The medieval Hanse: groups and networks of traders. The case of the Bergen Kontor (Norway)

Wubs-Mrozewicz, J.J.

GENTES DE MAR EN LA CIUDAD ATLÁNTICA MEDIEVAL

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Índice

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INTRODUCTION

When we look back at the urban society in the Middle Ages, one of its most conspicuous features is that it consisted of collectivities. The sources show us the individual in relation to others: for instance, in relation to members of their family, kin, household, parish or confraternity, in relation to people who practiced the same profession, burghers who were bound by the law of their town, or in relation to traders who travelled together abroad. A lone individual would be lost in the medieval world, and most often also lost in the medieval sources. Apart from exceptional cases, like portrayals of rulers or saints, information about individuals is scattered and has to be pieced together from various records. Therefore, if we want to catch more than just a glimpse of an individual, we have to study the collective. Especially in the last twenty years, a large corpus of research has been produced on the various aspects of the togetherness of medieval life, pertaining to both 'natural' groups based on kinship and on

(sworn) groups which created artificial kinship[1]. Collectivities have also been studied in the context of maritime activities and culture, the connecting theme of this volume, among them especially overseas traders, skippers and fishermen[2]. Some of the angles employed in the study of medieval collectivities are 1) the mechanisms of the emergence of and change within these collectivities, 2) the opportunities offered as well as the challenges posed to their members, and 3) the medieval and post-medieval institutions to which they gave rise. The latter angle is inspired by the currently 'hot' field of New Institutional Economics, which focuses on long-term developments in institutions and organizations[3].
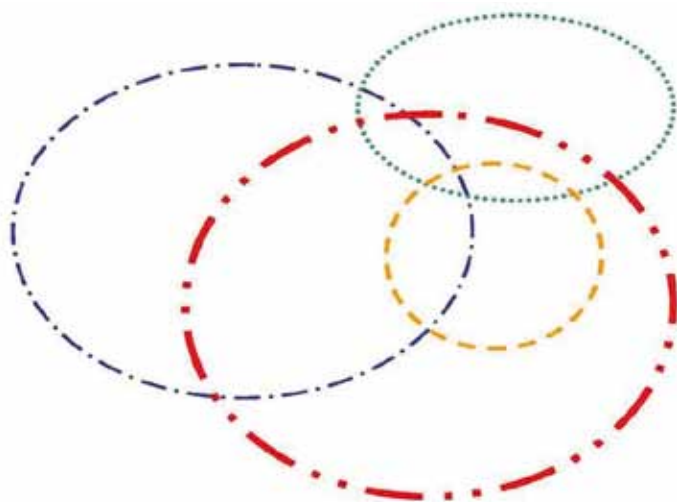
1. Image Groups.

1. For an extensive review, see OEXLE, O.G. "Soziale Gruppen in der Ständegesellschaft: Lebensformen des Mittelalters und ihre historischen Wirkungen", OEXLE, O. G.; VON HÜLSEN-ESCH, A. (eds.), *Die Repräsentation der Gruppen. Texte - Bilder – Objekte*. Göttingen, 1998: 9-44; LE GOFF, J. *Medieval civilization 400-1500*. Oxford, 1990; KLEINSCHMIDT, H. *Understanding the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge, 2003: 89-119 (2nd edition).

2. For instance, DAHL, G. *Trade, trust and network: Commercial culture in late medieval Italy*. Lund, 1998; MEIER, D. *Seefahrer, Händler und Piraten im Mittelalter*. Stuttgart, 2004; BARRET, J.E. "The pirate fishermen: the political economy of a medieval maritime society", BALLIN SMITH, B.; TAYLOR, S.; WILLIAMS, G. (Eds.), *West over Sea. Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300*. Leiden, 2007: 299-340. See also the contributions by B. Arízaga Bolumburu and J. Solórzano Telechea in this volume.

