This collection contains twenty-three essays drawn from a colloquium held in Paris in 2002 under the sponsorship of the Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères and the German Historical Institute in Paris. Nine essays are in German, the remainder in French, and each comes with a comparable summary in the other language, except for Burghart Schmidt’s German introduction, which discusses the background for the colloquium and the thrust of the individual papers, and the concluding comments of Jean-Pierre Poussou. Commercial contact between the three Imperial cities and French merchants began as early as the thirteenth century and continued through the revolutionary era with a final trade treaty signed in 1865, but only Richefort and Burghart Schmidt’s concluding essays address the Revolutionary era and nineteenth-century. The Swiss scholar, Guy Marchal, writes on the transformation of diplomatic rituals and protocols for agents of the Swiss Confederation in Paris. It provides a comparative framework but seems out of place in the collection. The remaining essays cover the late medieval and early modern eras; and though other regions form part of the context, the contributions all focus on French-Hanseatic relations. To approach these relations, the authors address four themes: 1) the diverse and changing political and economic relations between France and the three cities; 2) the economic infrastructure within the trading system; 3) the diplomatic protocols of trade relations; and 4) interpersonal and intercultural exchanges.

Simonne Abraham-This, Thomas Hill, and Peter Stabel’s opening essays explore late medieval trade relations between the three cities and France. Hanseatic merchants encountered French traders at the fairs of Champagne, and some Germans visited Parisian markets. However, the bulk of the trading activity between the Hanse and French ports occurred along the French Atlantic coastline, which initially attracted fleets of Hanseatic ships in search of salt in the Bourgneuf Bay. The salt trade had its risks for the Germans, and in 1440 Basque pirates captured a fleet of forty Hanseatic ships. In response Hanseatic merchants threatened retaliation against Spanish merchants at the Flemish entrepôt at Bruges, which served into the sixteenth century as the central clearinghouse for Hanseatic trade with western European states including France. Merchants from Lübeck and Hamburg (Hill shows that Bremen was not active in this trade) brought furs, amber, lumber, and mineral products to Bruges and returned to the Baltic Basin with fine cloth and other luxury items from France and elsewhere. Bremen, located upstream on the Weser River, was initially less active in the east-west trading network, but rather profited by connecting its hinterlands in Westphalia and Lower Saxony to products in the North and Baltic Sea basins. Nevertheless, French officials became aware of Bremen when one of its privateers captured a ship belonging to the French queen, Marie of Anjou, in 1446, triggering fifteen years of negotiations over damages and interest that eventually involved all the members of the Hanseatic League.
The next four authors explore the Hanseatic League’s late medieval diplomatic exchanges with France in the context of the League’s broader political and commercial interests in Northern Europe. Each author takes a different perspective, and together they create a composite multi-dimensional image of the complexities in the region. From the perspective of the French court, Jürgen Sarnowsky shows its drive toward the gradual extension and thickening of diplomatic ties with the Hanseatic towns to the point of full treaties by the end of the fifteenth century that secured the French presence in the northern trading network. Petra Ehm-Schnocks examines the network as seen by Charles the Bold’s Burgundian officials who did not view the Hanseatic towns as equal partners in negotiations and at times were confused about whether to treat the cities individually or collectively. Using Hanseatic sources, Thomas Behrman argues that diplomatic relations with the French were only one side of a multifaceted complex of negotiations with European powers from Russia to England. He concludes that there was never a fully articulated “Hanseatic” foreign policy in the fifteenth century; rather each town clung to its own traditional policies that had preceded the League and were slow to change direction or move in concert. Nevertheless, by the end of the fifteenth century, Lübeck had emerged as the dominant player in the League’s relations with their neighbors, and no embassy was dispatched without Lübeck’s involvement. Finally, Klaus Krüger’s fascinating essay uses civic chronicles to explore how various towns described political events in foreign lands, and he argues that defining what foreign news was important, such as the Hussite rebellion and its effects on the neighboring House of Luxemburg, and what news represented potential threats to civic order helped generate a strong sense of solidarity within the communities as well as the recognition of a shared political fate and among the three cities.

