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The Hanseatic League in Modern Historiography: A Polycentric Commercial Organisation, Baltic Political Economy, and Post-Viking Ecumene of Northern Europe

Christian Ilcus* 

MSc in Political Science, Ma in Eu Studies, Denmark

***Corresponding Author**

Christian Ilcus, Gociu Consult, MSc in Political Science, Ma in Eu Studies, Denmark.

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Abstract

This article examines the Hanseatic League through the lens of modern historiographical debates, arguing that it is best understood not as a loose merchant association or proto-state, but as a polycentric commercial organisation embedded within a wider Baltic and North Sea political economy. Drawing on recent scholarship in economic history, urban studies, and network theory, the study reframes the Hanse as a distributed system of governance characterised by legal pluralism, institutional convergence, and coordinated commercial enforcement across multiple urban nodes. The analysis situates the League within a long-duration transformation of Northern Europe following the decline of Viking maritime systems, interpreting the Hanseatic order as a post-Viking ecumene in which episodic mobility was replaced by structured, law-governed exchange. Central attention is given to the constitutional role of Lübeck as a normative hub, alongside the functional specialisation of key cities including Hamburg, Bremen, Visby, Gdańsk, and Bergen, as well as external trading relations with England. These nodes are understood as interdependent components of a wider maritime system rather than hierarchical centres and peripheries.

The article further explores the institutional mechanisms that sustained Hanseatic cohesion, including the Hansetag, Kontore, and city-based legal frameworks such as Lübeck law. It argues that these mechanisms enabled coordination without central sovereignty, producing a form of embedded autonomy within the Holy Roman Empire and across adjacent kingdoms. The study also highlights the importance of infrastructural constraints, commodity specialisation, and financial instruments in sustaining long-distance trade across politically fragmented regions. Finally, the article considers the Hanse as a historical precursor to modern forms of regional integration, while cautioning against direct institutional analogies. It concludes that the Hanseatic League represents a paradigmatic case of pre-modern distributed governance, in which economic, legal, and spatial systems co-evolved to produce a durable transregional commercial order in Northern Europe.

1. Introduction

The decline of Viking political and raiding systems created a structural vacuum in Northern European maritime space that was gradually filled by more stable and institutionally dense forms of economic organisation. As Viking activity diminished from the late eleventh century onward, the North Atlantic and Baltic regions became less characterised by episodic violence and more by predictable patterns of trade and settlement. This transition did not eliminate maritime connectivity; rather, it transformed its underlying logic.

Instead of decentralised raiding networks, new commercial “connective tissues” emerged in the form of urban trading hubs, legal frameworks, and merchant associations. These structures reduced transaction uncertainty and replaced coercive mobility with regulated exchange. The weakening of Viking power also allowed for the consolidation of coastal towns such as Lübeck, Hamburg, and Visby, which began to anchor long-distance trade routes within institutional frameworks rather than informal kinship or warrior networks.

The rise of the Hanseatic system can be understood as a direct

response to this transformation. Where Viking connectivity had relied on flexible but unstable maritime mobility, the post-Viking order depended on durable institutional linkages between cities, ports, and hinterlands. These linkages formed a mesh of commercial dependencies that functioned as connective tissues binding the Baltic and North Sea into a coherent economic space.

Legal standardisation, particularly through Lübeck law, further reinforced this transformation by providing predictable governance structures across dispersed urban nodes. At the same time, the emergence of regulated trade enclaves such as Kontore ensured continuity of exchange while minimising the risks associated with political fragmentation.

In this sense, the demise of Viking systems did not represent a rupture in connectivity but a reorganisation of it. Violence-based mobility gave way to law-based circulation. The maritime world of Northern Europe became increasingly structured by cities rather than warbands, by contracts rather than raids, and by institutional repetition rather than episodic disruption. This shift laid the groundwork for the Hanseatic League as a durable commercial ecosystem.

Ultimately, the “connective tissues” that emerged in the post-Viking period were not merely economic channels but socio-institutional infrastructures that integrated law, trade, and urban governance into a unified regional system.

The Hanseatic League began in the mid-1100s to early 1200s, when northern German merchants—especially around cities like Lübeck and Hamburg—started forming cooperative trading arrangements to protect commerce across the Baltic and North Sea.

Over time, these city alliances became more structured, especially after Lübeck law spread widely and the first Hanseatic assemblies (Hansetage) began coordinating collective decisions.

The League reached its peak between the 14th and early 15th centuries, when it controlled major trade routes linking Scandinavia, England, the Low Countries, and the Baltic hinterlands, with key nodes such as Lübeck, Visby, Gdańsk, Hamburg, Bremen, and Bergen.

Its decline began in the 15th century and accelerated in the 16th century as territorial states grew stronger, Atlantic trade expanded, and new national trading systems replaced older urban leagues. The last formal Hanseatic Diets were held in the 16th and early 17th centuries, and by the mid-1600s the League had effectively ceased to function as a unified organisation.

