

# **Two Naval Disasters of 1387. Glimpses of Baltic Trade at the End of the Fourteenth Century**

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## ABSTRACT

In 1387 two Prussian vessels were involved in shipwrecks on the coast of Jutland. One, loaded mainly with cloth from Artois, Brabant and Flanders, was probably returning from the Low Countries; the other, carrying wax, furs, copper and iron, must have been heading from one of the Prussian ports to western Europe. The paper discusses the goods carried by the two vessels and seeks to identify the owners of the cargoes, who came mainly from Toruń. The investigation shows that the two shipwrecks can be seen as a representative sample of Prussian trade in the late Middle Ages.

To enter the Baltic, mariners must circumnavigate the peninsula of Jutland and sail through the Danish straits. The passage of the Skaw (Skagen, i.e. the north end of Jutland) is especially dangerous because of the strong currents. In the spring of 1387, a ship belonging to one Lubrecht van der Beke was shipwrecked at Skagen. The exact date of the disaster is unknown; we only know that it happened before Palm Sunday, which in 1387 was March 31<sup>st</sup>. In the course of the first day it was possible to salvage 676 "hele laken" (full pieces of cloth), 185 "halbe laken" (half pieces of cloth) as well as some pieces of harras and other goods; everything was deposited in the nearby church. The following day, seven packets of cloth ("packen ghewandes") were taken ashore; the local priest, Bernard, had them carried to another church. Besides the 676 full pieces of cloth, 185 half pieces and seven packets of cloth, the cargo

comprised a barrel with 44 pieces of harras, a mantle (“heuke”), a frock (“eyn rok”), 23 individual pieces of harras (“loze harras”), as well as a barrel containing sugar, caps and two pots of ambergris (“potten walradis”). Except for the seven packets of cloth, which the Reverend Bernard had deposited in his church, the goods were taken, by order of the king’s local representative, from the church where they had been kept to the castle of Rugtved. As to the seven packets of cloth, the Reverend Bernard had promised, on his word as a priest, to declare for the king and the king’s mother<sup>1</sup> how many pieces of cloth the seven packets contained.<sup>2</sup>

Another ship, belonging to a certain Peter Gerhardsen, was shipwrecked about November 11<sup>th</sup> 1387. We do not know the exact place, only that it belonged to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the bishop of Ribe and to the secular administration of the governor of Ribe, Henneke Limbek.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the disaster must have taken place on Jutland’s west coast. From the ship it was possible to salvage 72 pieces (“frustra”) of wax and a barrel containing furs. In return for an indemnity of salvage, the bishop had 21 pieces of wax delivered to the mariners. The remaining wax was kept by Henneke Limbek, who in Lübeck had lining for his clothes made from some of the furs. The author of the report did not know whether the copper and iron, which the cargo also contained, had been salvaged.<sup>4</sup>

We find the description of the two shipwrecks in the instruction for the delegates of the Prussian towns to the meeting of the Hanseatic towns scheduled to begin on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1388. The merchants had still received neither their salvaged goods nor an adequate indemnity, so the Prussian towns hoped, with the support of the other Hanseatic towns, to force the Danish government to negotiate a solution of the question.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although King Oluf had come of age in 1385, his mother Margaret still played a considerable role; after Oluf’s death in August 1387, she was elected administrator of the realm.

<sup>2</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III ed. Thomas Riis, Copenhagen 1993, no. 378 §§ 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* § 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* §§ 6-7.

However, the negotiations should not be the focus of our attention; as the Prussian towns, which still belonged to the Teutonic Order, took care of the two shipwrecks, we can infer that the two ships were Prussian, or that at least most of the cargoes belonged to Prussian merchants, even if we do not know the ships' home port. The goods carried by Lubrecht van der Beke's ship reveal that it was returning to the Baltic from western Europe, probably from the Low Countries. On the other hand, Peter Gerhardsen carried Baltic goods to western Europe, probably to the Low Countries. The annexes to the instruction specify the cargoes, mentioning the goods that belonged to the individual merchants.

### Lubrecht van der Beke

The cargo of this ship consisted almost exclusively of cloth from the Low Countries and North-East France. Table 1 shows the geographical origin of the articles.

The list of goods gives us the names of their owners, adding their marks for identification. Sometimes only one mark was drawn, sometimes more. In the latter case, we can assume that the first mark belonged to the merchant and the others to the persons on whose behalf he had bought the goods. Table 2 shows their distribution according to the owners' home towns.