Although Bremen, Hamburg and Lübeck remained as League members until the 1860s, the Hanseatic League ceased to be a critical Northern European political player in the course of the sixteenth century. Georg Schmidt’s essay lays out the political framework for the next set of contributions. He plots the absorption of many of the smaller league members into the emerging territorial principalities in sixteenth-century Northern Germany. By the late sixteenth century, Swedish and Danish fleets would overshadow the Hanseatic navy in the Baltic Basin. In short, even collectively the Hanseatic Imperial cities could not match the military force of the emerging dynastic states. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Prussia and Russia would become the new power brokers in the Northern seas. Dieter Heckmann’s contribution examines the first, unsuccessful efforts of Duke Albert of Prussia (1499-1545) to export charcoal to France; later efforts would prove more fruitful. Moreover, according to Jacques Bottin, the sixteenth-century Hanseatic towns also found themselves constrained commercially as their trade was filtered through Antwerp, which had replaced Bruges as the key emporium, while later in the seventeenth century Amsterdam would succeed to Antwerp’s position. These shifts were tied to the changing fortunes of religious war and the struggles between France and the Habsburgs. In the later seventeenth century Georg Schmidt notes that due to fortunes of war Louis XIV would aggressively pursue trade relations favorable to the three cities as a counterweight to Dutch influence in the North and Baltic Seas, which finally established profitable direct commercial ties. Finally, Klaus Malettke shows that the seventeenth-century French geographers retained a detailed sense of the political culture of the Hanseatic cities based on his reading of La Description d’Allemagne of Théodore Godefroy. In this text, knowledge of Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen mattered. In the following century, the Encyclopédie offered vague and generalized descriptions of what had become less significant foreign ports, perceived as cultural backwaters.

Though the Hanseatic League’s political might had waned, the early modern cities were still self-governing, and profits from lucrative trade were possible. Commerce between French ports and the German cities remained concentrated along the western coast of France with salt as always a critical commodity. Bordeaux and La Rochelle were the harbors that now drew the German ships. As those Atlantic ports became engaged in the export of wine and the import of colonial supplies, merchants from Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen pursued profit there. Anne-Marie Cocula traces the beginning of the Bordeaux wine trade with the Hanseatic towns back to the end of the Hundred Years War. Though
sixteenth-century trade was irregular, with the Wars of Religion having a dampening effect, by the
seventeenth century ties between Bordeaux and the Hanseatic towns had stabilized. Peter Voss traces
the career of the “ehrsame Herr Johannes Baumgärten in Bordeaux” (1632-1702), a Prussian merchant
born in Thoru (Torun), who was a leader in a colony of German merchants residing in Bordeaux. He
imported naval munitions, lumber and copper from the Baltic Basin to Bordeaux and sent back fine
wines. His trade contacts extended from London to Riga, but much of this traffic was funneled through
Hamburg. Baumgärten served as a Protestant church elder in Bordeaux, but he accepted Catholicism
with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, though several of his sons refused and emigrated to
Hamburg and other northern ports. In the capitulation roll of 1695, Baumgärten was one of the richest
citizens of Bordeaux. Michel Espagne, on the other hand, sees the late-seventeenth-century German
merchant community in Bordeaux politically and economically integrated but culturally distinct. He
bases his assessment on what is perhaps a too facile argument built on how documents have been
classified archivally – drawing national distinctions – and the fact that the expatriate German merchants
still wrote in German or Dutch to their colleagues and family members in the northern ports. Filled
with ruminations on memory, identity, and collective memory, this is one of the weaker pieces in the
collection.

The presence of Hanseatic merchants in the French Atlantic ports was in part due to a treaty negotiated
in 1655, which had taken a long time to be realized. Rainer Postal follows the unresolved negotiations
between French officials and the three Hanseatic cities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth
centuries. Throughout the French agents took the initiative. From the French perspective closer ties to
Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck would insert French influence in the Baltic Basin and Northern
Germany at the expense of their Habsburg rivals. Down to 1648, however, the three cities wisely
sought to stay out of the great power struggle. After the Peace of Westphalia, the Hanse towns
reconsidered the opportunities for trade and political advantages that a treaty with Louis XIV would
offer. Antjekathrin Grassman demonstrates from the perspective of Lübeck how the treaty of 1655
opened up the possibility of being a “player” in the major peace treaties of Louis XIV’s reign, especially
Nijmegen and Ryswick, where the city had its trading rights recognized by all parties. For Pascal Even,
the treaty of 1655 initiated an extended period of trade for Hanseatic merchants in La Rochelle. Colbert
supported and encouraged these ties in the decades after the signing of the treaty. German ships left La
Rochelle filled with salt, wine, alcohol, soap, dried fruits, paper, and exotic colonial products of all sorts.
They returned to La Rochelle carrying lead, copper, and ship building supplies. By the eve of the French
Revolution, one in three foreign ships in La Rochelle’s harbor had originated in Hamburg, Lübeck, or
Bremen.

Diplomatic relations remained critical for sustaining trade throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. Marie-Louis Pelus-Kaplan follows the career Christophe Brosseau, who represented
Hanseatic interests at Paris from 1698 to 1717, while Lucien Bély details the mission of the French
diplomat Jean-Baptiste Poussin at Hamburg in 1714. Both agents served as a source for vital
information for their superiors. Poussin’s reports describe Hamburg as a diplomatic nerve center for
news and gossip with agents from all of the major Northern powers maintaining residences in the city.
Brosseau’s correspondence with Daniel Müller, a friend and official in Lübeck, is also full of information
about politics at Versailles, where he developed close ties with Philippe d’Orléans, and the status of
negotiations for the major peace treaties of Ryswick and later Utrecht and Rastatt. With the death of
Louis XIV, Brosseau successfully negotiated a renewal of the trade treaty of 1655 with the young king
and his regent Philippe d’Orléans.

