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THE BALTIC ZONE: HOMOGENEOUS OR DIVERSIFIED?

A “zone” is an area whose definition contains two determinants: boundaries that separate it from other areas and a set of distinctive features that enable its characterization¹. Thus the notion of “zone” becomes useful when applied in the context of other areas that differ from it by their boundaries and character. A “zone” is first of all perceptible when viewed “from the outside”, as a territory different from the observer’s place of residence. Apart from the current terms “demilitarized zone”, or “duty-free zone”, historiography applies it (interchangeably with e.g. “region”) when discussing the economic, cultural or political maps of an extensive territorial area. This is also the case when we discuss the lands lying on the Baltic coast; however, the factors that we take into consideration as shaping the boundaries of this zone, are sometimes doubtful or contradictory.

Thus the question we should pose, is: can we always use the term “the Baltic zone” without specifying it more closely? Doubtless, this zone has been defined by the system of communication

¹ A. Mączak, H. Samsonowicz, *La Zone Baltique: l'un des éléments du marché européen*, “Acta Poloniae Historica”, vol. XI, 1965, pp. 71–99; M. Małowist, *Wschód a Zachód Europy w XIII–XVI wieku. Konfrontacja struktur społeczno-gospodarczych (The East and West of Europe in the 13th–16th Centuries. Confrontation of Socio-economic Structures)*, Warszawa 1973, pp. 23, 41, 139; H. Madurowicz, A. Podraza, *Regiony gospodarcze Małopolski zachodniej w drugiej połowie XVIII w. (The Economic Regions of Western Little Poland in the Second Half of the 18th Century)*, Wrocław 1958, p. 10; D. Abulafia, *Seven Types of Ambiguity, c. 1100–1500*, in: *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, ed. D. Abulafia, N. Berend, Aldershot 2002, p. 1 ff.; K. V. Jensen, *The Blue Border of Denmark in the High Middle Ages: Danes, Wends and Saxo Grammaticus*, in: *ibid.*, p. 173 ff.

created by the Baltic Sea with its tributaries. The relative ease of water transport enabled the exchange of people, goods and models of life. Even if we put aside the earlier stages in the Continent's settlement by the peoples coming from the East, at least from the beginning of the migration of the Goths, the Baltic Sea had been the way that connected all the quarters of the globe. Its many tributaries, with their issues mainly at the Southern and Eastern coast, enabled interhuman contacts that reached the basins of the Black and the Adriatic Seas. This waterway network embraced over a million square kilometres.

The Baltic Sea, as we know, enabled contact between very different lands. Not only their coastlines had a different shape in the North and in the South, but also the territories that bordered on the sea were peopled by very diverse tribal and ethnic groups. The natural resources of the lands in the North and in the South also differed. The lands in the Baltic region are divided by a climatic boundary that crosses the whole of the European Continent, and runs from Southern Sweden, through the base — approximately — of the Hel Peninsula, the Eastern basin of the Vistula, up to the steppes of the Ukraine². Thus they are situated in different vegetation zones, have different landforms and different types of soil.

In the early Middle Ages this area was marked by two common features, important for the understanding of its later history. The first of them was its unquestionable cultural backwardness in relation to the Mediterranean countries which to a larger or smaller degree benefited from the achievements of ancient Rome. Regardless of the values contributed to culture by "barbarian Europe", it is beyond any doubt that science, art, systems of rule and of beliefs in the East and North of the Continent lagged far behind the heritage left in these areas of life by the Roman Empire.

The backwardness of the North in respect of civilization was also the effect of demographic relations. There were three different areas of settlement in Europe, confirmed by more precise data only in the High Middle Ages, which, however, could be observed

² J. Kondracki, *Geografia fizyczna Polski (The Physical Geography of Poland)*, Warszawa 1965, p. 30; cf. works by A. Malicki, K. Demel, M. Książkiewicz, W. Zinkiewicz, B. Dobrzański, in: *Geografia powszechna (Universal Geography)*, vol. I, Warszawa 1962, pp. 164, 200, 206, 265, 356.

much earlier³. In a simplified form, we may accept that the population densities of Italy, Rhineland, Ile-de-France, and some Balkan lands were four or five times larger than those of the countries bordering on the Western and Southern Baltic coast. On the other hand the Scandinavian Peninsula, as well as the areas inhabited by the Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples and the North-Eastern Ruthenian lands were at least twice less densely populated than Pomerania, Denmark, or Poland. On the whole, the Baltic region had vast areas very thinly populated, which did not favour interhuman contacts. Certainly, this was not characteristic only of those lands, since the same pertained to much more extensive areas of Eastern Europe. Therefore one can speak of the beginnings of the "Baltic zone" only since the 7th century, when the Vikings (Varangians) started their expansion and influenced the same type of behaviour in the Baltic countries, and when the role of the latter started growing in the first period of the rise of the Continent's economy⁴.

