Cities, state formation and the protection of trade in northern Europe, 1200-1700

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1. State formation and the sea

State formation is a term for growth of authority, resources and organisational structures connected to the state. It is based on resources extracted from the society to the central authorities. These resources must in a both formal and practical way be brought under centralized control and formed into a new structure if a state should develop. Local elites who merely combine their resources for a joint effort but keep control over them do not form a state. Rulers who are unable to centralize resources from all parts of the society and leave the burden of defence to border territories and coastal provinces are not running a state. 2

State formation is closely connected with efforts to control violence. In historical sociology, state formation is often seen as a result of wars and efforts to finance wars. 3 A common definition of the state, formulated by Max Weber, is that it is an organisation with an administrative staff able to sustain a legitimate monopoly of control of the means of violence in a given territorial area (monopoly of violence). A more elastic definition, formulated by the economic historian Douglass C. North, is that the state is an organisation with a comparative advantage in violence on a territory whose boundaries are determined by its power to raise taxes. 4

Max Weber’s concept of monopoly of violence is usually associated with territories and to the best of my knowledge he never developed its implications for the use of violence at sea. Douglass North has been interested in the economic consequences of improved violence-control at sea and he has used empirical evidence from studies of decreasing cost of transportation in trans-Atlantic trade as an illustration of his idea that institutions are central parts of explanations of economic performance. He has however not connected this with theories about state formation, protection costs or international relations. 5

It is nevertheless clear that the early modern European states introduced ideas about sovereignty at sea that in the long run had far-reaching implications for the relations between European states and for Europeans and the sea in general. When several states began to develop policies for protection and violence-control in the open sea and increasingly enforced

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1 This article is based on a perspective lecture at the workshop "The dynamics of economic culture in the North Sea and Baltic region (ca. 1250-1700)”, Esbjerg, Denmark, 8-10 October 2003.
5 For example D. C. North, 'Sources of productivity change in ocean shipping, 1600-1850', Journal of Political Economy 76 (1968). In North, Structure, pp. 20-32, 64, 66, 68 and 141 there are discussions of the state and economy which touch on protection and violence-control as economic factors of productivity, but the theme is not developed there or in North's later works.
their policies with naval forces under state control, the possibility for individuals to use violence at sea or from the sea without legal authorization was eliminated. With the spread of European seaborne trade to all parts of the world, the Europeans and their former American colonies also attempted to enforce the European concept that violence at sea was a monopoly of the state and that all states were responsible for what their subjects did at sea. In the nineteenth century this often became a motive for punitive actions, occupation and colonization of regions in Asia and Africa where other political institutions were prevailing.  

2. Violence and protection at sea
Maritime trade are vulnerable to violence. Goods and ships are concentrated wealth and they are interesting objects for those who wish to use violence in order to gain resources. It was not only that piracy was common in times when states held only feeble control over territories. It was also a problem if local power-holders extracted tolls and protection fees from powerless seafarers without offering more than nominal protection. This increased transaction costs without anything in return. Merchants may also use violence against foreign shipping in order to hinder competitors to trade and they may use power to extract trading privileges, which exclude or discriminate competitors from important ports.

In medieval and early modern Europe there were several ways to organize protection. Everyone sailing at sea could protect their ship and its cargo. The crew could be armed and it could be made numerous enough to fight attackers. Ships could be designed and fitted in such a fashion that they became defensible, for example with a high hull or with guns. Those who lived in the same town or sailed to the same destination might also co-operate. They could sail in convoy and agree to defend their ships in a collective fashion. This creates economy of scale in protection but it is still costly as a convoy system causes delays and restricts trade to certain routes. Costs may be further reduced if potential aggressors are convinced that those who co-operate are powerful enough to retaliate in great strength if anyone attacks them. This discourages attackers and ships may then sail independently and with small crews in those regions where their flag is respected or feared.

On the other hand, ships that do not participate in such co-operative efforts may be plundered or forcibly excluded from profitable trade by those who co-operate in protection. This may be a hinder to innovations in long-distance trade and create monopolies in trade. It may also induce those who have interests in long-distance trade to organize protection of it and break the power of the monopolists. There is two groups who have that interests: outsider merchants who wish to open new markets and those who live in these potential new markets. They get higher prices for their export and lower prices for their import if the power of monopolists is broken.