3. A prominent example is GREIF, A. *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade*. Cambridge, 2006; compare NORTH, D. *Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance*. Cambridge, 1990. On the other hand, see the criticism of the use of NIE in the study of collectivities in VAN DOOS-SELAERE, Q. *Commercial Agreements and Social Dynamics in Medieval Genoa*. Cambridge, 2009.

Until now, I have avoided the two terms used in the title of my paper: groups and networks. Both concepts pertain to the collective and both are used frequently in the aforementioned literature, sometimes interchangeably. We talk about kin groups and family groups, but also about family networks; about economic networks, but also about professional groups and professional networks; and, in the context of this paper, about groups of traders, and networks of traders. Are these concepts indeed interchangeable? Are groups, in essence, the same as networks?
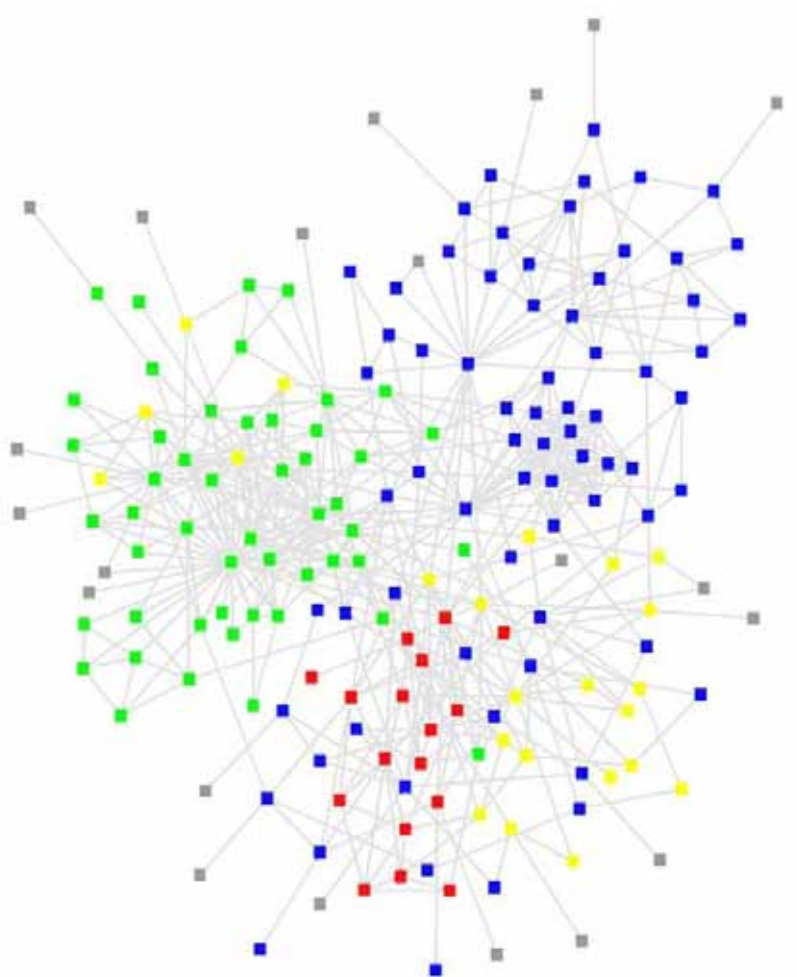
2. Image Networks.

The basic definitions in the social sciences suggest overlap. A group consists of two or more individuals who interact with each other, share characteristics, have a sense of unity and (especially in the case of long-lasting rather than *ad hoc* groups) who are governed by the same rules. A group is surrounded by a boundary, but membership in many (overlapping) groups is possible[4]. A social network is a structure consisting of individuals (or organizations) connected by interdependencies like friendship, kinship, exchange or shared interest. Also, networks can be long-lasting or based on short-term relations. Moreover, it is equally possible to be a member of various networks. A (business) network can also be seen as a form of organization[5]. In short, many elements in the definition appear to be similar or close in meaning. But are they close enough? Can they be used interchangeably without losing precision? Surprisingly, there has been little discussion in which the two concepts have been explicitly juxtaposed. In the social sciences, the question of the use of 'groups' versus 'networks' has been put forward in the context of terrorists, especially Al Qaeda, concluding that the two terms are not the same[6]. In other areas, it has apparently been less *de rigueur* to make a distinction, and medieval history is no exception.

