



Catalogue
European Hansemuseum

edition *exspecto*

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On the river Neva around 1193

Today, the estuary of the river Neva, in the Russian north-west, is dominated by the roads and buildings of St. Petersburg, a metropolis with millions of inhabitants. But around 1193 this easternmost point of the Baltic Sea was an area of marshland and rivers. Merchant ships from Lübeck, Dortmund and elsewhere anchored here regularly. They carried textiles, silver and foodstuffs, like wine, herring and finely ground salt. Their destination: Novgorod, a popular trading centre in the interior ...

Novgorod was the capital of the eponymous principality, which in the 12th century was part of the medieval Kievan Rus'. The settlement first recorded in 859 was surrounded by dense forests and had become an important centre for trade in beeswax, honey and animal pelts. An extensive network of trade routes also brought exotic spices and fine silk fabric to the town from southern Europe and Asia.

Novgorod was a lucrative destination for the Low German merchants. Exclusive goods were offered for sale in the town markets that were in great demand where the traders came from, especially with the nobility and wealthy merchants. The need for beeswax was increasing everywhere in Europe too, because all the churches in all the newly emerging towns had to be lit by candlelight. In exchange, the Russian merchants were happy to take woollen and linen textiles, metalware, foodstuffs such as salt and herrings, and especially silver, which the Low German merchants brought with them to Russia.

And so in the high Middle Ages a busy goods traffic developed along the Baltic coastlines. But the journey across the Baltic was a long one and full of dangers and challenges. It is about 2,000 kilometres from Lübeck to Novgorod. Ships took many weeks, often months to make the journey. The merchants crossed through various territories, in which different rules applied and different customs duties had to be paid. Travellers on sea and on land had to be ready to fend off an attack at any time. And doing business in a foreign town also involved very practical challenges. The commercial partners spoke another language, used different weights and measures and had their own laws. For a single trader on their own this was almost too much to deal with.

THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE HANSE

So for a long time already the merchants had banded together and set off on their travels in groups. Heavily armed to guard their valuable cargo, they sailed across the Baltic in a convoy, so they could protect each other in an emergency. It was not only

on route to Russia that long-distance traders formed such travelling communities, which in north-western Europe were referred to as *hansas*. Generally, however, the groups were made up solely of merchants from the same town, as with the Cologne traders in England. They were granted the privilege of opening their own trading post in London by King Henry II in 1176, which was known as the *Guildhall*.

But a few years later on the Neva estuary, something new happened: it is the first time on record that merchants came together to form a community who were not from one, but from several different towns. This kind of cooperative alliance was a common type of organisational structure in the Middle Ages and was generally sealed by an oath. As soon as the international traders reached the lands ruled by the prince of Novgorod they chose a leader, the "*alderman*", to represent the interests of the community for the duration of their stay. Compared with the travel groups made up of merchants from the same town, this league of merchants from different towns represented a new stage on the way to a wide-ranging Hanse trading alliance.

ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES THANKS TO PRIVILEGES

Forming an association not only enabled the merchants to protect themselves better while travelling, it also meant they were accepted as business partners by the local rulers. Because it was not only pirates and highwaymen who threatened to take the merchants' money and sometimes even their life. If there was a dispute with the native trading partners or

HANSE

The term Hanse is derived from *hansa*, an Old High German word for a division, group or community. It was used in north-western Europe from the 12th century to refer to groups of travelling merchants. Since the Hanse merchants only referred to themselves as *dudesche hense*, i.e. German Hanse, from the middle of the 14th century, however, we call them Low German merchants up to this point.



The merchants transported their goods across the Baltic Sea on open, single-masted sailing ships. The model on display in the European Hansemuseum is based on a vessel known as a cog, which ran aground near Kollerup on the north-west coast of Denmark in the early 13th century. The wreck was discovered in 1978 and is considered to be the earliest example of this ship type with a stern-mounted rudder, which made it more manoeuvrable than with a conventional side rudder. The picture below shows a 1:20 scale model of the Kollerup Cog.