Finally, there are territorial rulers who might make profit by selling protection to trade which passes through their waters. They can do so if they have some suitable place to raise

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6 J. E. Thomson, Mercenaries, pirates and sovereigns: State-building and extraterritorial violence in early modern Europe (Princeton, 1994) is an authoritative study on this subject, although much more can be done on the rise of state-control of violence at sea and the gradual elimination of "no peace beyond the line"; the idea that violence between Europeans outside Europe was a private matter. The development of operational naval forces as instruments of policies for control violence at sea is discussed in J. Glete, Navies and nations: Warships, navies and state building in Europe and America, 1500-1860, 2 vols (Stockholm, 1993), esp. pp. 6-9, 102-123, 196-206, 239-241, 418-421.
money for protection, usually a port or a narrow sea through which large amounts of trade have to pass. But, if they should be effective protection-sellers, they must have the necessary means to control violence. Incomes from custom duties on trade might provide them with the financial resources to acquire such means but it is up to the rulers to organise armed forces that may control violence efficiently.

The origin of the modern European state’s monopoly of violence at sea may be found both in rulers’ protection-selling and in co-operative efforts by merchants and seafarers to organize protection at sea. Rulers taxed trade or territories or both in order to create naval and military forces that protected trade. Merchants who ran the trade often controlled their cities and they could organise protection by convoy systems, warships and negotiations with other cities and with territorial rulers. Both groups had an interest in controlling violence but they had also a strong vested interest in gaining some kind of advantage from that control. They both looked for profits from the use of armed force.8

Protection is usually not regarded as a commodity and an object for economic analysis. In discussions about trade it is however obvious that protection against violence is a cost and that violence and war are important for trade. Protection is a service or a utility; it is costly to provide and valuable to have. You can organise it on your own or you can buy it from someone. The most likely seller is often that power which is best able to use violence and threaten you. The American economic historian Frederic C. Lane’s did in the 1940s and 1950s develop a theory of protection-selling and violence-control as economic activities, which also is useful as a theory about the interconnection between war and the development of states. Lane also asserted that states could be analysed as producers of a utility - protection - and as enterprises with interest in profits.

Lane’s own studies of medieval and early modern maritime history made him conscious of the need to integrate violence, violence-control and protection cost in the analysis of economy. Low protection cost increases profits while high protection cost - which may be the result of attacks from competitors - decreases profit. Lane suggested that economic actors might develop their ability to provide efficient coercion and protection at low cost as an integrated part of their entrepreneurial skill. The economically motivated demand for coercion and protection may also result in an increased role for the state, which may be the most cost-effective user of violence.9

3. Trade, protection and state formation in the Baltic, 1200 to 1700

How does this concept of trade, protection and state formation apply to the Baltic and its relations to the North Sea region from 1200 to 1700?10

The sea lines of communication in this region connect Eastern, Northern, Central and Western Europe. The large rivers, which flow to the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, are important for trade and the interconnection between the two seas are narrow and easy to control. This has made it possible to raise custom duties on trade on rivers and at narrow parts of the sea and this has been important for local power groups and state formation activities. Geosrategically, the Baltic Sea provides great advantages to those who are able to control the sea or deny its use to enemies. Large military resources can be transferred across the sea and sea power can be used to blockade ports and trade. The ability to use these advantages has

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10 This article is focused on the Baltic Sea region (including all Scandinavia) and its trade relations with the North Sea, primarily the Netherlands and the British Isles. The two later regions have many trade relations with other parts of the world, which are not treated here.
however shifted dramatically with technological and political development. Far from all power-holders in Northern Europe have used the opportunities for state formation or protection-selling.