In the case of one merchant (Mertin Mukenwalt of Toruń), 11 of his pieces of cloth had been sent to Wismar, probably on board another ship.<sup>6</sup>

Lubrecht van der Beke's holk carried other goods besides the pieces of cloth: 10 dozen caps, 63 pairs of trousers ("hosen"), 150 kirseys, as well as seven barrels containing fruit and spices. The two pots of ambergris mentioned in the instruction are not to be found among the goods unless they were contained in the seven barrels of fruit and spices. The cargo's total value must have been 2,561 pounds 8 ß grot.

<sup>6</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378, p. 372 lines 22-25.

**TABLE 1**  
Origin of the Pieces of Cloth Carried by Lubrecht van der Beke's Ship

|                 | Pieces  | Short Pieces | Long Pieces | Broad Pieces | Half Pieces | Slatuch (a) |
|-----------------|---------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Artois</b>   |         |              |             |              |             |             |
| Arras           | 68      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Cambrai         | 2       | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Comines         | 32      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Hondschoote     | 7       | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| St-Omer         | 18      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Valenciennes    | 1       | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Artois total    | 128     |              |             |              |             |             |
| <b>Brabant</b>  |         |              |             |              |             |             |
| Bergen/Mons     | 1/2     | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Brussels        | -       | 22           | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Edingen         | 86      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Herentals       | 48      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Malines         | 28      | -            | -           | -            | -           | 4           |
| Tienen          | -       | 7            | 30          | -            | -           | 1           |
| Tournai         | 10      | -            | -           | 14           | 83          | 1/2         |
| Brabant total   | 172 1/2 | 29           | 30          | 14           | 83          | 5 1/2       |
| <b>Flanders</b> |         |              |             |              |             |             |
| Bruges          | 5       | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Courtrai        | 18      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Dendermonde     | -       | -            | -           | -            | 85          | -           |
| Diksmuide       | 2 (b)   | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Eekelo          | -       | -            | -           | 2            | -           | -           |
| Ghent           | 2 (b)   | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Geraardsbergen  | -       | 107          | 38          | -            | -           | -           |
| Oudenaarde      | 83      | -            | -           | -            | -           | -           |
| Poperinge       | 50 (c)  | -            | -           | -            | -           | 3           |
| Ypres           | -       | -            | -           | 111          | 12          | -           |
| Flanders total  | 160     | 107          | 38          | 113          | 97          | 3           |
| Uncertain       | -       | -            | -           | -            | -           | 3 1/2       |

a) Wrapping cloth. b) White pieces. c) Among these, six in the way of Courtrai and seven mixed pieces.

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378. Where there are discrepancies, I have preferred the individual figures to their sums.

**TABLE 2**  
The Merchants and Their Goods According to Their Home Towns  
(in pounds grot)

|                   | Individual account | On behalf of others | Total       |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Toruń             | 892                | 383                 | 1,275       |
| Danzig and Elbing | 624                | 264 + 8 β           | 888 + 8 β   |
| Stralsund         | 139                | -                   | 139         |
| Rostock           | 234                | -                   | 234         |
| Lübeck            | 25                 | -                   | 25          |
| Total             | 1,914              | 647 + 8 β           | 2,561 + 8 β |

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378.

We notice the role of Toruń, whose merchants had acquired goods having a much higher value than those of their colleagues of Danzig and Elbing combined. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, Toruń was still considered the most important of the Prussian towns; for this reason, letters by the other Hanseatic towns addressed to those of Prussia were sent to Toruń.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we notice that to some degree the Prussian merchants traded on behalf of others. Further, we see that the cargo belonged to a large number of persons (Table 3).

**TABLE 3**  
Owners of the Cargo in Lubrecht van der Beke's Holk

|                   | Number of owners | Value (pounds grot) |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Toruń             | 23               | 1,275               |
| Danzig and Elbing | 11               | 888 + 8 β           |
| Stralsund         | 2                | 139                 |
| Rostock           | 1                | 234                 |
| Lübeck            | 2                | 25                  |
| Total             | 39               | 2,561 + 8 β         |

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378.

<sup>7</sup> Consequently, several letters from Hanseatic towns are known only from Toruń's book of incoming letters (Wojewódskie Archiwum Państwowe w Bydgoszczy Oddział w Toruniu, Ms. VII,1).