Paradoxically, those areas, poorer in material resources than their neighbours, sooner started benefiting from the economic boom. Huge trade, the beginnings of which were to be credited to the Scandinavian Vikings, discussed extensively in the literature, had led to similar effects in the whole area of the Baltic basin. Along the trade routes settlements arose that were not only centres of exchange of goods in demand, but also of the meetings of people with various languages and customs. Around those settlements a social group was shaped that organized exchange connected with robbery, drawing from it various benefits, not only economic⁵. Rich material sources indicate the special character

³ Cf. *Histoire des populations de l'Europe*, vol. I: *Des origines aux prémices de la révolution démographique*, ed. J.-P. Bardet, J. Dupâquier, Paris 1997, p. 388, 563, 573; H. Samsonowicz, *Późne średniowiecze miast nadbałtyckich (The High Middle Ages of the Baltic Cities)*, Warszawa 1968, p. 73 ff.

⁴ The literature of this subject is very profuse; for example: S.-O. Lindquist, *Society and Trade in the Baltic during the Viking Age*, Visby 1985, p. 126 ff.; *Zwischen Reric und Bornhöved. Die Beziehungen zwischen Dänen und ihren slawischen Nachbarn vom 9. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. v. O. Harck, Ch. Lübke, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 23, 79 ff.; K. Heller, *Die Normannen in Osteuropa*, Berlin 1993, p. 14 ff. (*ibidem* literature).

⁵ L. Leciejewicz, *Początki nadmorskich miast na Pomorzu Zachodnim (The Beginnings of the Seaside Towns in Western Pomerania)*, Wrocław 1962, p. 15 ff.; a review of the latest research together with its far-reaching conclusions has been recently presented by M. Bogucki: *The Earliest Craftsmen and Merchants' Settlements in the Baltic Zone. The Beginnings and Basis of Development in the Early Middle Ages*, Wrocław University 2005 (Department of History, typescript of a doctoral dissertation).

of this exchange. The Baltic lands received a great influx of silver, mainly in the form of an enormous number of coins from the East and West of the world. In return, if we analyse the written sources correctly, the main export commodity consisted of people⁶.

One can hardly overestimate the effects of such a state of affairs. In the first place, the Baltic zone was marked by a "favourable balance of trade" that took the form of an influx of money. Although it is not easy to estimate the losses caused by the outflow of people, still the profits of the new political élites were not to be underestimated. As a result, teams of merchant-warriors were formed, who in a more or less peaceful way eliminated the groups of tribal leaders. These developments had led to the rise of an early form of state system ruled by "a leader"⁷. These changes in the social organization of most Baltic lands took place approximately at the same time. Between the second half of the 9th and the end of the 10th centuries state systems were formed in Denmark, Poland, Norway, Ruthenia, and Sweden (to say nothing of Bohemia and Hungary, which did not border on the Baltic Sea).

The term "favourable balance", however, is not an entirely apposite one, for several reasons. Actually, we do not know precisely what was the role of silver coming to the Baltic zone. It seems that we can reconcile the positions of those who explain its influx by economic reasons, and those who see it as an indicator of ideology and prestige⁸. There can be no doubt that

⁶ More extensively on that subject see: H. Samsonowicz, "Długi wiek X". *Z dziejów powstawania Europy ("The Long 10th Century". From the History of the Origins of Europe)*, Poznań 2002, p. 71 ff.

⁷ Cf. P. Urbańczyk, *Changes of Power Structure during the 1-st Millennium A.D. in the Northern Part of Central Europe*, in: *Origins of Central Europe*, ed. P. Urbańczyk, Warsaw 1997, p. 39; Ch. Lübke, *Forms of Political Organisation of the Polabian Slavs (until the 10-th Century A.D.)*, in: *ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸ L. Leciejewicz, *Kim byli właściciele skarbów ukrytych w okolicy Kołobrzegu w XI w. (Who Were the Owners of the Treasures Hidden Near Kołobrzeg in the 11th Century)*, in: *Moneta Medievalia, Studia ofiarowane S. Suchodolskiemu (Moneta Medievalia, Studies Dedicated to S. Suchodolski)*, Warszawa 2002, p. 41; A. Bartczak, M. F. Jagodziński, S. Suchodolski, *Monety z VIII i IX w. odkryte w Janowie Pomorskim gmina Elbląg w dawnym Tresie (8th and 9th Century Coins Discovered at Janów Pomorski, Elbląg District, in the Earlier Tresie)*, "Wiadomości Numizmatyczne", R. XLVIII, 2004, fasc. 1, p. 32; W. Łosiński, *W sprawie rozwoju gospodarki towarowo-pieniężnej na ziemiach polskich we wczesnym średniowieczu w kontekście dziejów obrotu pieniężnego w strefie nadbałtyckiej. Part I: On the Development of Monetary Economy in the Polish Lands in the Early Middle Ages in the Context of the History of Monetary Turnover in the Baltic Zone*, "Archeologia Polski", vol. XXXV: 1990, fasc. 2; *idem*, Part II, "Archeologia Polski",

without convertible money the investments involved in the construction of the state and Church, such as the financing of chanceries, construction of sanctuaries, organization of the mints, and diplomatic contacts — would have been more difficult. Probably due to silver even its private owners could more easily purchase the products they needed, among them those brought from abroad and especially valuable, such as arms, horses, jewels, and spices. Silver and gold was also the best form of hoarding and safe-keeping of property (especially if the valuables were well hidden). We do not know whether its role was significant in internal turnover, in the market, but this is rather doubtful. On the other hand, the possession of silver was an indicator of inclusion in the financial élite, a group of high social prestige that created the circles of power in the Baltic zone.

