis and a developing economic center, as well as one of the great Hanse towns of future centuries, played their part in the ecclesiastic organization and civilization of Greenland by securing and maintaining connections between the Arctic and Scandinavia, and continental Europe. Their contribution comprised mediation, negotiation, and information. Obviously they also influenced the estimation and respect that continental Europeans held for the arctic population, by affecting the development of relations between Europeans and the people of the Arctic.

We would not know much more about Hanseatic participation in the opening of the Arctic if we relied only on official sources such as Hanseatic statutes and trade treaties. According to these, no active trade with the arctic regions was to take place other than that of Norwegian merchants. As a matter of fact, trade in arctic produce — primarily stockfish — intensified considerably as a result of increasing west European demand.

The importance and frequency of these trade contacts becomes clearer when seen in light of the fact that direct Icelandic fish export in the fifteenth century increased approximately 30 to 40%¹, and in light of the legendary tale that ships visiting a northern bay were so numerous that one could cross the sound by jumping from deck to deck.

Statutes and Hanseatic-Norwegian treaties stipulated that from 1294 on the trade connections with Iceland, the Faeroes, northern Norway, the Orkneys, and Shetland were limited to Norwegian merchants, and that no Hanseatic trade was allowed to go further north than Bergen. These statutes were repeated often — sometimes by Hanseatic, sometimes by Danish authorities — until into the sixteenth century. The more strongly they were expressed, the less they were obeyed. At first English and Hanseatic merchants sailed to different places, the English to Iceland (1412) and the Hanse merchants to the Orkney Islands (1415). Hanseatic merchants came to Iceland for the first time in 1423 (Friedland, 1973:68).

The development of trade must be seen in the context of the demand for stockfish. This high-protein, easily-preserved food was also popular Lenten fare. The Hanse increased production in the fishery, including stockfish-producing areas of

the North (Helle and Nedkvitne, 1977:248ff.). Consequently, more flour and grains were transported to the north Norwegian and Icelandic coasts, which eventually meant increasing the number of ships (Fig. 3). These were available to the Hanse, but not to the Norwegians (Thorsteinsson, 1957:168). The royal trade policy towards the Hanse was an attempt to develop Danish/Norwegian shipping routes as well as others — including Norwegian routes via Iceland and Trondheim to the Bergen Hanseatic agency; use of the same routes by Hanse ship masters; direct sailing routes between Iceland and England; and the trade routes of the Dutch and the English. This policy, of course, favoured different groups of merchants at different times. This is one of the reasons that the Royal Danish privateers Didrik Pining and Hans Pothorst were first considered by the Hanse as "pirates who did much damage to the merchants of the Hanse towns" (Brunns, 1900:396). They then began to represent the Danish king's political interest in Iceland (Meissner, 1907:257ff.) which meant a pro-Hanseatic tendency. Finally, modern historians (Pini, 1971:3ff.) point out that Pining and Pothorst came from Hildesheim, a Hanse town, and that some people of Hanseatic origin in that period found their way to the royal Danish court (Meissner, 1907:251-256²; Pini, 1907:7). What has been celebrated as the discovery of America by Hildesheim-born admirals was based, in reality, on a royal Danish order to find out what settlements, what harbours, and which of several possible policies concerning Iceland were to be developed. Of course, Pining's orders also included investigating what formerly, in the eleventh century, had been called the "*regiones finitimae*", i.e. the coasts opposite those still-remembered but obsolete settlements in Greenland. The history of Didrik Pining's Hanseatic, Danish, and Icelandic relations appears to be significant in determining how Denmark tried to control the penetration of the North.

The increase in stockfish production and the simultaneous development of an efficient foreign-trade system meant increasing individual contacts with foreigners and, on the whole, growing commercial internationalism. The transfer of money and assignments among Denmark, Iceland, and England; the acquisition of foreign languages in the North; ship transport of Icelandic passengers to the Continent (Urkundenbuch der



FIG. 3. Jonah and the whale (woodcut from Lübeck Low German Bible, 1494). Note the "holk", a three-masted ship used in the Hanseatic-Iceland trade.

Stadt Lübeck VII:721; Meissner, 1907:249-252) — all these could have been factors in the development of the North. But seen in correct perspective, and given the uncertain Danish policy, all these factors were ineffectual since merchants from various countries were competing to exploit the North as quickly as possible. The fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were characterized by pressure of debts on landed property, lack of educational possibilities, and dependency on imports of almost every raw material necessary for civilization. Danish-Icelandic relations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were defined by attempts of the Danish Crown to find its own way. This eventually was the way of mercantilism, which in Iceland began on 16 December 1619, when the Iceland Company in Copenhagen was established.