The decline of Nordic sea power and the rise of the Hanse

In 1200 the three Nordic states were the leading sea powers in Northern Europe. Denmark had a Baltic empire, Norway a North Atlantic empire and Sweden was expanding across the sea into Finland. The three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden had been shaped by chieftains and rulers who used ships and maritime communications to control large territories. Their systems for maritime control of violence were based on local participation in a national system rather than on centralised resources. Local communities along the coasts were obliged to provide one or a few oared vessels with their crew and the necessary arms and provisions for the service of the king.11

These *ledung, leding* or *leidang* systems might be useful for coastal defence against piracy, for protection of coastal trade and for amphibious expeditions across the Baltic or the North Sea. They were however politically vulnerable as local societies might use the same system against the central ruler if they disagreed with him. Small oared vessels were also physically unable to control the open sea for extended periods. We know rather little about trade in this period but it is obvious that it was small in scale and obstructed by local violence. Merchants who went to foreign territories had to be ready to fight as much as they must be ready to trade. Long-distance trade was possible but transport service expensive, not the least due to protection costs.12

During the thirteenth century rapid changes took place in Baltic and North European trade. It increased in size and became dominated by a German network of trade. German merchants took control of trade, partly with the use of cogs with larger cargo capacity than the Nordic vessels. The cogs and later the even larger hulks were also better suited for passage across the open sea and with their higher hulls they had an advantage in combat with low oared vessels. For protection and political co-operation the German merchants formed the Hanse, a combined military alliance and trading cartel with several cities as members. Their ability to co-operate may be an important part of their success. The Hanse cities could also use their ships for warfare and until the early sixteenth century they remained the leading sea power in the Baltic. Trade was based on privileges negotiated with territorial rulers and on a network of German merchants who settled in ports around the Baltic. Alliances of German cities became able to fight major territorial states with success. It was a period when political power in the Baltic was closely connected with trade.13

The Hanse was primarily organised around trade along the axis Novgorod-Reval-Lübeck-Hamburg-Bruges-London but trade with Scandinavia and southern Germany was also important. The Hanse was also a powerful political force in the North Sea although it cannot be said that it dominated this sea as it did in the Baltic. As long as the shipping route around Jutland was too dangerous, trade passed across the Jutland isthmus on rivers or on land and goods had to be loaded and unloaded at Lübeck. This city grew to the largest in the Baltic and became the informal capital of the Hanse. Of the other North German ports, Danzig in Prussia


in the long run became the most important as it handled the growing Polish grain trade with Western Europe. In the eastern Baltic, Riga, Reval (Tallinn) and Narva were founded as fortified settlements for trade with Eastern Europe. Stockholm was founded as the main port for the lake Mälaren valley and the iron and copper districts in central Sweden. Cities were obviously a key factor in this development as so many new cities were founded mainly in order to handle the trade and protect those who traded.  

Why did this transformation take place? Why were the Germans, who in 1200 were barely seafarers at all, able to become dominating in seaborne trade? Why was Nordic sea power reduced into insignificance? Nordic sea power was not defeated in wars with the Germans; it was mainly marginalized when a new maritime system was developed. Traditionally the German saw themselves as those who brought civilization to an underdeveloped area of Europe. Much of the traditional research about the Hanse was made in a period when European seaborne trade penetrated Africa and Asia and became the base of colonial empires. Actually, the Nordic states could be described as about as well developed as Germany in 1200, and they were certainly more developed in the maritime sector. The degree to which the Germans introduced purely technological innovations is uncertain and there is no reason to believe that the Scandinavian shipbuilders were unable to build ships of the same types, size and quality as the Germans could.

To me it looks more as if maritime, cultural and political development in an earlier non-maritime region, northern Germany, rather suddenly became highly dynamic and gained a leading position because it was unconnected with existing cultural and political traditions in Northern Europe. The Germans were not tied to existing cultural and technological conventions about seafaring and protection in the Baltic and they were thus able to try new technological and social concepts and institutions. I do not offer any definite explanation but I suggest that this period of transformation ought to be studied with a fresh look on the evidence and possibly with some theory about protection cost and state formation.