What about the graphic representation of the two concepts? The images above suggest that there are differences. Groups are depicted by visible boundaries around (less visible) individuals, while networks are visualized by identified individuals and connections between them. In networks, it is far more difficult to discern delimitations[7]. Does this reflect the actual distinction between the concepts? And, are they irreconcilable?

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4. The seminal studies by SHERIF, M.; SHERIF, C. W. *Groups in harmony and tension*. New York, 1953; BARTH, F. "Introduction", BARTH, F. (Ed.) *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*. Oslo, 1969: 9-38; also FORSYTH, D.R. *Group Dynamics*. Belmont, 1999 (3rd edition); M.B. BREWER, *Intergroup relations*. Buckingham, 2003 (2nd edition).

5. POWELL, W. "Neither market nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization", CUMMINGS, L. AND B. STAW (Eds.) *Research in organizational behavior*. Greenwich, 1990: 265-276; WASSERMAN, S.; FAUST, K. *Social network analysis: Methods and applications*. Cambridge, 1994; LABIANCA, G. "Network Analysis in the Social Sciences", Science, 323, 2009: 892-895.

6. JACKSON, B.A. "Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and Its Application to Al Qaeda", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29, 2006: 241–262. His point was that there is no "correct or optimal answer", but that the choice has to be done consciously and explicitly, as it can have various outcomes and consequences.

7. Groups are sometimes also depicted the way networks are presented here, which shows again that the differences between the underlying concepts can be unclear.

This leads to further questions. What makes researchers of medieval history choose one concept rather than the other? Does this owe itself to a difference in research interest, or in research traditions? 'Groups' occur more often in cultural history, such as when the *memoria* culture in confraternities or festive traditions are investigated[8], while 'networks' are popular in socio-economic medieval history[9]. However, research traditions also change. With the massive popularity of social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, 'networks' have become a household name, and appear to have entered research agendas in other fields of medieval studies, like communication, literature or art[10]. Is the choice of terminology thus a reflection of trends? Or is the term 'networks' a more precise, advanced analytical tool and can its use be seen as a further step in research?

In this paper, I will delve deeper into the similarities and differences between the two concepts. I also aim to highlight the opportunities and challenges they pose to a researcher. I will do so by using the medieval Hanse and its traders as a case, specifically Hanseatic traders who were active in the Bergen trade. There are two recent doctoral studies on these traders: one on networks and another one on groups.

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8. OEXLE, O.G. "Die Gegenwart der Lebenden und der Toten. Gedanken über Memoria", SCHMID, K. (Ed.) *Gedächtnis, das Gemeinschaft stiftet*. München, 1985: 74-107; ALTHOFF, G. *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter*. Darmstadt, 1990; ALTHOFF, G. "Fest und Bündnis", D. ALTENBURG *et al.* (Eds.), *Feste und Feiern im Mittelalter*. Sigmaringen, 1991: 29-38. See also more general the contributions in SELZER, S.; EWERT, U.C. (Eds.), *Menschenbilder – Menschenbildner. Individuum und Gruppe im Blick des Historikers*. Berlin, 2002: 121-152.

9. See, for instance, the contributions in FOUQUET, G.; GILOMEN, H. J.(Eds.) *Netzwerke im europäischen Handel des Mittelalters*, Ostfilder, JAN THORBECKE VERLAG; GREIF, A. *Institutions and the path to the modern economy…, op. cit.*; BAVEL, B. V. "Markets for Land, Labor, and Capital in Northern Italy and the Low Countries, Twelfth to Seventeenth Centuries", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 41/4, 2011: 503-531; DAHL, *Trade…, op.cit*. On the use of network analysis in history in general, see Gould, Roger V. "Uses of network tools in comparative historical research"; MAHONEY J.; RUESCHMEYER D.(Eds.) *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge, 2003: 241-269, and BERGHOFF, H.; SYDOW, J. "Unternehmerische Netzwerke - Theoretische Konzepte und historische Erfahrungen", BERGHOFF, H.; SYDOW, J. (Eds.), *Unternehmerische Netzwerke. Eine historische Organisationsform mit Zukunft?* Stuttgart, 2007: 9-43.

