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## HANSEATIC LEAGUE AND THE AMBER ROUTE

### - AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE

#### *I. Introduction*

The term 'globalization', now being hotly dissected, discussed and debated in today's world, refers to the phenomenon that all rounded changes are bought up by trans-national economic activity in an unprecedented volume and velocity<sup>1</sup>. However, globalization is unlike Big Bang that suddenly 'explodes' and thus happens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has its own historical context<sup>2</sup>. Throughout human history, trading and commerce has been an important agent of changes in various aspects, especially in the times when economic activity was in its intense volume. The late Middle Age saw a resurgence of trade and commerce after peace and stability was established by the Holy Roman Empire. The trading activity in the German cities and the Baltic States, in particular, was enhanced by the formation of the **Hanseatic League** and the re-opening of the **Amber Route**. This essay tries to discuss how such commercial organization and trade- route, economical in nature, act as the agents of change politically, socially and ideologically in Late Medieval Europe via increasing trans-boundaries trading activity, so as to illustrate the chain effects in the history of mankind and to establish the historical backdrop of today's globalization.

#### *II. The Amber Route*

##### *Transportation and Communication:*

*A Network re- connecting the north, the central and the southern Europe and beyond*  
In the classical era the love of **silk** connected the two empires from the West and the East, namely the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty, thus was the establishment of the famous 'silk road' that connect Europe and Asia. The same logic applies to the Amber route, in which the love of amber connected feudal states of the northern and central Europe to the southern Italian city states and to Asian minor and Africa. Originated from the Roman Empire, the **amber route** was nonetheless mal-functioned during the early Middle Age due to the invasion of barbarians. However, the late

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<sup>1</sup> P. 54, John Baylis, Steve Smith, Patricia Owens, The globalization of world politics : an introduction to international relation  
4th ed.

<sup>2</sup> P.xxv, Jerry H. Bentley, Herbert F. Ziegler, Traditions & encounters : a global perspective on the past

middle Age saw its re-establishment and expansion<sup>3</sup>. The route starts from the source of amber raw materials- the Baltic States and the cities where amber craftsmen clustered- most notably in Gdansk, Poland and Konigsberg, the east Prussian state formed by the Teutonic Knights. The route then runs down to present day Hungary and Italy, where rich and famous nobles and elites formed a huge market for the amber production. Shrewd merchants of Venice then exported the ambers from the Adriatic to Asian Minor and Africa. Evidence of the extension of amber route from European continent to African landmass could be found in the tomb of Tutankhamen where amber jewelry originated from the Baltic was found<sup>4</sup>. Along the way feudal lords and Teutonic Knights cooperated with each other to maintain the safety and the reliability of the routes so that a lucrative income could be guaranteed by the taxation on the amber merchants. We can therefore conclude that, thanks to the peace and stability established by powerful political lords, the demand for luxury goods could be fed and extended and that trade, commerce and communication could be revive again no less glorious then it had been in the Roman Empire.

*Economic change: the Indicator for Economic re-orientation of the Baltic States*

The flourish of the amber route served as an agent of change to the mode of economic production along the Baltic States. According to the history the Baltic people ran a self- sufficient agricultural economy and also conducted some trade and commerce by exporting the rich raw materials such as timber, woods and grains to its neighbors<sup>5</sup>. Generally speaking, they ran a vast-volume yet low added-value trade. With the increasing demand on amber and the growing appetite for luxury goods, people along the Baltic cities such as Gdansk and Konigsberg started not only to extract amber but start to develop amber craftsmanship in unprecedented aggression. Therefore, a more diversified source of income and economic thus developed: the export of vast volume, low added value raw material continued, but the shift towards a low volume, high add value commercial export was becoming more and more significant to the Baltic cities, which result in great wealth among these coastal cities.