However, it never truly “ended” in a clean break. Cities like Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck retained Hanseatic identity and institutions in symbolic or residual form long after the political structure had dissolved.

So in compact form: it formed gradually from the 1100s–1200s, peaked in the 1300s–1400s, and declined from the 1500s, with functional dissolution by the 1600s.

2. Trade and Exchange

The primary trade and exchange of the Hanseatic world concerned a set of **complementary bulk commodities and high-demand regional specialisations** that linked the Baltic, North Sea, and wider European economy into a single integrated commercial system.

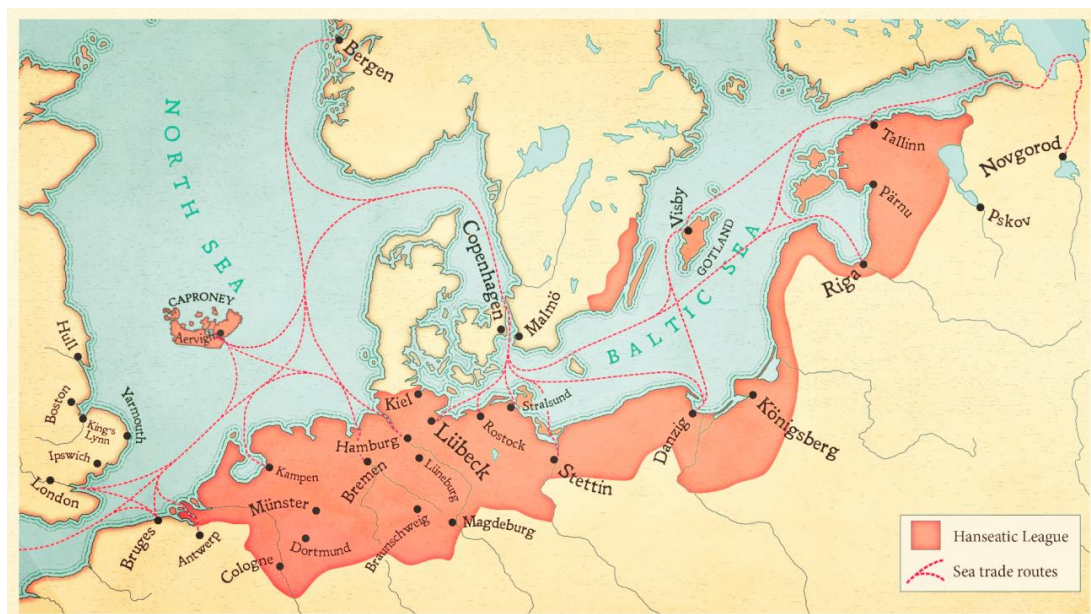


Figure: The Hanseatic League

At its core, the Baltic region functioned as a supplier of raw materials and foodstuffs. The most important exports included

grain (especially rye and wheat from the Vistula basin), timber for construction and shipbuilding, tar and pitch for maintaining ships,

hemp and flax for rope and sail production, and iron ore and metal goods from Scandinavian and northern territories. These materials were essential inputs for Western Europe's expanding urban and maritime economies.

A second major pillar of exchange was the North Atlantic and Scandinavian fisheries sector, particularly dried and salted fish from Norway, especially cod. This commodity was critical for long-distance food supply networks, especially during periods of religious fasting in Catholic Europe, when fish replaced meat consumption.

In return, the Hanseatic trading system distributed manufactured goods and value-added products from Western Europe and beyond. Cloth from England and the Low Countries was among the most important imports into the Baltic region, alongside salt (crucial for fish preservation), wine, luxury textiles, and later metal and craft goods from more industrialised urban centres.

Beyond physical commodities, exchange also included financial and institutional instruments. Credit arrangements, bills of exchange, and merchant accounting systems were central to long-distance trade, reducing the need for coin transport and enabling complex multi-city transactions. Trade was therefore not only material but also deeply financialised for its time.

Taken together, the system operated as a structured interdependence between resource regions and manufacturing centres: the Baltic supplied raw inputs, the Atlantic and western zones supplied processed goods and financial liquidity, and Hanseatic cities coordinated the flow between them through ports, legal frameworks, and trading enclaves.

In this sense, Hanseatic exchange was less about isolated commodities and more about the creation of a continuous circulation system across Northern Europe, binding together production, distribution, and consumption into a single integrated maritime economy.

3. The Holy Roman Empire and Embedded Autonomy

The Hanse functioned within the framework of the Holy Roman Empire but was not governed by it in a unified administrative sense.

Imperial cities possessed varying degrees of autonomy, and imperial authority was fragmented across regional princes, ecclesiastical territories, and urban jurisdictions. This fragmentation created conditions of embedded autonomy in which Hanseatic cities could operate within imperial law while maintaining economic independence.

The Empire thus functioned as a legal umbrella rather than an integrated economic system.

4. Die Hanse

The German Hansa was written by Philippe Dollinger and first

appeared in French in 1964 before being translated into English in 1970. The book is widely regarded as a classic study of the Hanseatic League and remains one of the most influential surveys of Hanseatic history.