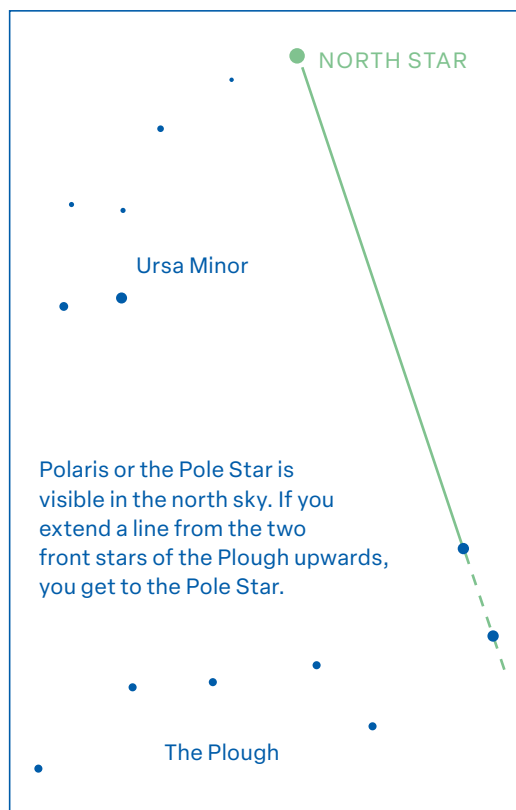


Over the Baltic Sea from Lübeck to Novgorod

1 The island of Gotland off the coast of Sweden was an important port of call for international merchants in the high Middle Ages. Without compasses or accurate charts at the time, the mariners in northern Europe navigated by reference to the stars and the coastlines; knowledge of which was handed down from one generation to the next. They could not cover long distances out of sight of land. So the merchants began their crossing to Russia from Gotland.

2 When the night sky was clear, the mariners used the Pole Star to navigate. It can be seen from all over the world and always points due north. As soon as it appeared in the sky, the skippers set sail and used it to steer across the open sea by keeping their vessel at always the same angle to the star.

2 Navigation by the stars





The journey across the Baltic Sea often took several weeks or even months. Merchants were always armed, in order to protect themselves and their goods in the event of attack. The model for the swords shown here is an original from the 12th century, which can also be seen in the European Hanseumuseum and is on loan from the St. Annen-Museum in Lübeck.

A language student with a Russian host family

People not only used different units for weights and measures on the markets in Novgorod and other Russian towns; they spoke a different language, which the Low German merchants had to learn. In order to do business with the Russian merchants, they used vocabulary books. A manuscript of one such a book from around 1600 has been preserved. It was probably composed by Tönnies Fonne, the son of a Lübeck merchant. Over 566 pages it lists idiomatic phrases and sayings in the Russian language, as well as sample letters and conversation guides for typical business transactions. It also contains useful vocabulary, axioms and adages, such as, "If you fear a loss, you will never make a profit".

In the Middle Ages many sons of merchants were sent to spend several months in north-west Russia in order to learn the language. They mostly lived with members of the Russian nobility, the boyars, who taught them the terminology and phrases they needed for business. The host families were paid a fee for their troubles. By 1268 at the latest there were standardised contracts to govern this kind of study trip. Students also used vocabulary books to prepare for their journey to Russia and while they were there, handing them on to others afterwards. Tönnies Fonne made a note of conversations between a boy and his teacher, for example.

Boy: "Dear father, I beg you to speak to me correctly in your language and to teach me to understand Russian words correctly. I will give and pay you for all you incur on my account."

Teacher: "I will instruct you gladly and explain everything as I would have done with my own son. And you too should remember [everything] and not forget what I will tell you."



noblemen, then local jurisprudence often provided no protection for the foreign merchants. But by forming an alliance, the merchants could negotiate privileges together and so establish a stronger legal basis for their business dealings.