As the Byzantine and Arab merchants were looking for slaves (or more precisely, for people whose labour guaranteed the efficiency of the economy of their countries), the range of articles in demand widened. Many significant indications to this effect can be found in the sources concerning the trade with distant countries; apart from people — the most valuable commodity — we find there minerals, horses, cattle, valuables and products of luxury. All the Baltic countries, to a greater or lesser extent, could join in this exchange that created the multiple ties of the world of that era. From the economic viewpoint, the Baltic zone in the 10th and 11th centuries emerges as a homogeneous area with strong internal ties. The expeditions of the Arab merchants to the Baltic coast testify that it was regarded as a zone that provided the Islamic world with products in demand⁹.

In the first half of the 13th century, the relations in the area of the Baltic lands underwent considerable transformations¹⁰.

vol. XXXVI: 1991, fasc. 1–2; T. Noonan, *The Fur Road and the Silk Road. The Relations between Central and Northern Russia in the Early Middle Ages*, Minneapolis 2000, p. 285; E. K. Hogen, *Handel og Samferdsel i nordens Viking tid*, "Viking", Bind XXIX: 1965, p. 165; W. Dziejuszycki, *Kruszce w systemach wartości i wymiany społeczeństwa Polski wczesnośredniowiecznej (Gold and Silver in the Systems of Value and Exchange of Early Medieval Society of Poland)*, Poznań 1995, pp. 11–12.

⁹ H. Samsonowicz, *Długi wiek*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Among the very rich literature concerning the history and significance of the Hansa, its social structure and economic function, we may mention e.g.: G. A. Kieselbach, *Die wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Hanse und die Handelsstellungen Hamburgs bis zur zweiten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1907; F. Rörig, *Vom Werden und Wesen der Hanse*, Leipzig 1940; idem, *Wirt-*

This was especially the effect of the activity of the Hanseatic League. In the beginning it embraced the coast belt from Flanders to Novgorod. Two hundred years later the Hansa merchants conducted their business in the area that formed a polygon between Portugal, Iceland, the Duchy of Moscow, Ruthenia, Hungary, Bohemia, Franconia and Rhineland. All this area, embracing about five million square kilometres, had its trade centre on the Southern coast of the Baltic and made up a relatively coherent economic community. Its main participants were merchants, sailors, financiers, and landowners. This community was also marked by specific ethnic relations. Its active members consisted of Germans, and only a small percentage of the local — Scandinavian, Slav and Baltic people. This community used a common language — Low-German, and common instruments of communication, convertible coins; at least theoretically, since this related mainly to the patriciate of Hanseatic cities, it also took advantage of its common privileges acquired in Denmark, Norway, the Teutonic State, in Sweden and Ruthenia. It used the same trade routes and conducted financial transactions in a similar way¹¹. There can be no doubt that its members were literate, since the existing sources (correspondence, accounts, notes) show that the use of written records was a normal thing for Hanseatic burghers. It is true that even in the 13th century rich merchants had clerks who ran the correspondence of their principals¹², however, towards the end of that century literacy had already been universal among the urban élites. Clerks and

schaftskräfte im Mittelalter: Abhandlungen zur Stadt- und Hansegeschichte, Weimar 1959; *Die deutsche Hanse als Mittler zwischen Ost und West*, Köln-Opladen 1963; A. von Brandt, *Die Hanse und die nordischen Mächte im Mittelalter*, Köln-Opladen 1963; K. Fritze, *Am Wendepunkt der Hanse: Untersuchungen zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte wendischer Hansestädte in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1967; Ph. Dollinger, *La Hanse*, Paris 1964; J. Schildhauer, *Die Hanse, Geschichte und Kultur*, Leipzig 1984; H. Samsonowicz, *Akteure und Gegner der Hanse: zur Prosopographie der Hansezelt*, hrsg. v. D. Kattinger, H. Wernicke unter Mitwirkung v. R.-G. Werlich, Weimar 1998.

¹¹ R. Czaja, *Miasta pruskie a Zakon Krzyżacki. Studia nad stosunkami między miastem a władzą terytorialną w późnym średniowieczu* (*Prussian Towns and the Teutonic Order. Studies of the Relations Between the Towns and Territorial Powers in the High Middle Ages*), Toruń 1999, p. 111 ff.; H. Samsonowicz, *Późne średniowiecze*, p. 145.