In the course of 1387 the Prussian towns twice sent embassies to Denmark; two of the three members of the first were Toruń merchants who had goods on board Lubrecht van der Beke's ship.<sup>8</sup> The second embassy consisted of Herman Kordelicz of Toruń and Johann vom Bruche of Danzig; both had goods on board the holk.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Toruń's dominant role is evident from the number of merchants and the value of the goods. Nevertheless, the average value of the goods belonging to individual merchants of Toruń is clearly below that of their Danzig or Elbing colleagues.

### Peter Gerhardsen

His ship carried copper and iron, a barrel with furs ("eyn vas werkis") and 72 pieces of wax belonging to eight merchants and having a total value of 1,077 marks. Although a piece had an average value of fifteen marks, there were individual variations, probably because the size of the pieces was not uniform (Table 4).

**TABLE 4**  
Value of the Pieces of Wax (Prussian marks)

| Pieces   | Total value | Average value |       |
|----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| 40       | 600         | 15            | N = 3 |
| 6        | 83          | 13.8          | N = 1 |
| 14       | 200         | 14.3          | N = 1 |
| 12       | 194         | 16.2          | N = 1 |
| Total 72 | 1,077       | 15.0          | N = 6 |

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378.

The barrel contained 7,300 pieces of fur at a value of 123 marks; given the number of pieces, they probably came from small animals like squirrels. The copper was described as "Gilniczer", meaning

<sup>8</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378 § 3: Gothard Bykoln and Johann Schindeler, both of Toruń, as well as Klaus Hetveld.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* § 4.

that it came from Göllnitz (Gelnica) in eastern Slovakia. Altogether, there were 93 “meysen” worth 461 marks. The copper belonged to four merchants, but we do not always know their town of residence.<sup>10</sup> Table 5 shows the average value of the “meyse”.

**TABLE 5**  
Value of Copper (Prussian marks)

| “Meysen” | Total value | Average value |       |
|----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| 49       | 245         | 5             | N = 2 |
| 20       | 90          | 4.5           | N = 1 |
| 24       | 126         | 5.3           | N = 1 |
| Total 93 | 461         | 5.0           | N = 4 |

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378.

The origin of the iron is not mentioned, but we may assume that it also came from Slovakia, where there are iron mines in the region of Gelnica.<sup>11</sup> The vessel carried a total of 27 “lastas” of iron for a value of 531 marks. This part of the cargo belonged to four merchants; its values are shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**  
Value of a Last of Iron (Prussian marks)

| Lasts    | Total value | Average value |       |
|----------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| 10       | 195         | 19.5          | N = 1 |
| 7        | 146         | 20.9          | N = 1 |
| 5        | 100         | 20            | N = 1 |
| 5        | 90          | 18            | N = 1 |
| Total 27 | 531         | 19.7          | N = 4 |

Source: *Diplomatarium Danicum* 4<sup>th</sup> series III no. 378.

<sup>10</sup> Johann Schotte lived in Toruń, and Bertram Ludenscheid’s relatives belonged to that town’s patriciate; see Jürgen Sarnowsky, “Das Thorner Patriziat und der Fernhandel”, in: “kopet uns werk by tyden”. Walter Stark zum 75. Geburtstag hrsg. Nils Jörn, Detlef Kattinger & Horst Wernicke, Schwerin 1999, p. 228. The home town of the others, Herman Rubit and Lifhard Blumental, is not known.

<sup>11</sup> Josef Vozár, “Die Bergstädte der Slowakei im 16. Jahrhundert”, in Wilhelm Rausch (ed.), *Die Stadt an der Schwelle der Neuzeit*, Linz 1980, p. 318.

We notice that the price of copper fluctuated at around five marks per “meyse” and that of iron at around 20 marks per last. The variations probably reflect the purity of the metal.

Peter Gerhardsen’s cargo belonged to seventeen merchants, only four of whose home town, Toruń, is known. Gothard Bykoln exported ten lasts of iron with a value of 195 marks; in Lubrecht van der Beke’s holk he had goods worth 111 pounds grot, among them 48 pounds on behalf of someone else. With Peter Gerhardsen, Herman Kordelicz sent furs worth 123 marks, and his wife seven lasts of iron worth 146 marks. He also had goods in Lubrecht van der Beke’s holk worth 224 pounds grot, of which 107 pounds on behalf of three other merchants. Moreover, Bertram Ludenscheid sent 190 marks’ worth of copper with Peter Gerhardsen. Both Herman Kordelicz and Gothard Bykoln must have been citizens of some standing, as they had been chosen to travel to Denmark to negotiate the restitution of the salvaged goods.

