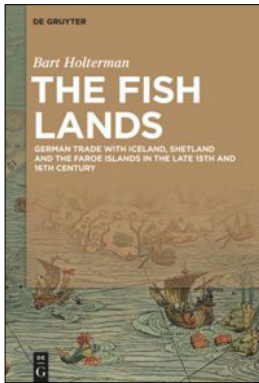


Bart Holtermann: The Fish Lands. German trade with Iceland, Shetland and the Faroe Islands in the late 15th and 16th Century,
De Gruyter, Oldenburg 2020, 512 pp.

Bart Holtermann's study is a slightly revised and updated version of his PhD thesis he defended at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Hamburg in 2019. Well-structured and written, the work offers a critical and comprehensive study of the Hanseatic trade in the North Atlantic area of Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Shetland from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth century. The research focuses on the political, socioeconomic, and organisational circumstances particular to the area, time, networks, and agents active in the interaction.



Often considered as a footnote in Hanseatic historiography, the German North Atlantic trade of Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck has traditionally been seen from the point of view of political or economic history with little interest in the actual organisation of how the trade between Hanseatic merchants and their counterparts in Iceland, the Faroes, and Shetland worked. Here is the author's leading set of questions – i.e., who were the merchants who sailed from Northern German cities to the North Atlantic, what was their social position in their home cities, how were they related to each other, and how did

they organise themselves – only provide a starting point for a comprehensive re-examination of the topic where the study opens into a more exhaustive evaluation of conditions of trans-local and trans-generational contact networks in a long-distance maritime context. Exploring the trade through individual merchants and their families, the networks and fields of their activities, the study shows that many earlier assumptions on the particularities of North Atlantic Hanseatic trade and its organisation are, in fact, assumptions and actual differences from trade in North and Baltic Sea areas can be pointed elsewhere.

The study is split into five sections, with the research questions presented in the Introduction neatly answered in the summary of the book. In between, the three main parts of the study focus on the historical economic and political background of the trade, the situation on the North Atlantic Islands, that is, the relations between the German merchants and islanders and the actual places of interaction (harbours and trading places), and the organisation of the trade in German cities. In the Introduction, the author gives a well-balanced and compact treatment of the structure of the work, describes the primary sources and their possible deficiencies, and presents the historiography of trade from traditional, nationally oriented views to the new directions opened by archaeologists in the 2010s. The detailed evaluation of the available written source material, private and diplomatic correspondence, court records, accounts of individual merchants active in Iceland and those of the Confraternity of St Anne of the Iceland Merchants in Hamburg, toll registers and contemporary geographical

and ethnographic descriptions, is – together with the archaeological data – essential for the study. In the section on the methods, theory, and terminology of the study, the author not only discusses the use and problems of social network analysis in historical research but also pays attention to the issues of New Institutional Economics and conflict management popular in the studies of late medieval and early modern trading networks since the 1990s. In a short but important section of the Introduction, the author states that because he aims to analyse the historical context of the North Atlantic trade and do justice to its complexity, he has deliberately “avoided the use of a clear theoretical model, which would carry the risk of approaching the subject from too one-sided a perspective” (p. 19). Considering the current normative standards of academic presentations influenced more and more by natural sciences, such a statement is highly welcome.

What are the main results of Holtermann’s study? In his summary, the author reminds that the first and foremost reason for Hanseatic activity in the North Atlantic was the high demand for salted, dried fish in continental Europe, which caused important environmental, sociocultural, and economic developments in the islands and merchant networks responding to this demand. Because of the growing want for fish during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the local economies started to develop their export fisheries at the cost of subsistence farming. This development was particularly apparent in Shetland but also evident elsewhere. Other exports included homespun cloth, butter, and from Iceland sulphur and gyrfalcons. Import included foodstuffs, fabrics, timber, iron, tools, and clothing. The merchants also provided Icelanders with boats, which enabled their own shipping.

Politically the defining factors in the development of the North Atlantic trade were the status of the islands as tributaries

of the Norwegian (from the mid-fifteenth century Danish) Crown, the penetration of English fishing to the Icelandic waters in the early fifteenth century and the opening of Iceland to Germans in 1468 by King Christian I of Denmark. Instead of rapid Hanseatic engagement to North Atlantic fishing from the beginning of the fifteenth century, as suggested by the older studies, the author shows that the reaction was hesitant and did not catch the wind in its sails until after 1468. In the activity of the three main German cities, the difference was made through the traditional involvement of Lübeck in the Hanseatic counter of Bergen as a terminal of the Norwegian mainland fish trade. In contrast, Hamburg merchants soon established a strong foothold in Iceland and were in the 1520s and 1530s favoured by the city’s active involvement in political turmoil in Denmark. By this time, Bremen had established a strong position in Shetland. After the royal rule in Denmark stabilised, Hamburg’s position started to wane in the new mercantilist policy of the Crown. First tested in the Faroes, the Crown’s regulations of the Icelandic trade undermined German merchants’ positions and finally ended Hamburg’s direct involvement in 1601. Because of the city’s established position in the stockfish trade, the contacts between Hamburg merchants and Icelandic operators remained important for some decades. The author also discusses the vital role of Scotland and Scots in developing the fish trade in Shetland in the sixteenth century.

Considering the activities of Hanseatic merchants in the North Atlantic, the study shows how the particular conditions of long-distance open sea contacts between Iceland and German towns moulded the ways of mercantile and social interaction between the locals in a way different from those of the North and Baltic Seas. Direct contacts, long-distance sailing and lack of terminal harbours in between except the

Bergen Counter produced not only organisational forms characteristic to Hanseatic trade elsewhere but also trans-local and trans-generational relationships characteristic to Northern Atlantic. A comparison with other fringe areas of Hanseatic trade, such as Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia area, also under the Scandinavian rule, would have been interesting. The relatively autonomous position of local Icelandic agents of trade as witnessed by credit transactions and commissions of Hanseatic merchants appear in many ways similar to those of Revalian merchants to peasant shippers in Finland, not to speak about direct contacts between the merchants and their local counterparts leading to the migration of better off Finnish coastal surplus population to Reval similar to that of Icelanders to Hamburg. In the end, many differences and similarities between the organisation and networks of trade in the Northern Atlantic and Gulf of Finland areas appear to result from a geographic distance and the availability of a more prominent hub as a broker between the local population and more distant agents in trade.

As the author several times points out, many features in the relationships of the North Atlantic trade show that the traditional picture of relatively homogenous socioeconomic networks in the Hanseatic sphere of interaction appears more a later paradigm than past reality and must not be used as a starting point in studying networks and agents in a particular area. Instead of assumptions vaguely based on older theories, Bart Holtermann's work unequivocally shows that it is essential to take a careful look at the surviving written sources together with archaeological and other scientific data, and place them in the overall geographical, political, economic, and sociocultural context to understand how the trade and mercantile interaction of an area was organised. Overall, the book offers a fascinating and engaging reading and serves as a comprehensive study and a handbook for further studies with its large bibliography and extensive appendices. ■

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