¹² A. von Brandt, *Geistliche als Kaufmannsschreibpersonel im Mittelalter*, "Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde", Bd. 38: 1958, p. 164.

educated businessmen knew Latin and used it in their correspondence with the rulers' courts, however, the common professional language used between Dorpat and Bremen was Low-German¹³.

The Hansa designated the Baltic zone not only by its activity but also as an institution. The territorial scope of this region, however, changed with the growing or diminishing significance of this confederation of cities. In fact, the Baltic zone had never had clear and permanent boundaries (so it did not fulfil one of the requirements of the definition). Their line depended to a large measure on the significance of this league of merchants in the European economy. At the first stage of its activity the towns lying on the Baltic organized exchange between Flanders and Ruthenia, transporting cloth in one and furs in the other direction. Another area of its activity was Norway, provided by the Hanseatic merchants with grain. At the same time the Low German merchants used river waterways to provide the West with metals such as gold, silver, copper and lead from the Carpathian region¹⁴.

The second half of the 14th century saw important changes in the Baltic region. Not only because the Hansa reached the period of its greatest influence after the Treaty of Stralsund (1370), but above all because of the changes in the European economy which was breaking out of its structural crisis. Transformations in the sphere of production, acceleration in the process of specialization, the search for new territorial and social markets — all these processes had produced two important results: a growing specialization in the economy of individual regions of the Continent and their growing mutual interdependence. From the very beginning of the 15th century the development of industry in Western Europe would be difficult without the raw materials brought from the Baltic countries. Swedish iron, Russian furs, Polish and Lithuanian timber, Polish grain — all these products brought from the Baltic region in large quan-

¹³ Apart from the obvious evidence such as source texts in *Hanserecesse*, cf. *Hildebrand Veckinhusen: Briefwechsel eines deutschen Kaufmanns im 15. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. U. Engel, W. Stieda, Leipzig 1921; S. Abraham-Thiesse, *La correspondance d'un marchand hanseate au XV s.: Hildebrand Veckinhusen*, in: *Le Marchand au Moyen Age*, Paris 1998, p. 121; H. Samsonowicz, *Późne średniowiecze*, p. 202.

¹⁴ H. Samsonowicz, *Przemiany strefy bałtyckiej w XIII–XVI wieku (Transformations of the Baltic Zone in the 13th–16th Centuries)*, "Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych", vol. XXXVII: 1976, p. 47.

tities enabled the development of industry, stimulated the rise of new forms of production, instruments of exchange (investment, banking, trading companies, insurance), means of transport (new types of ships — caravels). The Baltic lands were seen from the West, by the Dutch, English, Flemish and even Portuguese merchants, as a homogeneous economic area¹⁵.

This was connected with the character of exchange and the subsequent changes in the balance of trade. It seems that the value of industrial products transported to the East, above all cloth, was higher than that of the raw materials or semi-finished products brought from the East. In the economic respect the Baltic countries became dependent on the demand and supply in the Netherlands, Rhineland and England¹⁶. They became a sort of “colonies” or “semi-colonies”. To use Immanuel Wallerstein’s expression, they became “peripheries” in relation to the “centre” consisting of Western European countries¹⁷.

The next stage in the shaping of the Baltic zone came with the economic transformations of Europe in the 15th century and the beginning of great geographical discoveries. Without going into the mechanisms of changes that took place on the Continent, one should draw attention to the growing significance of mass products in the huge trade which became an important factor in the economic development of Western countries. Apart from the already traditional products exported from Russia — that is furs, other types of goods came into play: timber, grain, meat (oxen) and metal ores. Special attention is due to this factor because with the coming of the early modern era the balance of trade in the Baltic lands became activated again. At the beginning of the 16th century the value of exports started surpassing the value of imports. A stream of money was coming to the Baltic towns that enabled the financing of investments and the growth of large consumption¹⁸. Due to this the whole region could develop in a similar way. Given an influx of capital from the West, the Baltic economy developed at an accelerated rate in the sphere of invest-

¹⁵ Cf. M. Małowist, *op. cit.*, p. 252 ff.

¹⁶ A. Mączak, *Między Gdańskiem a Sundem (Between Gdańsk and the Sound)*, Warszawa 1972, p. 62 ff.

¹⁷ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vol. I, New York 1974, p. 7.

¹⁸ On the basis of *Pfundzoll* books, see H. Samsonowicz, *Badania nad kapitałem mieszczańskim Gdańska w II połowie XV wieku (Studies on the Capital of the Gdańsk Burghers in the Second Half of the 15th Century)*, Warszawa 1960.

ment, giving rise to new methods of acquiring prestige and significance that appeared both in individual countries (suffice to mention the rise of the social rank and influence of the burghers of Lübeck or Gdańsk) and internationally.

