The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: An Introduction

Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz

The Hanse Game

Just for fun, let’s imagine that the scholars who contributed to this volume did not meet at an international congress. Instead, they gathered to play a board game called ‘The Hanse: 500 years in the Baltic and North Sea’. They enjoyed a bite of bread with herring and a good glass of beer, distributed pawns, joked about winning and cooked up crafty strategies. Yet, scholars being scholars, they first squabbled about the rules of the game:

Carsten: ‘Why is Lübeck in the middle of the board? Come on, guys, there’s gotta be a better starting point for the Game! After all, Lübeck wasn’t the centre of the Hanseatic world from the word go. Also, nobody could count on selling his goods there, so “Go directly to Lübeck, collect 250 marks” is wrong.’

Edda: ‘Wait, before we start: it’s all about trade at sea. But the game doesn’t have any instructions about what happens if something goes wrong, like shipwreck, piracy and stuff like that. Worse yet, the Hanse didn’t have a unified set of rules about this. Each town made up its own. So we’re gonna to have to work through those Jeopardy and Chance cards carefully before we start!’

Sofia: ‘Hey, that’s true for all the other commercial regulations, like sales contracts. Each town had its own bylaws, just look at Scandinavia! And right at the beginning we can chuck that old bit of nonsense about how Lübeck law smoothed out all the differences that mattered. If anything, people faced with similar problems hit on similar solutions separately. So, Edda, I’m gonna be looking over your shoulder when you go through those Jeopardy and Chance cards! You keep your eyes on the sea, I’ll keep mine on the land.’

Justyna: ‘Why are we calling this “The Hanse Game” anyway? I mean, it’s not as though they never dealt with anybody else! And getting guys from all kinds of towns to get together in a tent with a “Hanse”
sign outside was harder than herding cats. So at least in the Kontore like Bergen, we need some Interaction cards!

Jim: ‘Everybody’s assuming the money comes out of the bank by magic. I mean, “Go directly to Danzig, collect 400 marks for cloth”, is just ridiculous! You gotta ask how you get the money to buy the cloth in the first place. Not by rolling dice! So we need some Finance cards, maybe ones that can only be cashed in Bruges.’

Stuart: ‘Hey, you’re all assuming everybody’s honest, but I’ve played enough Monopoly to know it ain’t so. All the Game’s got are Jeopardy cards telling you you’ve been rooked, but maybe we need some “Get Out of Jeopardy” cards to force people to cut square corners. Also, I’m not real happy about all these lines on the board telling you where to go. They all just send you from East to West and back again. But there are lots more places on the board than that, and the instructions don’t tell us anything about how to connect up the dots.’

Mike: ‘How are we supposed to know who’s winning? I mean, how do we know that you always get 200 marks for a load of stockfish from Bergen? And how do we know that you make money on the whole? After all, as Jim said, you’ve got to buy the stuff before you can sell it, and there’s no guarantee you won’t get skinned!’

Marie-Louise: ‘Where’s the end point of the Game? When does the music stop: 1669 when the last Hanseatic Diet met? Or do we go on playing until the merchant networks folded up? Is the Game about politics or people, that’s what I want to know!’

Stuart: ‘I’m gonna get another beer. Anybody want anything while I’m up?’

(Scene fades…).

If it were only so easy! Board games are board games, but all authors in this volume contribute—in the measured and dulcet tones of the learned—to the academic game called ‘Hanse studies’, putting forward new points of view, contesting the opinions of previous scholars. And they are not shy about it. Debate lies at the very foundation of this volume. When some of the articles were presented for the first time at the World Economic History Congress in Utrecht (August 2009), there was a spirited discussion both among the speakers themselves and with those in the audience. The latter were economic historians studying commercial relations in premodern Europe, and as specialists in their own fields, they questioned the Hanse from all corners. Thus, the Hanse was set in a broader European discussion context, where it rightfully belongs.