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2 Networks, states and empires in the Baltic Region

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In terms of communications and multilateral, multidimensional relations between people, the historical region to which the northern peoples belong cannot be defined as the drainage area of the Baltic Sea. The North Sea must be included as well. In their recent contribution to the publisher Routledge’s series “Seas in history”, David Kirby and Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen also treat the two seas as a whole, arguing that “they have for centuries been linked by maritime trade in a manner so intricate that to tear it asunder would seriously violate the narrative as well as run the risk of losing sight of the whole” (Kirby 2000).

Until the nineteenth century, the sea was the main uniting link for the people inhabiting the whole area concerning contact between localities, cities, towns and ports at a rather considerable distance from one another. One may speak of contacts and communications according to the rules of comparative advantage as seen in long distance trade, the exchange of technology, experts, skilled labour and manual workers. In the process, the diffusion of culture and warfare between established and emerging states contributed to create a rather easily discernable “Mediterranean of the North” with the Baltic Region as the core.

Small communities in the very sparsely populated Baltic Region gathered to create organisations and alliances that grew into political and military centres, based upon control of land and stationary populations. Natural obstacles to communication such as steep mountains and dense forests became political dividing areas, frontiers. At the same time as there was a Baltic network of long distance contacts and communications, there also existed a number of politically distinct units, countries.

Competing labels

In the Scandinavian languages and in German the Baltic Sea is known as the East Sea (Eystrasalt, Östersjön, Östersön, die Ostsee) whereas in Estonian the name is the West Sea (Läänemeri). It is historically significant that in Finnish the name is the East Sea (Itämeri). Although belonging to a different family of languages, the Finnish language is highly influenced by Swedish when it comes to concept building. Together with the Scandinavian peoples, the Finns define themselves as part of the West, whereas the Estonians of course do this as well but at the same time also look to the west. The English term is derived from Latin vocabulary, as are also the contemporary Russian and Polish words, i.e., from the name of a supposed island Baltia mentioned in the work of the elder Pliny. Hence also the expression Mare Balticum. In the Russian language those provinces that were conquered in the eighteenth century were originally called Oitzeiskie provintsy, which of course was a loan from the German.
1. Emergence of states

When a Swedish state emerged, developing from a loose community of so-called landscapes in the ninth to eleventh centuries, it was both around inland waters, the great lakes of Mälaren (with Hjälmaren), Vättern and Vänern, and on the two sides of the Gulf of Bothnia. The early Swedish state included what is today Finland and thus from the beginning it was clearly a Baltic state. It was not an ethnically defined nation state but an alliance of clans with the same language and related legal traditions. As a state consciousness developed, it was related to territory and political boundaries. The latter were generally vaguely demarcated and seen as flexible and negotiable.

Norway took shape as a North Sea state, literally “the Northern way”, whereas the third early Scandinavian state, Denmark, was at the centre of the Northern Mediterranean, facing both the Baltic and the North Sea and in control of the waters connecting the two halves, the Straits of Öresund, the Belts and Kattegatt. Its name was given by the neighbours to the south, the Franks, and it means literally “the Danish frontier”.

The eastern, inland part of the early Swedish state was settled by non-Swedish speakers, i.e., the closely related Finns and Karelians. The latter became a frontier zone beyond which was the Russian state of Novgorod, to be followed in time by Muscovy and Russia. In the southeastern part of the Baltic Region, people speaking Slavic, Finnish and Baltic languages settled. Of these, those that spoke Polish and Lithuanian had managed to create internationally recognised states in the Middle Ages.

The easiest way to give an overview of political history is by way of mentioning wars, because they have usually started and ended at distinct dates. Moreover, wars have not been fought for amusement or entertainment, but over natural and human resources, including the control of markets and harbours, and also as motivated by religious and ideological beliefs and by idiosyncrasies among decision makers. Wars were very frequent and viewed by most contemporaries as natural. To be a warrior was a profession, although many individuals did not have the freedom of choice but were conscripted or simply pressed into military service. For long periods, war was part of everyday life for many people in the Baltic area. Some wars were called crusades, whereas others were named either from objects of conflict or theatres of actual warfare, sometimes with a time period denoted as well. In the Baltic area, we observe the crusades of the Teutonic Order, of Swedes and Danes as well as the Livonian War, the Northern Seven Years War, the Kalmar War, the Thirty Years War, the Deluge and the Great Nordic War and a number of bilateral wars such as Swedish-Danish, Swedish-Polish and Swedish-Russian.