In *The German Hansa*, Dollinger examines the rise, development, and decline of the Hanseatic League, the powerful network of merchant towns that dominated trade in Northern and Baltic Europe from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century. His aim is not only to explain the League's commercial success but also to explore its political institutions, social structures, and cultural influence.

The book traces the origins of the Hanseatic League from the expansion of German merchants into the Baltic and North Sea regions. Dollinger describes how individual merchant associations gradually evolved into a federation of towns centered on major cities such as Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, and Danzig. He examines the League's trading privileges, commercial networks, and overseas trading posts in London, Bruges, Bergen, and Novgorod.

A substantial portion of the book is devoted to the organization of the Hansa, its economic activities, and its role as a major political force in Northern Europe. Dollinger also explores Hanseatic urban life, social structures, and cultural achievements. The final chapters analyze the factors behind the League's gradual decline, including the rise of territorial states, increased competition from Dutch and English merchants, and changes in European trade patterns.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its comprehensive treatment of the Hanseatic League. Dollinger successfully combines economic, political, social, and cultural history into a single narrative. His work reflects the influence of the *Annales* school of historiography, emphasizing long-term economic and social developments rather than merely recounting political events.

Another major strength is the depth of research. The book draws extensively on primary sources and remains notable for its detailed examination of trade networks, institutions, and urban society. Scholars and publishers continue to regard it as a foundational introduction to Hanseatic studies.

However, the work also has limitations. Because it was originally written in the 1960s, some interpretations and data have been supplemented by later scholarship. The dense level of detail can make the book challenging for general readers, and its narrative occasionally prioritizes factual completeness over analytical discussion. Several reviewers have noted that the book requires patience and concentration, particularly for readers unfamiliar with medieval economic history.

The most impressive aspect of Dollinger's work is its ability to explain how a loose federation of merchants and cities became one of the most influential economic powers in medieval Europe. Rather than presenting the Hanse as merely a commercial organization, Dollinger demonstrates its broader impact on

politics, urban development, and cultural exchange throughout the Baltic and North Sea worlds. Although the level of detail can sometimes be overwhelming, the book rewards careful reading with a rich understanding of medieval trade and society.

Overall, *The German Hansa* remains a landmark study of the Hanseatic League. Its combination of scholarly rigor, extensive documentation, and broad historical perspective has ensured its lasting importance. While newer research has refined some aspects of Hanseatic history, Dollinger's work continues to provide one of the most authoritative and comprehensive introductions to the subject. It is highly recommended for students and researchers interested in medieval Europe, maritime history, and the economic development of the Baltic region.

5. History of the Baltic Sea

Michael North's, *Geschichte der Ostsee: Handel und Kulturen* provides a broad historical survey of the Baltic Sea region from the Viking Age to the present day.

In *Geschichte der Ostsee: Handel und Kulturen*, North presents the Baltic Sea not merely as a geographical space but as a region shaped by centuries of interaction among diverse peoples, states, and cultures. His central argument is that the Baltic Sea served as a vital channel for trade, communication, migration, and cultural exchange, making it one of Europe's most significant historical regions.

The book traces the development of the Baltic region over more than a thousand years. It begins with the Viking Age and examines the growth of trade networks that connected Northern and Eastern Europe. North discusses the emergence of the Hanseatic League and its influence on commerce and urban development around the Baltic coast. He also explores the political rivalries among Denmark, Sweden, Poland-Lithuania, Russia, and the German territories that competed for control of the region.

Beyond political and economic history, the author investigates cultural developments, including religion, architecture, literature, and national identity. The later chapters analyze the transformations brought by industrialization, the world wars, Soviet domination, and the reintegration of the Baltic states into Europe after the Cold War. Throughout the book, North emphasizes the interconnected nature of Baltic societies and cultures.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its ability to combine economic, political, and cultural history into a coherent narrative. Rather than treating the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea separately, North demonstrates how they influenced one another through trade, migration, and cultural exchange. This regional perspective allows readers to understand the Baltic as a shared historical space rather than a collection of isolated national histories.

The book is also notable for its impressive breadth of research. North draws upon a wide range of sources and presents a balanced

account of different peoples and states within the region. His discussion of trade networks is particularly effective in showing how economic activity shaped political and cultural developments over time.

However, the book's extensive scope occasionally limits the depth of its analysis. Because it covers many centuries and numerous countries, some topics receive only brief treatment. The academic style and dense presentation of information may also be challenging for readers who do not already possess some background knowledge of European history.

The most compelling aspect of the book is its emphasis on connections rather than divisions. North successfully demonstrates that the history of the Baltic Sea cannot be understood through national narratives alone. His focus on interaction and exchange offers a fresh perspective on European history and highlights the importance of maritime networks in shaping societies. Although the amount of detail can be demanding, the book rewards careful reading with a deeper understanding of the region's historical development.