The decisive importance of the Hanseatic community for the European North came to an end during the sixteenth century, as did the role played by Hanseatic merchants in the opening of unknown arctic countries. However, a third period followed during which Hanseatic citizens were connected with discovery — the whaling period. Whaling was introduced in the sixteenth century with the discoveries of Davis Strait (by John Davis in 1585) and of the island of Jan Mayen (by Jan Jacobs

May in 1614). It actually began with Biscay whalers, who were followed by the English (1611), the Dutch and the Spaniards (1612), the French (1613), and soon after, the Danes (Oesau, 1955:44ff., 59, 63).

About 70 years before, Hamburg merchants had by chance rediscovered the Greenland coast when driven ashore on their way to Iceland. This event, however, did not mark the beginning of the Hamburg whale fishery, as the earliest whaling center, Spitsbergen (Fig. 4) (first mentioned as early as 1194), was rediscovered by the Dutchman Barents as late as 1596. The reason that Hamburg whaling began much later than whaling by the English, French, and Danes is that their chief business at first was the transport of whale oil. The Hamburg whale fishery itself did not begin until 1643-44 (Oesau, 1955: 64); the pioneers in the whaling business were the Dutch, and, to a certain extent, the Schleswig-Holsteiners (Oesau, 1937).

The part Hamburg's citizens played in the discovery of these coasts is shown in a book published between 1678 and 1715 by the Hamburg citizen Friedrich Martens, ship's surgeon on a Hamburg whaler, with the title *Spitzbergische oder Groenländische Reisebeschreibung*. It appeared first in German, then in Italian, French, Dutch, and English. What Martens published