From the Middle Ages until the early nineteenth century the military history of the Baltic Sea was practically identical with the military history of Sweden (Hornborg 1945). Because ‘war’ is a concept that denotes contact with somebody else, the enemy, and maybe also with allies, this military history necessarily had to be Baltic history. The wars were a means of gaining control of the water routes and they became a defining trait of the history of the whole region. The political and social structures of the warring states adapted to and coped in different ways with the demands of warfare (Frost 2000). Sweden and Denmark competed from their formation as states in the late first millennium until the early eighteenth century with one another and with the Hanseatic cities, the Dutch and the English, for control of the main outlet from the Baltic Sea, the straits of Öresund.
2. Empire builders

As is rather natural, life styles in the Baltic Sea Region have been overwhelmingly maritime in character. At the end of the first century AD, the Roman historian Tacitus paid attention to the fact that the Sviones had big fleets of long ships with pointed stems, i.e., something similar to the ships of the Vikings. The ships were both merchant ships and men of war, used for trade and robbery, war, conquest and settlement.

Thus the first, very loose “empire” in the Baltic Sea Region was based upon control of the water routes. Apart from the people from Roslagen, Danes, Norwegians and Germans and later the Dutch and the English also based their power on maritime prowess and skills. It is significant that a German bishop in the newly conquered Livonia, Albrecht, founded the city of Riga in 1201, and that the Danish king Valdemar II the Conquerer elevated a small Estonian village on the coast of the Gulf of Finland to a Danish stronghold in 1219, which subsequently became known as ‘Danishtown’ or ‘Danishburg’, i.e., Tallinn. However, the new masters and their German and Swedish successors retained the local name of the area, Rävala, and called the city Reval.

According to the Russian chronicle *Povest vremennych let*, warriors and traders – “Vikings” – from east Sweden, an area known as Roslagen, were invited by the Kievan Slavs to bring order to the country. Their chieftain was a certain Rurik, and his people, who became the founders of the ruling dynasty, were called Rus. The grand dukes of Kiev and of Moscow and the first tsars, until the death of Ivan the Terrible’s son Fedor in 1598, stemmed from Rurik. Some Polish-Lithuanian noblemen also traced their aristocratic origins back to the legendary Rurik.

The expansion of the Scandinavians was followed by the expansion in the Baltic Region by peoples from the North Sea seaboard. From the German-speaking areas came both warriors and merchants, monks and nuns, craftsmen, clerks and peasants. It was a matter of both conquest and colonisation, christianisation and urbanisation. Beginning in the late twelfth century, the German crusaders and the merchants of the Hanseatic league, with its beginning in Lübeck in Schleswig-Holstein in the southwest corner of the Baltic Sea, spread over the whole area up to the Gulf of Finland.

They also made substantial inroads into the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden and made an indelible imprint on the vocabulary of the Scandinavian languages. When it comes to maritime terms the Dutch presence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also left a lasting impact, to be followed by the influence of English with regard to industrialisation and the development of modern agriculture and, later, science, technology and commerce in the Baltic Region.

3. The cities

The Dutch influence in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries made water a prominent feature of townscape. In whole or partly, the Danish capital Copenhagen, the new Swedish port of Gothenburg, the old Hanseatic city Danzig, Berlin with Potsdam and the new Russian capital St Petersburg were partly designed or re-designed according to the Dutch model of building defence walls and canals, making townspeople living literally on water, am Kanal, to mention a street name in Potsdam. Most of these cities changed considerably in the following centuries. However, when Gdańsk was rebuilt after the heavy destruction brought by German
During the late Iron Age ship building in the Scandinavian area produced the keeled long boat carrying sails which could sail the open sea. It was also shallow enough to be useful for river traffic. This new ship made long distance voyages possible, providing the technological requirements for the Vikings, sea travelers from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. During the Viking period, from about 800 to 1050, a network of trade and communication was established in the Baltic region.

The most important routes of the Danish Vikings led to England and northern France, those of the Norwegians went west to Scotland and Iceland, even North America; the Swedish Vikings sailed the Baltic Sea and its rivers.