Overall, *Geschichte der Ostsee: Handel und Kulturen* is a comprehensive and insightful study of the Baltic Sea region. By integrating economic, political, and cultural perspectives, Michael North provides a nuanced account of how trade and human interaction shaped the history of Northern Europe. The book is highly recommended for students and scholars interested in maritime history, regional studies, and European history more broadly. Its broad scope and scholarly rigor make it one of the most valuable introductions to the history of the Baltic world.

6. Reframing the Hanse as a System of Distributed Commercial Sovereignty

The Hanseatic League occupies a distinctive and often contested position in European historiography because it resists conventional categorisation within state-centric or empire-centric analytical frameworks. Traditional interpretations alternated between viewing the League as a medieval trading alliance, a quasi-federal system of cities, or an embryonic mercantile empire. Yet each of these framings imposes structural assumptions derived from later political forms and thereby distorts the institutional logic of the medieval Baltic world.

More recent scholarship has instead converged on the idea that the Hanse constituted a polycentric commercial organisation embedded within a multi-sovereign environment spanning the Baltic and North Sea regions [1-3]. This interpretation emphasises distributed governance, legal pluralism, and networked enforcement rather than hierarchical command structures.

This essay develops and extends this approach by arguing that the Hanseatic system should be understood as a long-duration institutional ecology that emerged from post-Viking maritime connectivity and was stabilised through urban legal convergence, particularly under the normative influence of Lübeck. The

League's coherence was not derived from sovereignty but from the interaction of multiple nodes embedded within overlapping jurisdictional regimes including Hamburg, Bremen, Visby, Gdańsk, Bergen, and external trading partners such as England operating within the broader legal architecture of the Holy Roman Empire.

The central claim is that the Hanse represents one of the most sophisticated pre-modern cases of distributed sovereignty, in which governance emerges through coordination, repetition, and institutional convergence rather than territorial control.

7. Historiographical Trajectories: From Trade League to Institutional System

Early historiography of the Hanseatic League was heavily influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism and state-formation theory. Within this framework, scholars often interpreted the League as either a proto-state that failed to consolidate territorial sovereignty or as a loose association of merchants lacking institutional coherence. Both perspectives implicitly relied on modern political categories that do not map cleanly onto medieval institutional realities.

Philippe Dollinger's foundational study (1970) marked a decisive shift by demonstrating that the Hanse functioned as a structured commercial association with identifiable institutions, recurring assemblies, and enforceable norms. Subsequent scholarship deepened this institutional perspective. Hammel-Kiesow reframed the League as a legally structured urban system, while Selzer emphasised its procedural coherence and diplomatic mechanisms [2,4].

Nils Blomkvist expanded the analytical horizon further by situating the Hanse within a *longue durée* transformation of the Baltic Sea region, tracing continuity from Viking-era maritime mobility to medieval commercial institutionalisation [5]. This approach is particularly important because it repositions the League not as an isolated phenomenon but as the culmination of a broader regional transition from episodic exchange to structured trade governance. More recent historiography, particularly Harreld, has moved decisively toward network and systems-based models [2]. These approaches emphasise multi-nodal interaction, distributed coordination, and adaptive governance. However, even these models sometimes retain implicit assumptions drawn from modern organisational theory, particularly the analogy of networks as decentralised but structurally neutral systems.

This essay argues that the Hanse should instead be conceptualised as a hierarchically shallow but institutionally dense system, in which power is distributed but not equal, and coordination emerges from asymmetries of legal authority, economic dependency, and infrastructural control.

8. Methodological Considerations: Toward a Systems-Historical Approach

A key limitation in Hanseatic scholarship lies in methodological

fragmentation. Economic historians, legal historians, and urban archaeologists often work within separate analytical silos. As a result, the League is frequently reconstructed as either an economic system or a legal system, but rarely as both simultaneously.

A systems-historical approach offers a more integrated perspective. This method treats the Hanse as an evolving configuration of nodes, flows, and institutional constraints. Cities are understood not merely as actors but as infrastructural points within a wider relational topology. Trade routes are not static channels but dynamic systems shaped by political regulation, technological capacity, and environmental constraints.

This approach also enables the incorporation of comparative historical data from other pre-modern commercial systems, including Mediterranean trading networks and Islamic maritime economies. However, the Hanse remains distinctive in its degree of urban autonomy and legal standardisation across a politically fragmented imperial landscape.

9. Polycentric Governance and Institutional Structure

The Hanseatic League lacked a sovereign executive authority, yet it developed durable mechanisms of coordination that allowed it to regulate long-distance trade over several centuries. The Hansetag functioned as a deliberative institution where representatives of member cities negotiated trade privileges, diplomatic strategies, and collective sanctions.

Although decisions were not legally binding in a modern constitutional sense, compliance was achieved through reputational enforcement, reciprocal dependency, and coordinated withdrawal of trade privileges. This produced a form of governance that can be described as distributed coercive coordination, in which enforcement is decentralised but collectively effective.