*Political importance: The Source of Power of the Teutonic Knights*

The formidable authority of the Teutonic Knights may derived from that of the holy order by the church in Rome, but the definite source of power that enable the Teutonic Knights to confront, conquer and control much of the central and eastern European continent came from the wealth generated by the monopoly of amber trade along the

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<sup>3</sup> Austrian Amber Road Association:  
<http://www.bernsteinstrasse.net/website.php?sid=c8ffec2fa734cc413d7e5c1798e2e9b5&id=/en/amberroad/amberroad.htm&sid=c8ffec2fa734cc413d7e5c1798e2e9b5>

<sup>4</sup> Same as the above

<sup>5</sup> P. 75, 張明珠, 波羅的海三小國史 : 獨立與自由的交響詩

amber route<sup>6</sup>. On one hand the re-establishment of the transportation network of amber route enable the Teutonic Knights to expand their political power along the Baltic, the wealth generated by the trade of Amber along the route in turn nourish their economic wealth that enable them to sustain their control over the Baltic. The Teutonic Knights first conquer the Baltic States, **monopoly** the source of amber mining, and then control the trading of amber via the **craftsmen guild** and the **merchant guilds**. Amber was highly regarded by the Teutonic knights because it was the only product that generated lucrative profit compared with timber and crops. In fact, while most feudal powers were toppled due to financial problems in the late Middle Age, the Teutonic Knights were the only political regime that maintained healthy financial state throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its engagement in the maintenance of the amber route and the subsequent monopoly of the amber trade might explain the reason that the Teutonic Knights was able to stand firm in the sea of declining feudal lordships.

*Indirect Social Implication: A Challenge on the Authority of the Craftsmen Guilds*

Socially speaking, the resurgence of trade along the Amber Route brought new and expanding markets for the **Amber craftsmen** along the Baltic, which result in the growing number of Amber craftsmen that in turn challenge the authority of the existing craftsmen guilds. Seeing the amber production became a much sought after luxury good throughout the continent and beyond, many Baltic people thus engaged themselves in the amber craftsmanship as a respond to the growing market developed by the expansion of the Amber Route. This was not a welcoming sight for the existing craftsmen guilds because the increase of amber craftsmen means the decrease of their established interest. As a matter of fact they tried to limit the grant of masters among the amber workers. Many could not set up their own business as a result of the various limitation set up by the guilds<sup>7</sup>. To do the craftsman guild justice, it was undeniable that the founding of guilds contributes to the development of amber craftsmanship in the beginning, but as the time went on it became a hindrance to the burgeoning new comers<sup>8</sup>. Eventually there were a surge of illegitimate amber masters who escaped the control and the obligation of guilds and engaged themselves directly in producing and marketing their products thanks to the amber route and the growing markets along the way. Not a few of these illegitimate amber masters gained fame and fortune by presenting and selling their products to the kings and nobles in the courts\*. Their

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<sup>6</sup> 50-51, Marek Stokowski, Malbork Castle- the world of Teutonic Order

<sup>7</sup> Antoni Romuald Chodyński, How Amber Guilds Operated in Cities of the Baltic Coast: <http://www.amber.com.pl/en/resources/history-of-amber/item/425-how-amber-guilds-operate-d-in-cities-of-the-baltic-coast>

<sup>8</sup> Same as the above

success eventually deteriorated the authority of these established organizations.

### ***III. Hanseatic League***

#### *Economic significance: The Forerunner of Economic Integration*

The economic significance of the Hanseatic League laid in its role as a league of merchant guilds from different cities striving for shared economic interest and integration. The cities participated in the Hanseatic League shared the same mode of trade- the trading of high volume yet low added value goods such as timber, crops and wool. As a result, in order to maximize the profit, it is essential to minimize the cost of production, which involves all sort of cost of transportation, time consumption and risk involvement as well<sup>9</sup>. The Hanseatic League strove to maximize their interest by fighting for the **standardization of measurement** and **legal procedure**, reduction and the abolition of royal tariffs and toils. On the other hand, the league also went to great length when it comes to the protection of the exclusive interest of its merchant guilds and often had the interests of local merchants, craftsmen compensated. Nevertheless, it had achieved a primary level of economic integration by removing trade barriers, establishing uniform practices and safe-guarding common economic interests among its members.