One of the first surviving commercial treaties from Russia dates from 1191/1192 and was signed by the prince of Novgorod, as well as Low German and Gotlandic merchants. This document marks the start of direct commercial relations between Low German merchants and Novgorod on a contractually agreed legal basis, which applied to long-distance merchants from all Low German towns. The contract gives them greater security when travelling within the principality, for example, and protection against arbitrary arrest and unpredictable fees and charges. This made travelling safer and at the same time enabled the merchants to reduce the risk of doing business and so gain a competitive advantage over other traders. Another important privilege granted to the merchants in this contract was permission to set up their own trading post in Novgorod, which became known as St. Peter's Yard.

A POINT OF CONTACT ABROAD

This outpost in Novgorod was also an innovation, because it was the first time that Low German merchants had established a joint presence in a town outside the Holy Roman Empire. There had been a similar trading post in London since 1176, the *Guild-hall*, but this was used exclusively by merchants from Cologne at first, and only towards the middle of the 13th century by merchants from other Low German towns. Other important joint trading posts were established in Bruges and Bergen in the following years. Since the 16th century these outposts for long-distance traders abroad have been known as *Kontore*.

Low German merchants also established smaller outposts in many other locations, including King's Lynn and Boston in England, Bourgneuf and La Rochelle in France, Plescow (now Pskov) in Russia and Kaunas in Lithuania. Over the centuries the Low German merchants maintained more than 44 small-

er trading posts as well as the four major *kontors*. They supported the merchants' commercial activities, often provided accommodation and storage, and in some towns, including Novgorod, enjoyed a privilege of extraterritoriality. This meant that the local authorities had no jurisdiction over them.

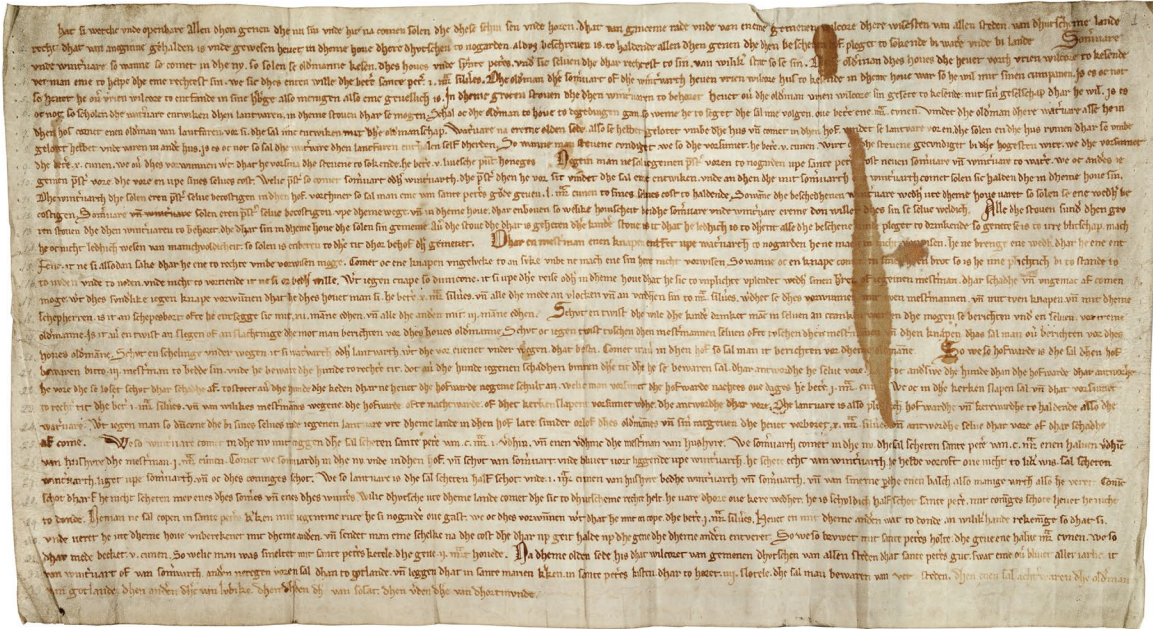
The organisation of a trading post was governed by a set of regulations, which the merchants drew up together. The four major *kontors* also had a seal and a joint treasury. In the event of internal disputes it was initially the community of the merchants in the *kontor* that decided on how to proceed. The elected *aldermen*, i.e. the governors of the trading post, chaired the court made up of those merchants present at the time, and so also acted as judges. In addition, they ensured that the merchants and their local business partners respected the privileges that the respective rulers had granted them. If a merchant got into difficulties the community generally supported him. From the middle of the 14th century, however, matters concerning the *kontors* were generally dealt with at the *Hansetag* assemblies and the trading posts no longer took their own autonomous decisions.