The Kontore in London, Bruges, Bergen, and Novgorod represented institutional extensions of this system. These were not merely trading posts but legally structured enclaves that regulated merchant behaviour, maintained internal discipline, and functioned as semi-autonomous diplomatic-commercial entities. In London, Hanseatic merchants operated within the Steelyard under negotiated privileges that granted them corporate legal status within English jurisdiction, illustrating the principle of embedded extraterritoriality [6].

This structure reveals that the Hanse was not simply a network of merchants but a multi-jurisdictional governance system operating through overlapping legal regimes.

10. Lübeck as Constitutional Core and Normative Generator

The centrality of Lübeck in Hanseatic organisation cannot be reduced to simple leadership. Rather, Lübeck functioned as a constitutional and normative anchor within a decentralised system. Its legal framework, Lübeck law, provided a transferable municipal template that was adopted across the Baltic region. This produced a shared institutional grammar that allowed cities to coordinate

governance without centralised administration. The diffusion of Lübeck law created a legally homologous urban zone extending from northern Germany to the eastern Baltic coast.

Importantly, Lübeck's authority was not coercive but exemplary. Cities adopted its legal framework because it reduced transaction costs, stabilised expectations, and facilitated trade coordination. Hammel-Kiesow describes this as normative centrality without sovereignty [2].

Lübeck also functioned as a diplomatic mediator in disputes between cities and as a procedural reference point in trade negotiations. Its role was thus constitutional in a distributed sense: it provided rules, not commands.

11. Hamburg, Bremen, and Western Integration

The cities of Hamburg and Bremen played a critical role in linking the Baltic system to the North Sea and emerging Atlantic economy. Hamburg functioned as a primary interface with English trade networks and later Atlantic commercial circuits. Its port infrastructure enabled the integration of Baltic exports into wider European exchange systems. Bremen, while less dominant, provided essential logistical connections between inland production zones and maritime trade routes.

Together, these cities formed a western functional corridor that balanced Lübeck's eastern institutional centrality. This spatial division of labour reflects the broader polycentric nature of the Hanse, in which different nodes specialised in distinct economic and geopolitical functions.

12. England and Contractual Asymmetry in Maritime Trade

The relationship between the Hanse and England is particularly significant for understanding medieval commercial sovereignty. The London Steelyard operated as a legally privileged enclave within English jurisdiction. Hanseatic merchants were granted collective rights of residence, trade, and self-regulation in exchange for access to English markets, particularly wool exports. This arrangement was not colonial or imperial but contractual and reciprocal. England depended on Baltic imports such as timber, tar, fish, and grain, while Hanseatic merchants relied on English wool for continental textile production. Lloyd (1991) demonstrates that this relationship was periodically contested but structurally stable [6].

The key analytical insight is that sovereignty was fragmented and negotiable. The Hanse and England operated as co-constitutive systems embedded within a shared commercial ecology.

13. Visby and the Transitional Maritime System

The city of Visby represents an earlier phase of Baltic trade organisation that predated full Hanseatic institutionalisation.

During the medieval period, Visby functioned as a cosmopolitan maritime hub where Scandinavian, German, and Baltic traders

interacted within relatively fluid legal frameworks. Blomkvist interprets this as a transitional system between Viking mobility and institutionalised urban commerce [5].

Unlike the later Hanse, Visby lacked formalised governance structures and relied more heavily on customary practice. Its significance lies in demonstrating that the Hanse did not emerge *ex nihilo* but developed from pre-existing maritime exchange systems.

14. Gdańsk and the Agrarian-Economic Foundation

The port city of Gdańsk played a foundational role in anchoring Hanseatic trade in East-Central European agrarian production. The Vistula river basin generated substantial grain surpluses that were exported through Baltic ports to Western Europe. This created a structural dependency linking Hanseatic commercial prosperity to inland agricultural productivity.

The importance of Gdańsk demonstrates that the Hanse was not purely maritime but deeply integrated into continental agrarian economies. It functioned as a redistributive mechanism connecting production zones to consumption markets.

15. Bergen and North Atlantic Expansion

The city of Bergen represents the western frontier of Hanseatic commercial expansion.

German merchants established long-term presences in the Norwegian fisheries sector, particularly in the trade of dried cod. Nedkvitne characterises this as a structurally asymmetrical relationship in which Hanseatic merchants controlled export distribution while local producers remained embedded in production systems [7].

Bergen illustrates the adaptability of the Hanseatic model, demonstrating its capacity to integrate resource peripheries into a broader commercial network.

16. The Danish Straits and Infrastructural Sovereignty

A critical but often underemphasised factor in Hanseatic trade was the control of maritime access through the Danish Straits. The Danish monarchy imposed tolls on ships passing through the Øresund, effectively exercising infrastructural sovereignty over Baltic trade.

This external constraint shaped trade routes, costs, and political negotiations. It demonstrates that the Hanse operated within a multi-sovereign environment where access to trade corridors was politically regulated.

17. Monetary Systems, Credit, and Commercial Infrastructure

One of the less frequently emphasised dimensions of Hanseatic organisation is its reliance on complex credit systems rather than uniform currency structures. Trade was facilitated through bills of exchange, merchant credit networks, and multi-lateral accounting systems.

