

*Die Briefkopialbücher des Flensburger Kaufmanns Christian Dethleffsen von 1775 bis 1792. Kommentierte Textedition und Einführung* von Detlev Kraack, Flensburg 1998, Gesellschaft für Flensburger Städtgeschichte e.V., 520 pp, indexes of persons, objects and geography, bibliography. Schriften der Gesellschaft für Flensburger Städtgeschichte e.V., N° 52.

Detlev Kraack has published an extremely interesting and useful book: the texts of 600 letters written towards the end of the 18th c. by a merchant of Flensburg, Christian Dethleffsen. These letters, directed mainly to Johan Cramer, his partner in Copenhagen, but also to other partners in business, friends and family, constitute a rich source for the economic and social history not only of the Danish province of Schleswig, but also of the whole of the Baltic region. Dethleffsen's interests, at any rate, reached far beyond this region — he carried on a lively trade almost with the whole of Europe (Germany, France, England, Scandinavia, Mediterranean basin) as well as with the New World (especially the Antilles, where on St. Thomas Island his son settled down and set up a business).

Christian Dethleffsen's career exemplifies considerable social advancement, well earned by the hard work and abilities of the author of those letters and

members of his family. His grandfather was a peasant from the countryside near Flensburg who in search of better living conditions moved to the city and advantageously got married there. Thus his father was already a burgher and practised skippership, a trade popular in Flensburg, a port city. Christian's ambitions were higher and he started by establishing a small commercial firm which from a modest beginning quickly developed into a large business. His friendship and co-operation with Johan Cramer, a merchant from Copenhagen, helped him to expand his activity. As we know well, the Danish Crown supported Copenhagen and wanted to centre here the whole foreign trade turnover of the country. Entering into partnership with Cramer enabled Dethleffsen to make many business transactions in cooperation with his Copenhagen partner. He also availed himself of his support and assistance in many endeavours to settle various affairs with the Danish court, mostly to obtain permissions and licences.

Dethleffsen ran his firm on rather traditional and old-fashioned principles; primarily, he did not try to specialize in a single kind of merchandise. In the vicinity of Flensburg he purchased (personally, or through his agents, and later, with the aid of his sons when they grew up) oxen, cows, porks, sheep, organized the slaughter of animals and then processed the meat (smoking, salting, pickling, preparation of sausages). The products of high quality (he took pains to offer the best meat to his purchasers) were packed in barrels which he exported or sold to sea captains as provisions for crews on their sea voyages. Similarly, touring gentry manors and peasant farms he purchased corn, hemp, butter, honey and vodka, which he later exported all over the world. He also traded in the products of the brick-yards in the vicinity (he was the proprietor of one of them), mainly roofing-tiles and bricks. He also imported such goods as spices, sugar, southern fruits, coffee, tea, tobacco and wine. He made investments in production works — brick-yards and ship-yards. The fact that he was not only old-fashioned, but also knew how to profit by the new methods of trading is testified by his participation in credit turnover as well as his clever handling of bills of exchange, and his speculation in the different rates of those bills as well as with currencies in various cities. He always gained thorough information on the prices on various markets and depending on the forecasts in this field, he decided on the course of transactions. He ran his firm with great care, paying much attention to checking the quality of merchandise and the right selection of personnel — honest and highly qualified. His letters abound in insightful opinions on the character and skills of particular sea-captains and sailors, as well as contracting parties in commerce and shipowners with whom he co-operated. Before entering a relationship with a new person he always collected information on his career and even personal life, family etc. His letters show that he was a man of old-fashioned principles, deeply religious, loyal and honest in business as well as in private life. His family life was beyond reproach, just as that of his sons (one of them even became a minister). His deep religiousness is striking — it seems that libertine-atheist trends of the Enlightenment by-passed small provincial Flensburg.

The letters have been edited with great care, supplemented with notes and glosses. The editor has provided the genealogical tree of the Dethleffsen family in the 17th–18th cc., a table illustrating the movement of prices of the main products in which Dethleffsen traded (vodka, corn, bricks, roofing-tiles) in the years 1775–1792 as well as a list of weights and measures as well as monetary units occurring in the letters. This correspondence is an excellent material for the researchers into the 18th c. commerce as well as for historians studying the mentality and customs of burghers, especially the old time merchant milieu. Dethleffsen's letters encourage reflection upon this subject as well. The editor deserves our appreciation and thankfulness.

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