Thus we can see that backwardness in civilization sometimes, in favourable circumstances, can lead to acceleration of development. The Baltic countries had to wait for joining the orbit of Mediterranean culture almost two thousand years. Christianity was adopted by them five hundred years later than by the Franks, and two hundred years after it was imposed on the Saxons. Writing as a means of communication became universally used in the German countries in the 12th–13th centuries, while in the Baltic region only a hundred years later. New forms of socio-legal life, town communes, were, however, known here as early as the 13th century, with only several decades' delay in relation to the countries of the Reich.

Similar processes concern the mentality of the inhabitants of less developed countries¹⁹. On the one hand it is marked by inferiority complexes in relation to the more developed countries whose models of behaviour they tried to copy, on the other — by a search for their own identity which would strengthen their belief in the value of their own customs, languages and political systems. In the latter case two directions of development are possible: if they adopt the models coming from the more developed countries, they can take over their languages, legal and social structures as well as customs, or seek their own, individual forms of life seen as indicators of their group identity. The first option was taken by the Slavs around the Oder and Elbe rivers and some representatives of the social élites in other Baltic lands, the other was taken by the inhabitants of Denmark, Sweden, Poland and — a bit later — Lithuania. One can doubt whether this was a factor that helped the integration of this zone. After Gdańsk Pomerania was seized by the Teutonic Knights, the wrongs suffered by the Poles found expression both in songs showing their deep resentment against the Teutonic Order, and in sayings that arose at that time, such as: "A Pole will never be a brother to the German"²⁰. These complexes had disappeared

¹⁹ Cf. remarks on that subject by N. Adario, *L'evoluzione della società-mondo: il sottosviluppo come differenziazione centro-periferia della modernità*, "Studi di Sociologia", Anno XLII: 2004, N° 4, p. 411.

after the victory of Grünwald, when Poland became an equal partner of the Order. One can surmise that at the same time Oder Pomerania and Mecklenburg, as state organizations, were gaining peripheral characteristics in relation to the other countries of the Reich.

In this context we should consider common culture as another factor that may define a "zone". Its forms and contents are shaped by various factors. The peoples living on the Baltic had never dwelt within the borders of one state (even during the Swedish domination in the 17th century), their social structures, legal norms, and customs had been highly differentiated almost until the last century. Their social and systemic relations, differences in beliefs and customs, were factors that divided the Baltic lands. There were great differences in the time when their state organizations arose — some of them, as in the case of the Finns, Latvians and Estonians, had not been created until the 20th century.

On the other hand, the factor that integrated the countries of the Baltic zone consisted of their political ties, growing with the consolidation of their state structures. These ties, according to the ancient custom of establishing diplomatic relations, were created through marriages between rulers. Such practices existed probably even under the tribal system, but only with the consolidation of the ducal power this became a more frequent and probably more widespread manner of contracting alliances and undertaking mutual obligations. It is possible that their value was seen by the people of that era as that of family ties, the most durable and best-known form of human tie at that time; it is also possible that, according to the rules of the old diplomacy they were to ensure (not always successfully, as we know well) the realization of joint actions, as a substitute for the much later oral or written agreements. With the extension of diplomatic horizons, beginning with the 10th century, genealogical ties, which until the end of early modern times had played a significant role in the

²⁰ Cf. G. Labuda, *Geneza przysłówia "Jak świat światem nie będzie Niemiec Polakowi bratem"* (*The Origin of the Saying "Never in his life will a German be a brother to a Pole"*), in: *Idem, Polsko-niemieckie rozmowy o przeszłość: zbiór rozpraw i artykułów (Polish-German Talks about the Past: a Collection of Dissertations and Articles)*, Poznań 1996, pp. 101, 110; the author looks for the origin of this saying to the relations dating back to the 15th century; however, it seems that the beginnings of such resentment could be observed even earlier, as far back as the 13th century.

policy of the ruling courts, seemed to be gaining in importance. The marriages between the Piast princesses and the princes of Sweden, Denmark (the example of Świętosława), the frequently cited marriage of Mieszko to Dobrava, matrimonial unions contracted with Ruthenian princesses, are well known in the literature of the subject. The large distances across which those unions were contracted, the selection of brides by the rulers, may testify to the growing significance of dynastic relationships in the zone under discussion. They also provide information on the career of the ruling courts in new state centres. The first three Piast generations are a good example of the advancement of this Polish dynasty in the international arena, just like the unions of the representatives of the Rurik dynasty with the Byzantine princesses. Marriages with brides from great European dynasties were, however, rare and it seems that more frequent were alliances within the Baltic zone. It also seems that this factor, which emerged with new political relations, must also be taken into consideration when discussing the growing network, also of cultural ties, in the area under examination²¹.