Such studies may start with the question why the Germans merchants were better than their competitors in organising protection. The fortified cities and the shipping lines between them was a system for protection, which was superior to earlier systems in the region and that gave those who organised it an economic and political advantage. In that process of innovation, German merchants appears as more open to new technology, new institutions and new opportunities. They saw the Baltic as a promising area for trade but the promise could only be fulfilled if they adopted their institutions to it. One of these institutions was the strong propensity to co-operate, which made a large number of not very powerful cities into a great collective political actor. The Hanse was not a state, nor was it a protection-seller. It was a coordinator of protective efforts organised by those who urgently required efficient protection for profitable trade. As the protection usually worked, profits increased and provided the foundation for even better protection and political strength to act with increased authority.

The rise of Dutch maritime supremacy and Nordic naval power

Another period of rapid transformation took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially the decades around 1500. This period saw rapid state formation in Northern Europe and a structural transformation of trade between east and west. The main outline of the transformation is that Denmark-Norway and Sweden became fairly strong monarchical states

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14 Recent studies of the Hanse and relations between cities, states and trade: J. D. Fudge., Cargoes, embargoes, and emissaries: The commercial and political interaction of England and the German Hanse, 1450-1510 (Toronto, 1995); D. Seifert, Kompagnons und Konkurrenten: Holland und die Hanse im späten Mittelalter (Köln, 1997).

with permanent navies, that the Hanse lost its political, naval and military power and that the Western Europeans, primarily the Dutch, gained a leading position in the trade between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. There were interconnections between these developments and it is also easy to find technological explanations for them. The two major technological changes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were major improvements in sailing ship technology and the introduction of gunpowder and heavy guns. There are however no obvious interconnections between these changes and the rise and decline of certain powers. This must be explained by various power-holders ability and inability to adapt to changing circumstances.\footnote{Glete, *Navies*, pp. 110-114, 133-139; Glete, *Warfare at sea*, pp. 112-130; J. Glete, 'Naval power and control of the sea in the Baltic in the 16th century', in Hattendorf and Unger, *War at sea*, pp. 217-232.}

Improvements in sailing-ship technology made it possible to sail around Jutland fairly safely and this made this route cheaper for trade than the traditional route across the Jutland isthmus, which had given Lübeck its key position as the great Baltic entrepot for trade. Gunpowder and heavy guns made it possible to dominate the sea with specialised warships. These developments favoured both long-distance trade and the formation of permanent navies, which could administrate guns, warships and the competencies that were required to handle this technology. However, the new opportunities were used by different groups. Merchant shipping suitable for efficient and cheap trade between the Baltic and the North Sea was mainly developed by seafarers in the west of which the Hollanders became the most important. Navies were in the Baltic developed by two new Nordic dynasties. Later, towards the end of the sixteenth century, the new Dutch Republic did also develop naval power that was closely interconnected with the Republic’s trade.\footnote{J. R. Bruijn, *Varend verleden: De nederlandse oorlogsvloot in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1998); a revised and enlarged edition of J. R. Bruijn, *The Dutch navy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Columbia, 1993).}

There were certainly no technological obstacles for German and Polish territorial rulers to develop navies or for the German Baltic cities to dominate trade between the Baltic and the North Sea, especially not if German and Polish rulers had protected that trade with navies. The problem was obstacles for state formation and aggregation between territorial and mercantile interest groups in these large countries. Why these obstacles existed and persisted for centuries is an interesting problem to study. It ought to be compared with the situation in the Netherlands where an urbanized and mercantile society quickly developed strong naval power after a revolt against their territorial prince.