#### *Political implication: The Confronter of the Feudal Lordships*

Striving for economic interest was the ends of the Hansa, but gathering political might was the means adopted by the Hansa merchants to achieve such ends, which therefore confronted and undermined the political authority of the strong feudal lordships within and beyond the Holy Roman Empire. The majority of the Hanseatic members came from those cities within the Holy Roman Empire, whom historian described as “a series of independent cities in the sea of feudal states<sup>10</sup>”. By the great wealth generated by trade and the solidarity among its members, they adopted what to could be termed as ‘gunboat policy’- the use of military might and political blackmailing to achieve their economic interest whenever they felt that they were threatened by the feudal lords. It was said that the **Hansa** even had the power **to make kings** and destroy kings<sup>11</sup>. As a result, not only did the Hansa hold economic prominence in the Northern and Central Europe, it also had the political power and the diplomatic influence beyond its sphere of influence. The Hansa could be seen as the de facto ruler within its scope and thus challenged the existing authority of the existing political regime.

#### *Ideological revolution: The Challenger against Medieval Values*

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<sup>9</sup> P. 65, Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors : an analysis of systems change*

<sup>10</sup> P. 116, Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors : an analysis of systems change*

<sup>11</sup> P. 24, D. S. Ault and S. H. Steinberg, *The German Hansa*

Ideologically speaking, the founding of the Hanseatic League could be seen as the materialization of the **revolt against existing medieval values** and the ‘Christendom’ notion uphold be the Holy Roman Empire. To begin with, the Hansa’s emphasis on impersonal commercial practice was a direct attack on the personal bondage uphold by the feudal lords. Their expansion on commercial activities and banking industry was a defiant against the clerical power who strongly forbids trade and usury. Their development on logical and systematic legal practice was a challenge against the reliance of mythical religious practice used by the feudal lords to control the people<sup>12</sup>. Their existence also challenged the traditional medieval social structure, from which people were classified into three main categories: those who pray, those who fight and those who toil- there was no place for those who trade. The founding of the Hansa, therefore, was to establish the **social status of the merchants** by solidarity and gathering their increasing political and economic power. It could be said that the Hansa was a statement sent to the Holy Roman Empire that its concept and its practice were not quite valid in the practical reality of the changing world. In fact, Rousseau even commented that the Holy Roman Empire was ‘neither holy, nor roman, nor was it a true Empire’<sup>13</sup>- showing how the authority and the values of the HRE was undermined in the late Medieval Europe.

#### ***IV. Conclusion***

Early in the introduction I try to put forward my argument that, despite they shared economic feature in the surface, the Amber Route and the Hanseatic League both have their influence beyond the scope of economy and their existence had changed the complexion of the late medieval Europe economically, politically, socially and ideologically. In particular, the political power behind these trading organizations is notable in the sense that by gathering economic wealth and controlling trading networks the political power could expand itself for more benefits, as seen in the case of the Hansa and the Teutonic knights. In the long run, the mercantilism generated by the burgeoning trades among the Hansa and the Amber route paved way for the 16<sup>th</sup> century notion of colonialism, if not the 18<sup>th</sup> century notion of Imperialism in which the concept of monopolizing trade routes and the trade of new lands powered by military might and driven by the desire for greater economic interest could be traced back to the late Medieval times. In retrospect, the effort on various economic integrations in Europe pushed by the European Union could be seen as a subsequence of the standardization of the Hansa. On the other hand, the reason why the labor

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<sup>12</sup> P. 119, Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors : an analysis of systems change*

<sup>13</sup> P. 120, Hendrik Spruyt, *The sovereign state and its competitors : an analysis of systems change*

unions are particularly strong and powerful in Europe (most typically in the case of the Solidarity Movement in Gdansk 1989) could be traced back to the late Medieval times and the Hansa members in terms of their solidarity in fighting for their own interest and freedom, and challenging the existing authority economically, politically and ideologically- the independent and defiant spirit that sowed into the mind of the Europeans 1000 years ago. As for the Amber route, today it still plays an important role in the reviving the **artistic and tourist industry** in the central and Eastern Europe<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Portal on Amber: <http://www.amber.com.pl/en/>