Another factor that divided the communities living on the Baltic was that they represented a veritable "Tower of Babel". The diversity of languages they spoke (among them also non-Indo-European ones) makes one wonder about the way these people communicated with each other²². One may suppose there were two stages that introduced the *lingua franca* of that time. Initially the common tongue that made possible trade dealings was probably a much simplified Scandinavian language. In the times of the consolidation of state organizations and adoption of Christianity, it was gradually replaced in diplomatic contacts by Latin and Greek, but one can hardly think of them as the means of communication in the markets of Wiskiauty or Truso. People would probably rather use some Arabic or Scandinavian words concerning their trade. There can be no doubt that at the second stage in the history of the medieval Baltic region the universally used language that enabled exchange of information was Low-German. This language was used in correspondence within the

²¹ See, *Historia dyplomacji polskiej, połowa X–XX w.* (*The History of Polish Diplomacy, mid-10th – 20th Centuries*), vol. I: *Połowa X w. – 1572* (*From mid-10th Century till 1572*), ed. M. Biskup, Warszawa 1980, pp. 104, 210, 277.

²² P. Bibire, *The Languages of Europe around the Year 1000 A.D.*, in: *Europe around the Year 1000*, ed. P. Urbańczyk, Warszawa 2001, p. 69 ff.

zone (letters to the rulers of Poland or England were written in Latin), and it was in it that universally used notions arose (not only in the cities inhabited by German merchants) concerning professional or legal relations, or the names of articles.

However, one should not overestimate the scope of this phenomenon. Certainly, the migrations of the Goths and the passages of many other tribes had earlier created conditions for the adoption of similar forms of culture in the whole Baltic area. However, the differences found by archaeologists show that in the early Middle Ages the material culture of the Baltic region was not homogeneous. One can speak of such a homogeneity only in later times, beginning with the 13th century. Similar forms of activities and their similar names were connected with similar forms of architecture, clothing, tools and methods of work, means of transport and municipal systems that arose during the domination of the Hansa. An area arose between the Sound and the Gulf of Finland with the same system of transmission of information. It is not accidental that the area of activity of Hanseatic burghers generally covered the scope of Gothic art expressed in the shape of churches, and the buildings as well as the planning of towns²³.

One may wonder to what extent the inhabitants of the Baltic lands were linked by a common mentality, expressed in common beliefs and memories. These, as well as their traditions and customs, differed. It even seems that in the early Middle Ages individual tribal groups represented various levels of theoretical thought. The picture may be slightly distorted because of a lack

²³ Cf. J. Schildhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 105 ff.; J. Białostocki, *Obszar nadbałtycki jako region artystyczny w XVI wieku (The Baltic Area as an Artistic Region in the 16th Century)*, in: *Sztuka pobrzeża Bałtyku: materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Gdańsk, listopad 1976 (The Art of the Baltic Sea-side: Materials of the Session of the Association of Art Historians, Gdańsk, November 1976)*, Warszawa 1978, p. 11; H. Samsonowicz, *Późne średniowiecze*, p. 148; on the subject of the monetary zone — R. Kiersnowski, *Wstęp do numizmatyki polskiej wieków średnich (Introduction to Polish Medieval Numismatics)*, Warszawa 1964, p. 44; uniform means of transport — P. Heinsius, *Das Schiff der hansischen Frühzeit*, Weimar 1956, p. 71 ff.; law — W. Ebel, *Lübisches Kaufmannsrecht*, Lübeck 1950, *passim*; scope of the transmission of works of art — H. Samsonowicz, *Sztuka Hanzy około roku 1500 — dzieli czy łączy kraje nadbałtyckie? (The Hansa's Art About the Year 1500 — Dividing or Unting the Baltic Countries?)*, in: *Sztuka około 1500: materiały Sesji Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki, Gdańsk, listopad 1996 (Art About the Year 1500: Materials of a Session of the Association of Art Historians, Gdańsk, November 1996)*, Warszawa 1997, p. 18.

of Slavonic written sources from that era, but it seems that Scandinavian mythology was much more developed than that on the Southern coast of the sea. The existing texts of sagas may be the basis for a reconstruction of beliefs concerning the history of gods, the origin of the world and its structure, they also provide visions of the other world. One cannot categorically assess to what extent these beliefs continued the earlier traditions, and to what extent they were transformed as a result of contacts with the Christian world²⁴. As far as we know, in the rites of the Old Slavs, according to experts, transformed due to contacts with their Christian neighbours, there was no trace of so highly developed a mythology as that of Scandinavia. There were certainly some beliefs concerning the other world, shown by the contents of the graves, provided with objects necessary for the afterlife, but one cannot say anything more precise about this issue.

Beliefs were always connected with another type of tie linking society, that is its common, collective memory. Traditions concerning the history of the Goths or Saxons known from the works of Jordanes and Widukind²⁵ testify clearly to the tribal consciousness of the Germans. One cannot be sure whether a similar consciousness was exhibited by the Slavs. There are no records or traditions about the past of the Slavic tribes, but one cannot rule out that in a limited territorial area there existed some memory. There was certainly some family tradition shown both in the series of dynastic lines and some names of tribes (for example — *Dziadoszanie* — “those descended from forefathers”) handed down to later generations. These names of tribes testify to their group consciousness; they are clear proofs of their self-identification, in the perpetuation of which their common memory had always played a significant role. This, however, does not change our conclusion that larger — supra-tribal and, later, suprastate collectivities did not exhibit such a consciousness.