The absence of German or Polish naval power gave the relatively small and poor Nordic power an opportunity to exercise command of the sea in the Baltic. That reduced the protection cost for Western shipping. Denmark could finance much of its naval efforts with the Sound Toll where shipping between the Baltic and Western Europe paid for protection. Sweden raised toll in its own ports and in the increasing number of Baltic ports, which were brought under Swedish control from 1561 to 1660.\footnote{Sound toll and Danish state finance: M. Venge, *Dansk toldhistorie: Vol. I, Fra årtold til toldetat; Middelalderen indtil 1660* (Copenhagen, 1987); S. Balle, *Statsfinanserne på Christian 3.s tid* (Aarhus, 1992). Trade and customs policy in the Swedish expansion in the Baltic: E. Wendt, *Det svenska licentväsendet i Preussen, 1627-1635* (Uppsala, 1933); A. Attman, *The struggle for Baltic markets: Powers in conflict, 1558-1618* (Gothenburg, 1979); S. Troebst, 'Debating the mercantile background to early modern Swedish empire-building: Michael Roberts versus Artur Attman', *European history quarterly* 24 (1994), pp. 485-509.} Both powers claimed that they, and only they had the right to command the Baltic with naval power and protect foreign shipping. This policy is usually known as *dominium maris Baltici*, which was the same as a policy of monopoly of violence over a large inland sea.\footnote{Conflicts between Sweden and Denmark in the 1610s and 1620s about the *dominium maris Baltici* is studied in L. Tandrup, *Mod triumf eller tragedie*, 2 vols (Aarhus, 1979).} It must however be remembered that the
Nordic navies primarily were used for protection and control of territories, not for trade protection. The new naval policy was cost-efficient as the same navy protected territories and made trade to these territories cheaper.

As we know, it was the Dutch who drew most benefit of the new trading conditions in the Baltic.\footnote{Dutch trade with the Baltic and its connections with other parts of the Dutch mercantile system: J. I. Israel, \textit{Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740} (Oxford, 1989). The new structure of Baltic trade from a Swedish perspective: Å. Sandström, \textit{Mellan Torneå och Amsterdam: En undersökning av Stockholms roll som förmedlare av varor i regional- och utrikeshandel} (Stockholm, 1990).} Trade between the Baltic and Western Europe could be arranged cheaply with more or less unarmed ships with small crews and these ships could sail independently in the Baltic Sea without being delayed by a convoy system. The development of cheap Dutch shipping is often seen as a technological innovation but it must also be seen as one side of an institutional change where the development of specialised warships was the other side. Outside the Baltic the Dutch themselves developed a sophisticated convoy system with warships protecting trade and the fact that the Dutch state protected its merchants may be an important part of the explanation for Dutch maritime and mercantile supremacy.\footnote{This is a theme never studied in the Dutch literature where it is usually assumed that the navy, at least before 1652, was inefficient and of limited importance for the Dutch trade supremacy. Bruijn, \textit{Varend} is an exception as it leaves the question of efficiency open. Arguments for a high degree of Dutch naval efficiency up to 1660 is presented in Glete, \textit{War}, pp. 162-171, with an empirical survey in Glete, \textit{Warfare at sea 2000}, pp. 165-185. Israel, \textit{Dutch}, pp. 410-411, concludes that the Dutch state and its military and naval power was important for protection of trade but Israel has never analysed naval policy and administration in his studies of Dutch history.} Inside the Baltic, Dutch shipping bought protection from the Nordic rulers when the paid toll in the Sound and in the Baltic ports. Up to the mid-seventeenth century both Nordic powers regarded the rising Dutch economic influence in the region as something favourable as it provided cheaper shipping service and a flow of investments, which, especially in Sweden, caused industrial development.

\textit{The opening of the Baltic}

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Baltic Sea was the most modern region for maritime trade in Europe. Foreign merchantmen could sail unarmed and alone with practically no risk of being attacked by pirates, competitors or local power-holders. Conditions were widely different along Europe’s Atlantic coast and in the Mediterranean. It was still however a pre-modern institutional framework which created these favourable conditions for trade, as it depended on a Nordic claim of \textit{dominium} over the Baltic Sea and a unique Dutch ability to integrate the special Baltic conditions with a European trading system protected by the Dutch navy and its convoy systems. The final “modernisation” of the Baltic took place in the latter half of the seventeenth century when the sea became a highway for east-west shipping from many countries; the Netherlands of course, but also Britain, Germany and the Nordic states. It was of course not free trade that had arrived. It was the rise of mercantilism and the general European balance of power at sea which opened the Baltic and created a North and Western European shipping system. In that, the states protected peaceful international trade against piracy and interventions not authorised by the state but they also used their naval power to eliminate enemy trade in times of war.