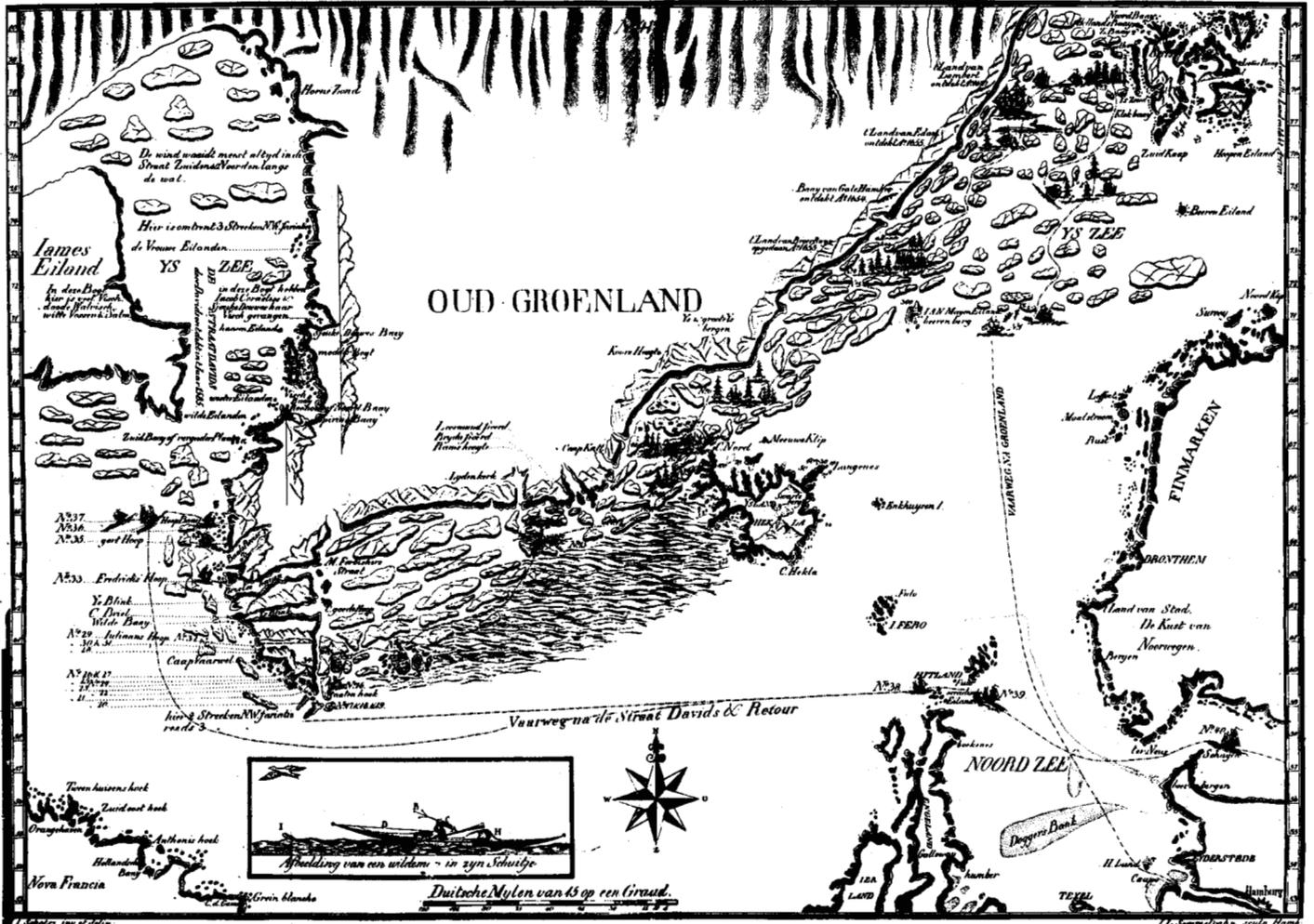


FIG. 4. Greenland and Spitsbergen (etching from Commander Hidde Dirks Katt's diary, 1777). Greenland whalers such as Katt thought Spitsbergen to be an outlying Greenland island.

were the results of his observations and research in the "Hamburgbukta", the Spitsbergen bay (Fig. 5) where Hamburgers first cooked whale oil. Martens included information on meteorology, latitude, terrestrial geography, zoology, and botany. As a symbol of his Hamburg origins he called one bird "burgomaster" and another one "town councillor" (Oesau, 1955:28). Martens and William Scoresby, whose diary is well

known, opened the way to the arctic countries with a new key: arctic literature.

Though rather modern, this seems to be comparable with the ways Hanse merchants penetrated the North: their role was assistance, conveyance, mediation, negotiation, information. The merchants found these responsibilities less risky than adventurous discovery for the sake of everlasting glory.

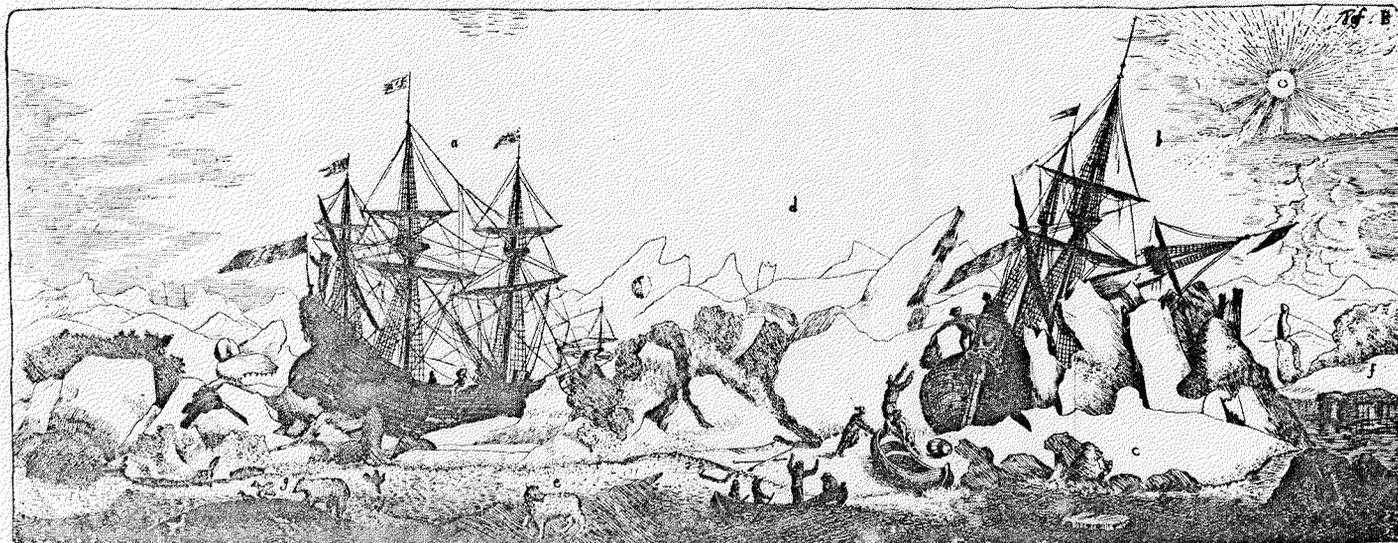


FIG. 5. "Im Westeis" (the icefields west of Spitsbergen). Etching from F. Martens, *Spitzbergische oder Groenländische Reise*, Hamburg, 1675.

NOTES

¹The total amount of stockfish exports from particular arctic ports to particular European countries is unknown. Estimated numbers concerning stockfish exports from Bergen, Norway, to Lübeck are 160 ships of 6400 lasts (1 last = 2000 kg), or 12 800 tonnes per year. Unfortunately, figures concerning exact weights have not been preserved in the literature.

²In 1475, merchants whose property was taken by English buccaneers on a ship crossing from Bergen to Iceland were defended against the English as Danish subjects, though they were obviously Lübeckers (Meissner, 1907:251-256).

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