²⁴ See, L. P. Słupecki, *Mitologia skandynawska w epoce Wikingów (Scandinavian Mythology of the Viking Era)*, Kraków 2003; S. Piekarczyk, *Mitologia Germańska (Germanic Mythology)*, Warszawa 1979; the lack of theoretical reflection is especially strongly emphasized by H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek (w. VI–XII) (The Slavs' Religion and Its Downfall, 6th–12th Centuries)*, Warszawa 1979; more cautious in his assessment is A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian (Slavic Mythology)*, Warszawa 1982, p. 5 ff.

²⁵ Cf. J. Banaszkiewicz, *Widukind on the Saxon Beginnings. Saxo, Thüring and Landkaufszene — Res Gestae Saxonicae, I, 5*, “Acta Poloniae Historica”, vol. XCI, 2005, pp. 25–54.

The conclusion to be derived from these brief remarks is that at the present stage of research it may seem that the various levels of spiritual and intellectual life of the peoples living on the Baltic (among them also those who — as the Saxons — had adopted Christianity earlier) did not facilitate contacts between individual communities. One should not, however, overestimate the importance of these differences. Hanseatic merchants frequently had to use foreign languages in Denmark, Poland, Sweden and Ruthenia, sometimes (as is shown by the wood-carvers' illustrations of the stalls in Stralsund) supporting their explanations with gesture. Nevertheless the fact that the languages, traditions, and customs of those countries differed had led to conflicts that were visible in the relations of Baltic merchants with Denmark, Sweden and Poland towards the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of early modern times.

The resentment of the Danes, Poles and Swedes towards the German patriciate could be due not only to their different customs, but also to economic conditions. The Hanseatic merchants showed their dominant economic situation also in their trade dealings. They exacted the advance money before the harvest, dictated the prices of the products they purchased, and imposed regulations they found most convenient on the local population²⁶. Even in this respect, however, the opposition between "nationals and foreigners" was not unequivocal. With time also another phenomenon, frequently discussed by historians, gathered strength — that of conflicts between various parts of the Hansa and among the German inhabitants of Hanseatic towns²⁷. The

²⁶ M. Małowist, *Podstawy gospodarcze przywrócenia jedności państwowej Pomorza Gdańskiego z Polską w XV w.* (*The Economic Grounds for the Reunification of Gdańsk Pomerania with the Polish State in the 15th Century*), "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. XLV: 1954, fasc. 2-3, p. 151 ff.; M. Biskup, *Zjednoczenie Pomorza Wschodniego z Polską w połowie XV wieku* (*The Unification of Eastern Pomerania with Poland in the Middle of the 15th Century*), Warszawa 1959, p. 82; H. Samsonowicz, *Badania nad kapitałem*, p. 36; B. Geremek, *Ze studiów nad stosunkami gospodarczymi między miastem a wsią w Prusach Krzyżackich w I poł. XV w.* (*From the Studies of Economic Relations Between Town and Countryside in Teutonic Prussia in the First Half of the 15th Century*), "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. XLVII: 1956, fasc. 1, p. 69 ff.; R. Czaja, *op. cit.*, pp. 135, 187 ff.; W. Sieradzan, *Sąsiedztwo mazowiecko-krzyżackie w okresie przemian politycznych w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1411-1460* (*Mazovian-Teutonic Neighbourhood During the Political Transformations in Central-Eastern Europe in the Years 1411-1460*), Toruń 1999, pp. 167, 189.

²⁷ E. Cieślak, *Walki ustrojowe w Gdańsku i Toruniu oraz w niektórych miastach hanzeatyckich w XV w.* (*15th Century Systemic Struggle in Gdańsk and Toruń and*

members of the urban patriciate in a large measure identified themselves with the country where they lived. This was partly connected with the differences in the structure of their trade. The townsmen of Lübeck served as middlemen in the exchange carried on along the Baltic coast, the townsmen of Gdańsk were more and more involved in buying products in its hinterland and transporting them further on. The interests of both these cities did not always concur, just as there was a growing difference in the trading needs of the towns of Rhineland as opposed to Wendish towns, or Wendish as opposed to Saxon ones. There were also great differences in their possibilities of acting and exploiting their hinterlands. As early as the beginning of the 16th century the specialization of the Baltic states in trade was growing. Novgorod continued exporting furs, however, its trade power was considerably limited by its political dependence on Moscow. Sweden, which started conducting its own economic policy, became one of the main European exporters of iron ore. Poland supplied grain to the Netherlands, Denmark fish and meat to the Reich. These products required different methods of trading, different ways of financing investments, and different types of deals contracted with the inhabitants of the hinterland; the conditions of their transport also differed.