Mercantilism is here used as a convenient term for protectionism and the integration of economic policy with international power politics. From around 1650, several European states began to try to develop their mercantile marines and maritime trade with restrictions on foreigners, in practice the dominating Dutch mercantile interests. They tried to trade with each other rather than with the Dutch as they had become used to in the age of Dutch maritime supremacy. The Dutch became involved in several wars with Britain, Sweden and France where trade was an important issue. One effect was that the Dutch, British and French navies
grew dramatically in size and became able to intervene in any region of Europe, including the Baltic. The other side of the coin was that the states in Western Europe became more aware of the positive effects of trade and used their increased power at sea to eliminate small-scale violence and the general insecurity at sea. This made it possible to reduce shipping costs.

The Baltic was by the 1650s politically a Swedish lake while it economically was a Dutch lake. This caused conflicts between the Republic and Sweden, as the Dutch feared that Swedish expansionism in combination with rising mercantilism might erode their favourable trading position in the region. Sweden failed to create a Baltic trading empire of its own but other powers; primarily the British used the opportunity of Swedish-Dutch conflicts to increase their share of the trade in the region. Britain could, just like the Dutch, use their rapidly increasing naval power to intervene in the Baltic from the 1650s on and the integration of the Baltic with the Western European balance of power at sea did not create any new monopoly of trade.

Instead, a new situation developed where the Baltic and the North Sea became a safe region for trade for ships from many countries, provided that they followed trade agreements and restrictions on shipping in wartime imposed by the powers, which controlled the seas with their navies. Naval forces were now so superior that it was out of the question for merchant shipping to try to fight it. It was cheaper to try to reach political agreements about trade and trust that the states were strong enough to fulfil their obligations towards each other. In this new situation, neutral shipping became highly profitable when two or more sea powers were at war. Maritime trade was of course not entirely free from violence and in the Mediterranean the older conditions lingered on far into the eighteenth century, primarily due to the activity of the North African Barbaresque states. The fact that large-scale and profitable neutral shipping was possible at all must be regarded as a major institutional innovation in protection. It was based on the fact that states now were strong, able to enforce their will at sea and ready to place their weight in a European-wide balance of power. The fate of individual merchantmen sailing along European coasts was now largely unrelated to their armament or the size of the crew. It was also little related to local or regional protection-selling. It was primarily determined by their flag. The flag was of course a symbol of power and ability to use violence but that power was exercised by their state on the European political scene.

4. Concluding remarks

Historical studies about the Baltic region are usually divided into political, economic, maritime or naval subjects and they are often even studied within different academic disciplines. State formation takes place on land, shipping and large-scale trade at sea while naval warfare are related to international politics and usually regarded as much less important than military operations on land. Recent studies and recently published collections of important articles about the history of this region from 1200 to 1700 generally follow this pattern.22


23 General: Kirby and Hinkkanen, The Baltic. Political history and state formation: L. Jespersen, ed., A revolution from above? The power state of the 16th and 17th century Scandinavia (Odense, 2000); H. Gustafsson, Gamla riken, nya stater: Statsbildning, politisk kultur och identitet under Kalmarunionens
In the real medieval and early modern world around the Baltic Sea and also around the North Sea, the sea and the maritime lines of communication were of central importance. Major cities and centres of political power were located at the sea, usually at river estuaries or narrow seas of strategic and economic importance. Control of the sea was decisive for trade, political power and military operations as the sea was the major highway for cheap transportation of bulk cargo, army forces and logistical supply of major military operations around the coasts. Control of the sea, protection of trade and state formation were closely intertwined in the Baltic region, the Netherlands and the British Isles. Such control gave rulers and elites the ability to control territories dependent on the sea, both as credible protectors and protection-sellers and as power-holders able to isolate the territories from other parts of the region. Especially in the Baltic, major military and naval operations cannot be understood if they are studied in isolation, as large-scale warfare in the region usually was amphibious and dependent on control of the sea.

There are excellent opportunities for future studies of trade, protection and state formation in the Baltic and North Sea region. It is a fruitful region for comparative and interdisciplinary studies and for studies focused on the interaction between various parts of Northern and North-Western Europe.

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