BUSINESS AS USUAL? A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION ON THE HANSEATIC POUND TOLL LISTS

Mike Burkhardt

I. Introduction

Late medieval pound toll lists\(^1\) from Hanseatic towns are one of the most important sources for calculating the volume of trade. In traditional Hanseatic historiography, they have been regarded as complete and reliable registers of a given town’s trade, and hence of the trade of the individual merchants of the town in question. So unquestioning was the faith in the reliability of these sources, that one historian based his comparison of Lübeck’s trade in the fourteenth century with Genoa’s on the Lübeck pound toll list for 1368/69 alone.\(^2\)

There is no reason why the Lübeck pound toll lists should enjoy a dispensation from the sort of rigorous text-critical examination to which we subject all other medieval sources. In particular there is room for doubt that the pound toll lists provide us with complete information on Lübeck’s sea-bound trade. This paper will address this problem, focusing on the trade of one particular group of Lübeck merchants, those trading with Bergen in Norway (the Bergenfahrer). First, it will outline the organization of the Bergenfahrers’ trade with Norway. Second, it will investigate the entries relating to the Bergen trade in the Lübeck customs records of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, calculating profits and losses of individual merchants. Finally, it will use these results in order to judge the reliability of pound toll lists in Lübeck (and in other Hanseatic towns) as sources for the history of trade.

---

\(^1\) In order to secure trading routes or their merchant’s trade privileges Hanse towns occasionally had to spend large amounts of money (e.g. to man ships for hunting down pirates). To raise this money they levied a special toll (i.e. customs charge) on imports and exports passing their harbors and on the ships in which they were transported. This was an *ad valorem* charge, calculated at a fixed amount per unit of value. For instance, from 1492 to 1496, goods passing Lübeck’s harbor were subject to a charge of 1d per mark lub. of commodity value. Once the money was raised, the pound toll was rescinded.

\(^2\) Spufford (2002).
II. The Organization of the Hansards’ Late Medieval Bergen Trade

Hanseatic business in the Norwegian town of Bergen integrated and coordinated the exports of Hanseatic towns with the fish production of northern Norway. The most important exports were flour, malt and beer from the Hanseatic ports on the southern shores of the Baltic and North Seas, which were exchanged for dried cod (‘stockfish’) and, though in much smaller quantities, other products from northern Norway.3 As the production of dried cod was carried out in the far north, mainly at the Lofoten and Vesterålen Islands, the foreign merchants, whose trade at the Norwegian west coast was restricted to the town of Bergen, were dependent on transports by the fishermen or intermediaries. These so-called Norderfahrer brought the fish in small vessels along the Norwegian coast to Bergen, where they exchanged it for the products imported by foreign merchants, in the main Hanseatic Bergenfahrer.

In the course of the fourteenth century the Hanseatic Bergenfahrer gained control over much of the trade in the town by making most of the Norderfahrer economically dependent. As demand for stockfish grew, more and more northern Norwegian farmers abandoned agriculture south of the Arctic Circle for coastal fishery around Vesterålen and Lofoten Islands. Consequently the demand for flour, malt and beer in the villages along the high northern coast quickly outstripped the ability of the inhabitants, and in consequence, the middlemen Norderfahrer to pay for these goods by selling stockfish. Only the organization of fishery on a large scale by Hanseatic merchants, who supplied the fishermen with foodstuffs (particularly grain) made large scale fishery profitable there.4 However, this led to economic dependence, since the terms of trade were not in favor of the Norwegians. The increasing demand for imported foodstuffs could only be satisfied by buying flour, malt and beer from the Hansards on credit, the loans being repayable in the form of stockfish. However, often the Norderfahrer could not manage to provide enough dried cod to pay their debts. Thus they had to postpone payment, but still needed to take out a new commodity loan in order to pay the Norwegian fishermen for next year’s haul. Soon, the debts got accumulated at the staven and most of the Norderfahrer had become dependent on one specific Bergenfahrer.5

---

4 Nielssen (1994).
5 It would be an interesting to investigate whether northern Norwegian fishermen were dependent upon the Norderfahrer in a similar way.