The disintegration of the Baltic states in the 14th–16th centuries was certainly also due, among other things, to their political competition²⁸. The Hansa waged wars against Denmark, the Kalmar Union was the cause of long-lasting conflicts between Denmark and Sweden, and the Union of Poland with Lithuania lay at the root not only of their struggle against the Teutonic Order but also — later — of the Lithuanian–Polish–Russian, Polish–Swedish and Swedish–Russian wars.

Some Hanseatic Cities), Gdańsk 1960; J. Schildhauer, *Soziale, politische und religiöse Auseinandersetzungen in den Hansestädten Stralsund, Rostock und Wismar im ersten Drittel des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar 1959; Th. Behrmann, "Hansekaufmann", "Hansestadt", "Deutsche Hanse"? Über hansische Terminologie in das hansische Selbverständnis im späten Mittelalter, in: *Bene vivere in communitate: Beiträge zum italienischen und deutschen Mittelalter*. Hagen Keller zum 60. Geburtstag überreicht von seinen Schulerinnen und Schülern, hrsg. v. Th. Scharff, Th. Behrmann, Münster 1997, p. 155; Ph. Dollinger, *op. cit.*, p. 324 ff; F. Frensdorff, *Die Hanse zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, "Hansische Geschichtsblätter", Jg. 1893, p. 81.

²⁸ There is rich literature on that subject, cf. recently, *Historia Europy (History of Europe)*, ed. A. Mączak, Wrocław 1997, p. 333 ff.

Worthy of note, however, is another aspect of events taking place in the Baltic basin, that is the acceleration in the development of this area as seen against the rest of Europe. Even as late as the middle of the 14th century the Baltic countries did not figure prominently in the politics of major European states. The only exception was Denmark, but this state too, in face of its lost competition for primacy with the Hansa, did not count for much in international politics. A special position was held by the Teutonic Order which — being a “Western colony” in the East of Europe — played, as is well-known — a significant role in the ethos of the knights from all the Latin countries, becoming a place of meeting for all the “crusaders”, who were guests of the Order. The literature of the subject stresses correctly the significance of the Teutonic State in creating the “model” life of a knight during the “autumn of the Middle Ages”, and in the integration of all this estate²⁹. One can, however, doubt whether this factor really linked the countries of the Baltic zone, all the more since it existed only for about half a century. Its greatest significance came in the last four decades of the 14th century, and practically dwindled after the Battle of Grünwald. Moreover — the “crusaders” were used not only for fighting against Lithuanians, but also against the inhabitants of Ruthenia and Poland, and the ties arising between those newcomers (rather known from literature than existing in reality) did not necessarily involve the inhabitants of the Baltic lands. It cannot be questioned, however, that the towns and routes leading to Prussia *mutatis mutandis* played a role similar to that of the pilgrimage routes to the shrine of St. Jacob in Compostella.

With the beginning of the 15th century the Baltic states increase in importance in European politics. The Kalmar Union was not successful, but it started the construction of the modern states of Denmark and Sweden and their significant role in the days of the Reformation and the Thirty Years War. The Union of Poland with Lithuania, despite its various complicated stages, created the Jagiellon court as one of the more important powers co-deciding the major events on the Continent: the course taken by the conflicts between the Pope and the Council, the institution of monarchs on the thrones of Central Europe, the Hussite

²⁹ W. Paravicini, *Die Preussenreisen des europäischen Adels*, Teil 1, Sigmaringen 1989.

Revolution, and the Turkish expansion. With the waning of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern era a rivalry started for *dominium mares Baltici*, in which interest was shown by the Netherlands, England, the German Principalities, and indirectly also, to a smaller extent, by other states. The first half of the 16th century also saw a great denominational disintegration with the coming of the Reformation.

Can we, on the basis of these deliberations, accept that the Baltic zone in the Middle Ages was homogeneous? Certainly, it was, in the economic respect, both during the domination of the Vikings and later — in the Hanseatic period and on the threshold of early modern times. One could also observe the same forms of activity of its inhabitants, similar forms of architecture and the exchange of cultural patterns. Even the struggle for the control of the Baltic shipping trade in the 16th century concerned a well-defined area, identified with profits coming from the Baltic trade, although this area embraced a much wider part of the Continent, not only the Baltic region. So one might rather speak of a vast area of the lands of Eastern Europe where two processes took place: the formation of ever stronger ties with the West of the Continent and the shaping of increasingly differentiated systemic and social forms³⁰.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

³⁰ An interesting fact is that the term "Baltic Europe" is currently used in deliberations concerning geopolitical and economic matters, cf. *Baltic Europe in the Perspective of Global Change: in memoriam of Jean Christophe Oberg*, ed. A. Kukulinski, Warszawa 1995, esp. p. 11.