The large number of owners of the cargoes shows that the merchants reduced risk by not sending large quantities on board one ship. Nevertheless, an element of risk remained, as is shown by the fact that both Gothard Bykoln and Herman Kordelicz were affected by the two shipwrecks.

### The merchants

Sometimes the sources let us know their economic and political activities. For this purpose, the prosopographical catalogue of the persons mentioned in the tax rolls of Bruges proved most helpful.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Lifhard Blumental*

We only know that he was a Prussian merchant, whom we find

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<sup>12</sup> *Hansekaufleute in Brügge* ed. Werner Paravicini & Horst Wernicke III: *Prosopographischer Katalog zu den Brügger Steuerlisten* by Ingo Diercks, Sonja Dünnebeil & Renée Rößner, Kieler Werkstücke Reihe D 11, Frankfurt am Main 1999 (henceforth *Hansekaufleute III*).

in England in 1392. In 1387 he had sent copper with Peter Gerhard-  
sen's ship.<sup>13</sup>

## Danzig

### *Johann van der Beke*

Established in Danzig. Cleared goods in Toruń: wax and smoked victuals in 1362; wax, potassium ("Asche"), wheat, rye and honey in 1369; wax, potassium, copper and hides in 1370; potassium in 1371. In 1383-84 several shipments of potassium, copper, hides and wax to Dordrecht, from where he had exported cloth of Brabant in 1382-83. In 1387 shipped cloth with Lubrecht van der Beke, to whom he may have been related. It is possible that between 1373 and 1384 he sent Flemish goods to Reval and that he traded with England (London, King's Lynn) in 1389-90 and 1401-02.<sup>14</sup>

### *Johann vom Bruche*

Mariner and merchant established in Danzig. Traded with England between 1377-78 and 1411 and with Flanders in 1376, 1384-5 and 1387. In the latter year he shipped cloth on Lubrecht van der Beke's holk. Was sent to Demark with Herman Kordelicz of Toruń in 1387 to obtain restitution of the salvaged goods.<sup>15</sup>

## Stralsund

### *Johannes de Dorne*

Mentioned in 1353, 1371 and 1384 as established at Stralsund. Sent salt to Reval in 1383 and wax and furs to Dordrecht in 1384. Traded in the same year in cloth at Damme. Sent cloth with Lubrecht van der Beke in 1387.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 379 and 420.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 162 and 375.

## Toruń

### *Johann Goltberg*

“Schöffe” (member of court) in Toruń 1374-8 and before 1390. Invested money, especially in real estate in Toruń. Cleared potassium and mercury at Toruń in 1362, iron and rye in 1371. Had furnished herring to the Armenian bath at Lviv (Lemberg), which he allowed to be sequestered in 1387 in order to obtain his payment. In 1387 sent cloth with Lubrecht van der Beke.<sup>17</sup>

### *Herman Kordelicz*

Recognized in 1363, together with two other directors of the Hanseatic “Kontor” in Bruges, to have received 150 pounds from the count of Flanders; promised to procure a receipt from the city of Lübeck. In 1387 sent cloth with Lubrecht van der Beke and furs with Peter Gerhardsen. Was dispatched to Denmark with Johann vom Bruche of Danzig in 1387 in order to obtain the restitution of the salvaged goods.<sup>18</sup>

### *Ditmar Rebber (II)*

Established in Toruń, to whose patriciate his relatives belonged. Cleared wax, copper and furs in 1362-3 and wax, copper and iron in 1369-71. Exported wax with Peter Gerhardsen in 1387.<sup>19</sup>

### *Johann Schotte*

“Schöffe” of Toruń 1378-80, councillor from 1381, died in 1389. Cleared goods at Toruń, especially hides and wax in 1362-3, wax and copper as well as articles of western European origin in 1369-70. Exported copper with Peter Gerhardsen in 1387.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Sarnowsky, *Das Thorner Patriziat*, pp. 225-226.

<sup>20</sup> Hansekaufleute III, p. 373.

*Matthias Wise*

Together with Hinrich Schonhals, in January 1363 lent money in Bruges to an English aristocrat bound for Prussia; again with Hinrich Schonhals, invested money in the rent market of Breslau. Sent cloth with Lubrecht van der Beke in 1387.<sup>21</sup>

The prosopographical survey has shown us that several merchants held positions of trust in municipal government or as envoys abroad. We also see that the cargoes carried by Lubrecht van der Beke and Peter Gerhardsen were representative of the Prussian towns' trade. Even if the Low Countries were their principal trading partner in western Europe, some merchants had economic activities in England as well; further research is necessary to discover what goods they bought there.