This financial infrastructure reduced the need for physical coin transport and allowed transactions to occur across vast distances. It also reinforced the importance of trust, reputation, and institutional continuity.

The Hanse therefore functioned not only as a spatial network but as a financial system embedded within overlapping monetary regimes.

18. Shipping Technology and Maritime Logistics

The cognitive and material infrastructure of Hanseatic trade depended heavily on shipping technology, particularly the development of the cog, a robust cargo vessel capable of navigating both shallow Baltic waters and open North Sea routes.

Standardisation in ship design, port infrastructure, and navigation practices contributed to the efficiency of long-distance trade. Seasonal sailing patterns and convoy systems further reduced risk and increased reliability.

These technological factors are often underemphasised in institutional analyses but are essential for understanding the operational feasibility of the Hanseatic system.

19. Decline, Transformation, and Early Modern Transition

The decline of the Hanseatic League cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to a convergence of structural transformations.

The rise of territorial states increased regulatory competition and reduced urban autonomy. The expansion of Atlantic trade shifted economic gravity away from the Baltic region. The growth of national trading companies and maritime empires introduced new organisational forms that outcompeted Hanseatic structures.

However, decline should not be understood as collapse but as transformation. Many Hanseatic cities, including Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen, adapted to early modern conditions by integrating into emerging state systems while retaining aspects of their commercial identity.

20. Ecumene Continuity and Cultural Persistence in Lübeck

A further dimension concerns the persistence of what can be described as an ecumene layer within Hanseatic urban centres, particularly in Lübeck.

This refers to the long-term continuity of institutional memory, commercial orientation, and linguistic-cultural structures rather than biological or ethnic continuity. Elements of Low German mercantile culture, guild organisation, and maritime spatial logic persisted into later historical periods.

Modern heritage representations of Lübeck often emphasise its role as a symbolic carrier of European connectivity, reflecting enduring cultural narratives derived from its Hanseatic past.

One sometimes encounters the suggestion that elements of the Hanseatic period may still be perceptible within the populations of former Hanseatic port cities, particularly in regions such as northern Germany and the wider Baltic and North Sea littoral. This idea is often expressed in terms of perceived continuities in physical appearance among inhabitants of cities historically connected to trade networks with Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic regions.

From a historical and scientific perspective, however, such claims must be treated with caution. The Hanseatic League was primarily a commercial and institutional system rather than a large-scale demographic movement capable of producing stable, identifiable biological traits within urban populations. While there was indeed sustained mobility of merchants, clerks, and maritime workers across Hanseatic ports, this mobility was limited in scale and concentrated within specific occupational and social groups.

Intermarriage and settlement of foreign merchants did occur in some centres, including Lübeck, Hamburg, Gdańsk, and Visby, but these processes were neither uniform nor extensive enough to generate distinct or traceable population characteristics over the long term. Over subsequent centuries, these cities experienced repeated waves of demographic change driven by broader European developments such as state formation, warfare, industrialisation, and internal rural–urban migration, which substantially reshaped their populations.

Contemporary understandings in genetics and physical anthropology also emphasise that human variation across northern Europe is continuous rather than divided into discrete visual categories. As such, attempts to identify historical trading systems through phenotypic traits are not methodologically reliable.

Where continuity can more plausibly be identified is in cultural and institutional domains. Elements of Hanseatic-era organisation persist in urban identity, architectural heritage, legal traditions, linguistic traces—particularly Low German influences—and in the enduring economic orientation of former port cities toward maritime and international trade.

In this sense, the legacy of the Hanseatic League is best understood not as a biological imprint on populations, but as a long-term cultural and institutional inheritance embedded in the historical development of northern European urban centres.

In Lübeck's Hanseatic context, the idea of *concordia* (harmony) was not abstract philosophy but a civic ideology of trade governance: stability inside the city enabled trust and continuity outside it, which was essential for long-distance commerce. This internal cohesion was maintained through structured municipal law, guild regulation, and the authority of the city council. External peace (*foris pax*) reflected the pragmatic necessity of sustaining predictable relations with trading partners across the Baltic and North Sea. Merchants relied on reputational trust, which depended

directly on the perceived orderliness of their home city. In this way, civic harmony functioned as an economic asset as much as a political principle. The built environment of Lübeck symbolised

this balance between internal order and outward commercial openness.



This is the Holstentor (Holsten Gate) in Lübeck, the most iconic surviving medieval city gate of the former Hanseatic city. It is the structure most closely associated with the civic motto *Concordia domi foris pax* (“harmony at home, peace abroad”), which reflects Lübeck’s Hanseatic governing ideal of internal civic order combined with external commercial peace.

21. Synthesis: The Hanse as Distributed Political Economy System

The Hanseatic League can ultimately be conceptualised as a distributed political economy system characterised by overlapping governance layers, legal pluralism, and multi-scalar trade integration.