10. For instance, SINDBAEK, S. M. "The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange", *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 40/1, 2007: 59-74; ERNST, U. "Literarische Netzwerke in Antike, Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Zur Vorgeschichte der Netzkultur", HAUBRICHS, W.; GREULE, A. (Eds.) *Studien zu Literatur, Sprache und Geschichte in Europa: Wolfgang Haubrichs zum 65. Geburtstag gewidmet*. St. Ingbert, 2008; MCLEAN, P.D. *The art of the network: strategic interaction and patronage in Renaissance Florence*. Durham, 2007.

HANSE

The Hanse was a phenomenon which can be tagged in multiple ways in connection to the theme of this volume. The relevant tags are 'urban', 'mercantile', of course 'medieval', 'maritime', and, perhaps most importantly, 'people', 'groups' and 'networks'. This is already evident from the definition of the Hanse. It was an *organization of traders* (specifically: traders speaking Low German, abiding by German law and engaged in foreign, i.e. overseas trade) AND an *organization of towns* (70 large and 100-130 smaller towns) in which these traders were burghers[11]. It must be stressed that towns became and remained members in the Hanse because their traders were active in it, not the other way round. When traders from a town ceased to make use of Hanseatic privileges abroad, the town eventually lost its status as a town in the Hanse. In other words, shared interest and shared privileges for traders abroad were the prime motive which held the members of the Hanse together. Traders who can be called Hanseatic lived in towns which stretched from Reval (now Tallinn) in the east to Dinant in the west, but they operated in a much larger area, from Iceland and Norway in the north to England in the west and Italy in the south, and they were also active in Spain and Portugal. Although river and overland trade (i.e. regional and interregional trade) were also of importance, the Hanse was clearly also a maritime organization. The privileges which were the main bond between Hanseatic traders pertained to (long-distance) sea trade. This does not mean that all towns in the Hanse were coastal towns – in fact, the opposite was the case – but at least some traders who lived in these towns had a pronounced interest in sea trade. There was thus always a maritime element in a Hanseatic town[12]. The Hanseatic trade was primarily in bulk goods, like grain and fish, but also expensive woollens, spices or art were traded, to name but a few of the more exclusive products. The sheer geographical extent of the Hanse, and the fact that the towns of these traders were to a large extent autonomous, as well

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11. HAMMEL-KIESOW, R. *Die Hanse*. München, 2002: 10 (2nd edition). It can be called an organization because there was a collective goal, see SCOTT, R. W. *Institutions and Organizations*. London, 2001.

12. The presence of these overseas traders in town, and the importance of the maritime connections, can be easily traced in the town records of the Hanseatic towns. This involvement of traders in Hanseatic overseas trade gave a town a Hanseatic and maritime *aspect* of identity. In contexts other than the Hanse, a town did not have to manifest itself as Hanseatic or interested in sea trade, such as when its traders conducted trade with southern Germany. In other words, the notion of "Hanseatic" or maritime was not all-encompassing and cannot be seen as *the* identity of the town.

as the rather egalitarian motive of shared interest, made it a non-hierarchical organization.