Finally war and peace form the backdrop for Burghart Schmidt’s essay, which carries us into the
nineteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, Hamburg had emerged as the principal city of
the Hanseatic triad. It sheltered a stock exchange and was a crucial center for finance and shipping
insurance. It had become the major northern transfer port for French colonial products in the decades
prior to the Revolution with nearly 40 percent of all French colonial goods transferred from there to
markets in Central and Eastern Europe, but the commercial warfare between England and France that began in the 1790s and continued through Napoleon's reign resulted in a shift at Hamburg and Bremen to England as the principal trading partner in the early nineteenth century. It would be a permanent shift. Isabelle Richefort's essay covers the nineteenth century. She argues that economic liberalism replaced commercial warfare. This was embodied in the commercial treaty of 1865, the final act of six centuries of economic and political relations between France and the Hanseatic League.

The original colloquium sought to bring together European scholars from many lands to explore the history of commercial, political, diplomatic, and interpersonal relations between these three North German ports and France. The organizers have succeeded. Employing new archival sources, the participants exposed new historical insights from distinct and insightful perspectives. It is clear the commercial dynamics that have helped bring about the European Union were at play in late medieval and early modern Europe. The essays recount commercial and diplomatic agents operating cross-culturally but not in the framework of national histories. Even "France" in these essays is normally embodied as particular French towns with particular commercial interests. French kings became engaged when dynastic interests were at stake. It was only with the French Revolution that competition for access to the markets at Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen become national concerns between France and England. The story ends with the emergence of the German nation state under Bismarck. This collection has much to offer for economic historians but also more broadly for late medievalists and early modernists in general.


Simonne Abraham-Thisse, "Les relations commerciales entre la France et les villes hanséatiques de Hambourg, Lübeck et Brême au moyen âge"

Thomas Hill, "Bremen, die Hanse und Frankreich im Mittelalter;" Peter Stabel, "Bruges, plaque tournante du commerce hanséatique avec la France (XIVe-XVe siècles)"

Jürgen Sarnowsky, "Die politische Beziehungen der Hansestädte zu Frankreich im späteren Mittelalter"

Thomas Behrmann, "Y avait-il un diplomatie hanséate au moyen âge"

Petra Ehm-Schnocks, "Handelspartner, Reichsfeind, Städtefeind: Karl der Kühne und die Hanse 1465-1477"

Klaus Krüger, "‘Böhmen und andere Fürsten’: aussenpolitische Konstellationen in der Sicht hansischer Städte des späten Mittelalters"

Guy P. Marchel, "Le rôle de la représentation symbolique dans les relations diplomatiques: les envoyés de la Confédération Helvétique à Paris"

Georg Schmidt, "Hanze, Hanseaten und Reich in der frühen Neuzeit;" Klaus Malettke, "Les villes hanséatiques, le Saint-Empire et la France aux XVIe et XVIIIe siècles"

Dieter Heckmann, "Die Wirtschaftsbeziehungen zwischen der Herzögen in Preussen und Frankreich im 16. Jahrhundert"

Anne-Marie Cocula, "Les réponses du marché aquitain à l’approvisionnement des pays du nord à la fin du XVe et au XVIe siècles"
Jaques Bottin, "Les relations entre Rouen, Hambourg et Anvers vers 1600: système commercial et complémentarité de fonctions"

Peter Voss, "Der 'ehrsame Herr Johannes Baumgaerten in Bordeaux’ (1632-1702). Ein preussischer Kaufmann im Frankreichhandel der frühen Neuzeit"

Michel Espagne, "Papiers allemands, papiers français: l’existence d’une mémoire interculturelle et ses usages historiographiques”


Marie-Louise Pelus-Kaplan, "Christophe Brosseau, résident hanséatique à Paris, et son action de 1698 à 1717”

Lucien Bély, “Jean Baptiste Poussin, envoyé de France à Hambourg: négociateur subalterne et informateur de premier plan”

Pascal Even, “La Rochelle et le commerce du nord au XVIIe siècle”

Burghart Schmidt, “Le commerce extérieur des villes hanséatiques au temps des guerres de la Révolution”

Isabelle Richefort, “Le traité de commerce et de navigation entre la France et les villes de Brême, Hambourg et Lübeck;” Jean-Pierre Poussou, “Conclusions.”

Peter G. Wallace
Hartwick College
wallacep@hartwick.edu

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