Its coherence emerged from interaction between structural nodes rather than central authority. Lübeck provided normative coordination; Hamburg and Bremen facilitated western integration; Visby represented transitional maritime organisation; Gdańsk anchored agrarian production; Bergen extended Atlantic reach; Denmark imposed infrastructural constraints; and England functioned as a co-constitutional trading partner.

This configuration produced a resilient system capable of sustaining long-distance trade across centuries without centralised sovereignty.

22. The Baltic Council

The contemporary governance of the Baltic Sea region is shaped by a convergence of strategic, economic, environmental, and security interests among a relatively small group of highly interdependent

actors. At the institutional centre of this coordination framework stands the Council of the Baltic Sea States, which provides a structured but non-binding forum for regional cooperation. Its role is not to govern the region in a supranational sense, but to align policies and facilitate dialogue among states that share a geographically enclosed and economically integrated maritime space.

The principal drivers of interest in shaping the Baltic region include northern European states with direct coastline access, particularly Germany, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, alongside Norway and Iceland in broader Nordic cooperation structures, and the European Union as a supranational actor. Each of these actors approaches the region through partially overlapping but distinct priorities: trade and logistics efficiency, maritime security, energy infrastructure, environmental protection of a sensitive semi-enclosed sea, and geopolitical stability.

For Germany and Poland, the Baltic represents both an economic corridor and a strategic gateway linking continental production zones to global maritime routes. For the Nordic states, it is closely tied to security concerns, environmental governance, and regional identity frameworks that emphasise institutional cooperation. For

the Baltic states, participation in regional governance structures is closely connected to post-Soviet integration into European political and economic systems, making the Baltic Sea region a key arena for consolidating sovereignty and external anchoring.

The European Union plays a particularly important role by embedding Baltic cooperation within broader regulatory and funding frameworks, especially through infrastructure investment, environmental directives, and cross-border development programmes. In this sense, the Baltic Sea region is not governed by a single authority but is instead shaped through a layered system of governance in which national governments, EU institutions, and regional organisations interact.

The CBSS itself reflects this logic of “soft coordination.” It does not impose binding rules but instead builds consensus through working groups, expert networks, and ministerial meetings focused on long-term regional stability. This model reflects a broader evolution in European regional governance, where complex interdependence is managed through institutionalised dialogue rather than hierarchical control.

At a deeper level, the interest of these actors in shaping the Baltic region reflects the structural reality of a shared maritime space where environmental risks, supply chains, and security concerns are inherently transnational. Pollution, shipping routes, energy cables, and digital infrastructure all require coordinated governance across borders.

In this sense, contemporary Baltic cooperation can be understood as a modern form of regional system-building: not analogous to medieval structures like the Hanse in institutional form, but comparable in the way it responds to the persistent geographical constraint of a semi-enclosed sea that necessitates coordination among multiple sovereign actors.

The role of a common identity in regional systems such as the Baltic Sea area is often described as an important but complex and uneven factor. When one examines cooperation among the states and societies bordering the Baltic, it becomes clear that institutional arrangements alone do not fully account for the durability and depth of interaction. Alongside formal governance structures such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, there exists a softer layer of shared regional consciousness that helps sustain cooperation over time.

This sense of common identity does not imply cultural uniformity. Rather, it is built on overlapping historical experiences, maritime geography, and long-standing patterns of exchange across the Baltic and North Sea world. The idea of the Baltic as a connected space has deep historical roots, extending back through the Hanseatic period and earlier phases of post-Viking maritime interaction. These historical layers contribute to a modern perception of the region as a zone of interaction rather than separation.

In contemporary terms, common identity is reinforced through shared policy challenges that require collective responses. Environmental protection of the Baltic Sea, maritime safety, energy infrastructure interdependence, and cross-border mobility all generate practical experiences of interconnection. These shared challenges gradually produce a form of regional awareness that complements other identities, acting as a bridge between Europe and the Nation.

At the same time, this identity remains unevenly distributed. It is strongest among policy elites, academic networks, and institutional actors engaged in regional governance, while it is often weaker in everyday popular consciousness. Nevertheless, cultural initiatives, educational exchanges, and regional cooperation programmes have contributed to slowly embedding a sense of Baltic regionality into public discourse.

From a theoretical perspective, common identity functions less as a fixed cultural essence and more as a framework of recognition that supports cooperation among diverse actors and the lived reality of living around shared geography of people with exchanges dating back centuries. It provides a narrative structure within which states and societies can interpret their interactions as part of a shared regional system rather than isolated bilateral relationships.

In this sense, the role of common identity is not to override national distinctions but to enable coordination by making those distinctions compatible within a broader regional logic.

“Paradiplomacy” refers to international activity conducted by sub-state actors such as cities, regions, provinces, and regional organisations that operate alongside (but not in place of) national foreign policy. In the Baltic context, this takes a particularly dense and institutionalised form because the region itself is highly integrated, geographically enclosed, and historically interconnected.