In this organization, collectivities of traders were of key importance: groups like merchant guilds, the councils of towns, and the outposts abroad (the so-called *Kontore*, the four largest being the settlements in Bruges, Bergen, London and Novgorod). Researchers usually call these collectivities groups because there was a more or less clear boundary around who belonged to them, a name for those who were within this boundary (either you were a member of a guild or not a member), and there were rules governing those who were within the group. There could be some degree of hierarchy *within* these groups, but between the groups the connections were usually non-hierarchical. In addition to doing business together and sharing the endeavour to gain and maintain trading rights, the decision-making was also a non-hierarchical, collective affair, taking place at the so-called Hanseatic Diets. What's more, the Hanse itself grew from collectivities: groups of traders abroad, 'hansas' in the 12th century. It must be stressed here that privileges were always given to groups which could be identified by a name (e.g. a town or ethnic term); they were not given to individuals (at least not in a way which would guarantee continuity beyond the life of the individual). Privileges for groups could last for generations, sometimes for centuries, and many individuals could benefit from them. The Hanseatic collective privileges became an institution without which no sustainable trade was possible, using now a term from New Institutional Economics[13]. According to recent studies, the Hanse came into existence as an organization and because there was need for an inclusive structure *and* a new encompassing group term which would protect the rights of merchants in England and Flanders. The term 'universi mercatores Romani imperii', later Hanse traders, proved to be a new successful brand name[14]. The Hanse itself can also be seen as one complex group, whose boundary was formed by law (Magdeburg or Lübeck), language (Middle Low German), and participation in rights abroad.

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13. HAMMEL-KIESOW, *Die Hanse…*, *op. cit.*; SELZER, S. *Die mittelalterliche Hanse*, WBG, Darmstadt, 2010; WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. "The Hanse in Late Medieval Europe: an Introduction", WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J.; S. JENKS (eds.) *The Hanse and Late Medieval Europe*. Leiden (forthcoming).

14. JAHNKE, "The City of Lübeck and the Internationality of Early Hanseatic Trade", WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J.; S. JENKS (eds.) *The Hanse and Late Medieval…, op.cit*.

On the other hand, the Hanse was clearly also built up by networks, that is interdependencies between individuals. When Rhinish, Westphalian and Lower Saxon traders moved eastwards in the 12th and 13th centuries, and later founded and populated towns in the Baltic, they maintained family connections which became the basis of their economic networks. One of the characteristics of Hanseatic trade was its small scale, and that family ties played a major role in choosing trade partners at least until the fifteenth century. This is hardly surprising if we consider the fact that Hanseatic trade was long-distance trade and, in order to conduct it, mutual trust was necessary. Most of the business was done on the basis of reciprocity, and partners traded in each other's name (sold and bought goods as if they were their own) in towns lying hundreds of kilometres apart[15]. The map of the myriad personal and economic networks of Hanseatic traders is thus in fact the map of Hanseatic trade. Also, the networks of traders were firmly anchored in their towns through membership in guilds, confraternities and participation in the administration of the towns. Indeed, in the structures that have just been called groups, some of the members had direct trade connections with each other on top of the shared group membership. Both these outgoing and local networks of traders consisted of primarily horizontal ties, which contributed again to the fact that the Hanse was a non-hierarchical organization. The network structure of Hanseatic trade has now become an axiom, but it is also one more argument that the Hanse was primarily an organization of traders, and only secondarily an organization of towns. Recent research shows that when the Hanse gradually ceased to exist in the seventeenth century, networks of traders in the area lived on. This was the reason that some of the towns (Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen) continued to trade under the Hanseatic banner[16]. So, for over 500 years, groups and networks of traders set the tone in northern European trade.

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15. STAR, W. "Über Techniken und Organisationsformen des hansischen Handels im Spätmittelalter", JENKS, S.; M. NORTH (eds.) *Der hansische Sonderweg? Beiträge zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Hanse*. Köln etc., 1993: 191-201; EWERT, U.C. AND SELZER, S. "Verhandeln und Verkaufen, Vernetzen und Vertrauen. Über die Netzwerkstruktur des hansischen Handels", *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*: 119, 135-163; EWERT, U.C.; SELZER, S."Netzwerkorganisation im Fernhandel des Mittelalters: Wettbewerbsvorteil oder Wachstumshemmnis?", BERG-HOFF, H. and SYDOW, J. (Eds.) *Unternehmerische Netzwerke. Eine historische Organisationsform mit Zukunft?* Stuttgart, 2007: 45-70.

