ENGLAND’S CONTACTS WITH POLAND-LITHUANIA IN THE FOURTEENTH TO SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

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England’s information about Poland-Lithuania could come through several channels: ecclesiastical and university circles, trade, diplomacy, and military activity. Trade, the unifier of the Middle Ages, was probably always the main source of up-to-date information for the greatest number of people in the secular world, and intermittent links with the imperial court and a steady trickle of Englishmen joining the northern crusades brought further information. English awareness of Poland was probably at its medieval peak in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century: English merchants were pressing hard into the eastern Baltic, King Richard II married the daughter of the German Emperor, and the earl of Derby took small contingents to fight in Lithuania. This paper will therefore focus on this period, while setting it in a broader context.

Geo-political definitions are difficult, because, of course, England’s direct trade connections were with Prussia, once part of Poland and to be so again from 1466, but for much of the later medieval period under the political control of the Teutonic Order. The Prussian towns, moreover, were dominated by the German Hansa. This explains the absence of references to Poland in England’s mercantile sources at this time although England used plenty of Polish goods, especially timber and wax. The change of political overlordship in the fifteenth century increased the formal links with Poland, but probably made little immediate difference to the merchants since the kings of Poland delegated much of the regulation of trade to the ports. In 1470 Gdańsk found the king of Poland as willing to support its policies as the Master of the Teutonic Order had been.1

This lack of mention of Poland is clear in a number of mainstream fifteenth-century trade records. For instance, the author of The Libelle

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1 Lloyd, England and the German Hanse, p. 206; in 1499 however the king supported the request of Elbląg and Toruń for greater freedom for English merchants. Ibidem, p. 246.
of *Englyshe Polycye*, a polemic verse written about 1436 to encourage the English transport of English trade, discussed England’s trading contacts at length, examining their benefits or problems for England. The author discussed Prussian trade, but made no mention of Poland. His long list of goods carried by Prussians included osmund, copper, bow-staves, steel, wax, furs, pitch and tar, boards, flax, Cologne thread, fustian, canvas, cards, buckram, and wedges of silver brought from Bohemia and Hungary. These goods were obviously drawn from a wide hinterland, but the writer was primarily interested in who was transporting the goods, not in their origins. Just as the osmund was undoubtedly Swedish, so the timber and wax were undoubtedly predominantly Polish, although no reference was made to Poland.

Another verse on England’s trade policy of about the same period, which extolled the importance of eastern European markets for the sale of woollen cloth, similarly ignored Poland. Its list of markets swept straight from Prussia, Bohemia and Hungary to Greece and Great Turkey. The *Noumbre of Weightes*, a mid-fifteenth century merchant handbook, which is full of detail on commodities and their measurement, also referred to most eastern goods as generically Prussian. Only on wax was the author a little more specific, mentioning Polish, Russian, and Prussian sources. Here at least there is an acknowledgement of Poland’s existence, but clearly the filter of Prussian ports diminished English merchants’ acknowledgement of the provenance of Polish goods.

These English records of the fifteenth century, so strongly influenced by current Prussian politics, are very different from both earlier and later documents, which fully acknowledged the kingdom of Poland. An example of an earlier document is the well-known Flemish list of commodities brought to Bruges. This list was compiled in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and its information must have been shared by the English merchants who frequented Bruges at that time. The list gave full weight to the kingdom of Poland alongside those of Russia, Hungary, Bohemia, and Germany, and it provided a list of Polish exports at that time: gold and silver in plate, wax, furs

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