Similarly, some merchants appear to have shipped salt and Flemish goods (probably cloth) to Reval; it is highly probable that some of these items were reexported to Russia. We also notice that herring (from the Baltic or the North Sea) arrived as far as Lviv/Lemberg.<sup>22</sup>

## Perspectives

In earlier research on the Hanse one sometimes finds a tendency to identify Hanseatic interests and politics with those of the Wendic towns, especially Lübeck. Elsewhere, we have described various groups of towns and their diverging interests. The Confederation of Cologne (1367) united the Hanseatic towns against the kings of Denmark and Norway, but their reasons for joining the alliance were not identical. For the Wendic towns, the most important of which were

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>22</sup> A trade route for herring led from Danzig over Toruń and Kraków to Lviv/Lemberg; see Carsten Jahnke, "Das Silber des Meeres. Fang und Vertrieb von Ostseehering zwischen Norwegen und Italien (12.-16. Jahrhundert)", *Quellen und Darstellungen zur Hanseatischen Geschichte*, Neue Folge XLIX, Köln-Weimar-Wien 2000, pp. 236-240.

Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock, Stralsund, Hamburg and Lüneburg, their privileges in Norway (especially in Bergen) and their control of the Scanian fair were paramount. On the other hand, there existed a community of interests between the Prussian towns and those around the Zuiderzee; for these two groups, freedom of shipping and trade between western Europe and the Baltic had priority.<sup>23</sup> Our two shipwrecks show us that this community of interests had economic foundations; in the economic history of the Baltic and of Denmark, the antagonism of the Wendic towns on one side and the Low Countries on the other is a leitmotif from the late fourteenth century until the Danish civil war of the 1530s.

Further, we see that the captain was occupied only with sailing and did not trade on own account. However, the large number of cargo owners makes it likely that at least some merchants travelled with the goods. The instruction's first article summarizes Lubrecht van der Beke's shipwreck, whereas its second article describes the events in the first person: "Wissentlich sey das wir ghelandet syn myt eyne holke uf den Schagen..." [Be it known that with a holk we ran aground at Skagen]. Here the mariners and the merchants are speaking; probably, then, the first article is based on a letter written by the travellers shipwrecked at Skagen.

Obviously, the merchants' task consisted in selling the goods as favourably as possible and finding a return cargo that corresponded as closely as possible to their commissions. The origin of the cloth (Artois, Brabant, Flanders) could indicate that it had been bought in Bruges, but this remains conjecture. Moreover, the large number of small orders, especially by the merchants of Toruń, could mean that they served the town's hinterland as well as the town itself.

<sup>23</sup> See Thomas Riis, "Die preußischen Städte und Dänemark im 14. Jahrhundert", in *Die preußischen Hansestädte und ihre Stellung im Nord- und Ostseeraum des Mittelalters*, ed. Zenon Hubert Nowak & Janusz Tandecki, Toruń 1998, pp. 133-152.

<sup>24</sup> See Thomas Riis, "Les forêts de l'Europe du Nord-Est, leurs produits et leur rôle économique", in *L'Uomo e la Foresta, secc. XIII-XVIII*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi (Istituto F. Datini, Atti delle Settimane di Studi 27, Florence 1996), pp. 766-769 and 771-772; Horst Wernicke, "Der preußische Kaufmann und seine Städte in der Hanse", in "kopet uns werk

Wax and furs are classical Baltic items;<sup>24</sup> as far as the Slovak metals are concerned, we have here an early example of transport along the Vistula to one of the Prussian ports. Since western European mariners seldom ventured as far as Stockholm before 1600, Danzig became the Baltic staple for metals, both Swedish and Slovak, which influenced the city's politics during the Danish-Swedish wars around 1500.

As an isolated event, a shipwreck teaches us little about the period's trade. In our case, the situation of the sources is extraordinarily favourable: the two disasters occurred in the same year and the cargoes contained a selection of the classical goods of Prussian trade in the two directions. Thus, although we have a snapshot of trade at a specific moment, the shipwrecks allow us to discern perspectives for the region's evolution until the first half of the sixteenth century.

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by tiden", Walter Stark zum 75. Geburtstag, ed. Nils Jörn, Detlef Kattinger & Horst Wernicke, Schwerin 1999, p. 198.