A central pillar of Baltic paradiplomacy is the network of cities and municipalities. The most prominent is the Union of the Baltic Cities, which brings together hundreds of coastal cities across the region. It focuses on practical cooperation in areas such as sustainable urban development, maritime planning, culture, and environmental protection. It functions as a classic paradiplomatic actor because it connects local governments across national borders without direct state mediation.

Alongside this, there are strong Nordic and Baltic regional cooperation structures such as the Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation (BSSSC), which links regions rather than cities. This includes sub-national governments like Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, Skåne in Sweden, and various Polish voivodeships. These actors engage directly in EU policy lobbying, cross-border development strategies, and infrastructure coordination.

23. EU-Embedded Regional Governance

Paradiplomacy in the Baltic is reinforced by the European Union’s

multi-level governance system. EU programmes such as Interreg Baltic Sea Region encourage sub-state actors to collaborate on environmental policy, transport corridors, energy transition, and innovation. This creates a semi-formal diplomatic layer where regions and cities act transnationally within an EU framework rather than purely through national foreign ministries.

24. Functional Domains of Baltic Paradiplomacy

The network is not symbolic; it operates through concrete policy fields: Environmental governance is a major driver, particularly because the Baltic Sea is a fragile semi-enclosed ecosystem requiring coordinated action on pollution, eutrophication, and maritime biodiversity.

Maritime and transport infrastructure is another core domain, including port cooperation, shipping routes, and logistics corridors linking Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states.

Energy and digital infrastructure cooperation has become increasingly important, especially regarding undersea cables, offshore wind development, and regional energy security.

Cultural and identity-building initiatives also play a role, reinforcing the idea of a shared Baltic space through festivals, educational exchange, and heritage projects.

These paradiplomatic networks do not replace national diplomacy or EU governance. Instead, they operate as intermediate layers of coordination, often feeding into broader frameworks such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and national foreign policy structures.

The Baltic case is often used in political science as an example of high-density regional paradiplomacy, where sub-state actors are not peripheral but structurally central to governance. This is partly due to geography (shared sea space), partly due to historical trade integration, and partly due to EU institutional design.

In that sense, the Baltic is not just a region of states cooperating — it is a multi-layered diplomatic ecosystem, where cities, regions, states, and supranational institutions all participate in overlapping networks of governance.

25. Conclusion: The Hanse in Long-Duration European Institutional History

The Hanseatic League remains one of the most analytically significant examples of pre-modern transregional organisation. It demonstrates that complex economic systems can operate without centralised state authority, relying instead on distributed governance, legal convergence, and infrastructural interdependence.

Here, the cities agreed to transcend national interests in the name of exchange and trade in a more refined manner than the inhabitants were used to than then the northerners went Wiking.

As a historical phenomenon, it bridges Viking maritime mobility, medieval urban institutionalisation, and early modern commercial

transformation. As a historiographical object, it continues to challenge assumptions about sovereignty, organisation, and economic integration.

The Hanse is therefore best understood not as a relic of medieval trade but as a foundational case study in the historical evolution of distributed governance systems in Europe.

• Theoretical, Research, and Empirical Gaps

Despite significant advances in Hanseatic scholarship, several structural gaps remain evident. The first is a theoretical gap concerning the conceptual vocabulary used to describe polycentric governance. Existing frameworks still rely heavily on analogies drawn from modern institutions such as federations, corporations, or networks, none of which adequately capture the hybrid legal-economic nature of the Hanse. A more precise theory of distributed sovereignty in pre-modern contexts remains underdeveloped, particularly one that integrates legal history with economic geography.

A second gap is methodological and concerns the limited integration of spatial-economic modelling with institutional historiography. While scholarship has richly documented individual cities and trade routes, there remains insufficient use of systematic network analysis grounded in historical data series. This restricts the ability to model the Hanse as a dynamic system rather than a descriptive constellation of urban nodes.

The third gap is empirical and relates to uneven archival integration. Although major corpora such as the Hanserecesse and urban council records have been extensively studied, comparative synthesis across regional archives remains incomplete. In particular, systematic integration of Baltic port books, English customs records, and Scandinavian fisheries accounts has not yet produced a unified dataset capable of supporting large-scale quantitative analysis.

A fourth empirical gap concerns cultural continuity and the long-term persistence of Hanseatic institutional memory in urban populations, especially in cities such as Lübeck. While heritage studies have addressed symbolic commemoration, there is limited empirical research on how commercial traditions, linguistic patterns, and guild structures persisted or transformed across the early modern and modern periods.

Finally, there is a conceptual gap in linking the Hanseatic system to broader theories of post-Viking ecumene transformation. Although Blomkvist (2005) and others have outlined this transition, it remains under-theorised as a macro-historical process connecting Viking mobility systems to later European commercial integration. A more comprehensive synthesis would require bridging maritime archaeology, institutional economics, and comparative urban history.

Addressing these gaps would not only deepen understanding of the Hanseatic League itself but also contribute to broader debates on the nature of pre-modern globalisation, institutional resilience, and

the emergence of interconnected economic regions in European history [8-10].

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