THE KONTOR IN NOVGOROD

The site of St. Peter's Yard was on the right bank of the river Volkhov, very close to the marketplace. High palisades enclosed an encampment that covered almost 2,000 square metres and included living quarters and warehouses. In the centre rose St. Peter's Church, which was not only used for masses, but also for storing merchandise. Every merchant had the right to an individual portion of the church nave to stow their wares. Particularly heavy goods like wax, copper and lead had to be placed up against the wall. Bales of fabric, sacks containing pelts, boxes and large bundles were allowed to be stored under the arches of the building, and wine had to be stashed right next to the altar. Only the altar itself was not allowed to be desecrated by use for storage.

Normally the merchants were not supposed to stay at St. Peter's Yard for more than six months and their commercial activities were subject to strict rules. In order to control the total volume of merchandise,

Nowgorod Schra



Date: before 1250 or 1268, Original in the Russian State Archive for Ancient Documents (Moscow)

A *schra* is the term used for the internal regulations governing the Low German trading post in Novgorod. The word *schra* originally comes from the old Norse and means *cured animal skin* or *parchment*. So it refers to the material on which the document was written. The regulations governed many aspects of the merchants' communal life in the Novgorod trading post, including the fees they had to pay and the procedures to be followed in the event of internal disputes. In paragraph 6, for example, it says:

“If an argument and insults during the voyage,
be it on water or on land, are settled during the voyage,
then so be it. If it continues to the trading post,
however, the alderman must be notified.”

The Novgorod *Schra* is the only complete surviving copy of a Hanse *kontor*'s internal regulations. It was revised a total of seven times. The first version was written before 1250 or 1268 and the last in 1603. Today the *schra* is one of the key texts of Hanse history and in 2023 its second version was included in the UNESCO Memory of the World, a compendium of our world documentary heritage. In the prologue it also says that Low German merchants from different towns and states freely formed an association on the banks of the river Neva for the duration of their stay on foreign territory and elected a leader known as an alderman. Because the *kontor* in Novgorod constitutes a separate jurisdiction for the Low German merchants, the *schra* also contains all their own laws and rulings. Low German merchants are forbidden from taking legal action before a Russian court in the event of any dispute.



To the full
translation of
the source:



for example, the value of the goods they brought to Novgorod was limited. An alderman of St. Peter's Church was also elected in addition to the alderman of the trading post. His main task was to supervise trade and to inspect all the incoming goods. So he would spot if the merchants brought fake or adulterated beeswax into the trading post, for instance, instead

of the real thing. He would break off a large lump and see whether any inferior substances, such as tallow, stones or tar had been mixed in with the merchandise. If the wax was of particularly good quality it was marked with a special seal, and the Low German international merchants could charge more money for it at markets in western Europe. ● *Tatjana Dübbel*

Seafarers often lived on board for weeks at a time, and in the 12th and 13th centuries were permanently exposed to wind and weather. Ships of this time had nowhere to shelter under deck, so the crew ate their meals out in the open.