The western Viking voyages were sometimes conquering expeditions. The Vikings travelling to the east were mainly merchants who were first concerned with trade. Their travels built on trade connections that had been established during the Iron age, especially by Gotlandic seafarers who went to the eastern shore of the Baltic which is the present day territory of the Baltic states. The trade routes carried them far east. Sailing the Vistula, Nemunas, and Daugava rivers continuing on the Pripyat, Dnepr and Dnestr they came to the Black Sea. Along the Volga they even reached the Caspian Sea. Among important trade settlements that developed were Hedeby (Denmark), Wölín and Truso (Poland), Birka (Sweden), Staraja Ladoga (Finno-Ugric area) and Novgorod and Kiev (Russia).

At the end of the Viking period, kingdoms were formed in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Vikings played an important role in the establishment of the first Russian state in Kiev.

Map 7. Viking voyages. The travels of the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish Vikings. Ill.: Ulf Zander
The Hansa

Harald Runblom

In the 12th century merchants in North German cities organised themselves with the intention of controlling trade in the region. This organisation grew stronger and developed into a network of cities, the Hanseatic League. The League excluded others from profitable business by controlling ports and shiproutes. The northeastern part of the Baltic region provided furs, grain, timber, wax, flax and hops which was brought to the more densely populated areas on continental Europe. Among the return trade goods was salt from France and Germany, used for food conservation, not least of all Baltic Sea herring. During the 14th and 15th centuries when the Hanseatic League was at the height of its dominance, more than 100 cities and towns were part of this trade network. It extended from London in the west to Novgorod in the east. Strongholds were in the north German cities, in particular Lübeck. Visby on Gotland was an important free port in the early phase due to its old connections with the eastern part. Lübeck gained dominance because of its strategic position between the Baltic and the North Seas. The German influence of the Hanseatic League can still be seen in many of the languages in the region, in the design of the new cities they planned, in architecture, and the standardisation of merchant and sea law.

Map 8. The Hanseatic routes during the height of their power in the 14th and 15th centuries. Ill.: Ulf Zander
and Soviet troops at the end of the Second World War, its central market street in the Old Town was recreated according to the seventeenth century Dutch model. After German unification in 1990, reconstruction of central Potsdam, with its Dutch imprint, was also undertaken.

An important aspect of the use of the waterways in the Baltic Sea part of the region was bulk trade. After the long-distance trade of the Vikings had ceased, which brought fine goods such as glassware, pottery and silk to Scandinavia, export from the Baltic countries was dominated by goods for everyday use, such as cereals, butter, fish, furs, timber, iron, copper, wax, flax and hemp. Imported goods were mainly salt and cloth. Some of the salt came from south-western France, but much from Lüneburg in northern Germany. The cloth came mainly from the Lowlands (Rebas 1976). In the late fifteenth and in the sixteenth century, more than half of the ships that went through Öresund were Dutch, their total number being more than six hundred per year. They brought salt and money, weapons and textiles, and collected cereals, tar, timber, hides, hemp and wax, much as the Hanseatic ships before them. In this perspective, the North and Baltic Seas emerge as an economically self-sufficient macro-region, defined by its network of water ways. For the interested parties, Sweden, Denmark and the Dutch, control of the Straits of Öresund was of crucial importance. Here it was possible to benefit from the trade by collecting customs.

In terms of international politics, the principle of the Baltic Sea as a *Mare Clausum*, which was sometimes a goal of Swedish politics, contradicted the principle of the open seas, which was promoted primarily by the Dutch and the English.

Reval and Riga acquired a German character with regard to both inhabitants and architecture. They emerged as simili of the other Hanseatic cities around the Baltic Sea, such as Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock, Stralsund, Stettin, Danzig, Elbing, Pillau and Memel. Many of the places had older local Slavic or Baltic names that were the basis for the German names, and under which they remained known in these languages, such as Szczecin, Gdańsk, Elbląg and Klaipeda. These cities were interfused with the fortresses of the twin German organisation, the Teutonic Order, primarily Marienburg, Thorn and Königsberg, known in Polish respectively as Malbork, Toruń and Królewiec. Königsberg was a Hanseatic city as well. Associated with the Hanseatic League and under heavy German political and cultural influence besides the economic and linguistic as well as in terms of architecture, were Bergen, Oslo and Tønsberg in Norway, Stockholm and Kalmar in Sweden, Novgorod and, of course, Visby in Gotland. As an early centre for north German merchants, Visby even anticipated the emergence of the Hansa. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Baltic Region was a German Region in terms of trade, urban culture and common language. As was the case with the Vikings, one cannot speak of an empire, but certainly of dominance and political hegemony. The Middle Ages saw a functional German empire in the Baltic Region.


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