16. PELUS-KAPLAN, M. L. "Mobility and business enterprise", WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. AND S. JENKS (Eds.),*The Hanse and Late Medieval…, op.cit.*
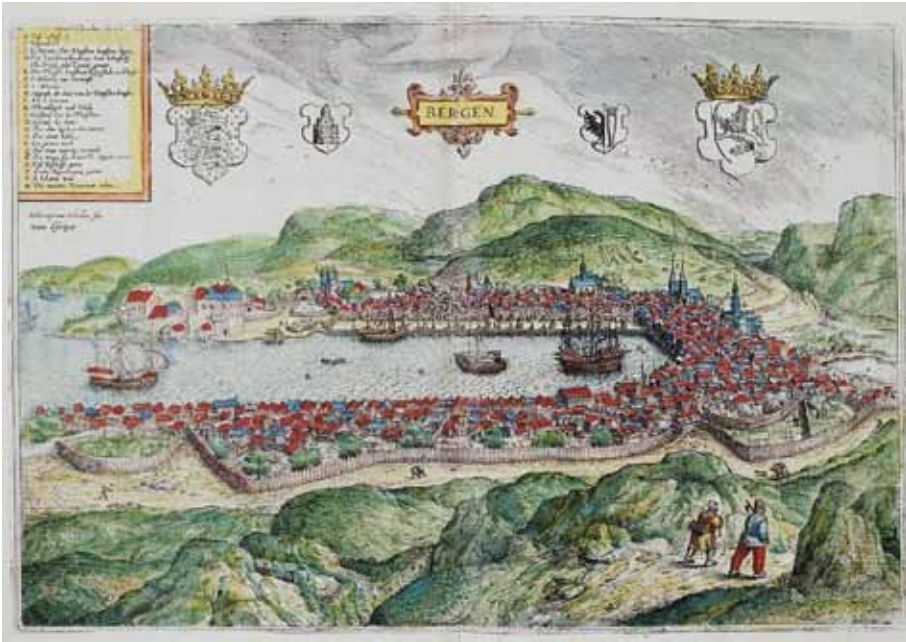
Image 3. University Library, COLLBN Atlas 45 2 (Bergen in the 16th century, Hieronymus Schoelbus, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, Atlas 45-2, fol.38-39).

BERGEN: GROUPS AND NETWORKS

Let us now turn to a more concrete example in Hanseatic trade, namely the *Kontor* in Bergen, Norway. In 2008, I defended and published a doctoral thesis on the interaction of groups of traders in Bergen in the Middle Ages, namely Lübeckers, Overijsslers and Hollanders[17]. A year later, Mike Burkhardt (then at the University of Copenhagen), defended and published his thesis on the networks of Lübeckers in Bergen[18]. What made us choose this particular terminology and respective analytical frameworks, and what were the results reached by these tools?

17.   WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. *Traders, Ties and Tensions. The Interaction of Lübeckers, Overijsslers and Hollanders in Late Medieval Bergen*. Hilversum, 2008.

18.   BURKHARDT, M. *Der hansische Bergenhandel im Spätmittelalter: Handel, Kaufleute, Netzwerke*. Köln, 2009.

4. The Hanseatic Kontor in Bergen and towns of origin of traders studied in *Traders, Ties and Tensions.*

Our studies share two points of departure. The first of which is the town of Bergen, Norway's main mercantile hub in the Middle Ages, and the seat of the so-called *Kontor* of the Hanse. As mentioned above, it was one of the four main overseas settlements of Hanseatic traders. One can say that these settlements were among the most visible aspects of the fact that the Hanse can be called a maritime organization which connected European hinterlands. The existence

of the *Kontore* was intrinsically connected to the privileges of traders engaged in sea trade, privileges they collectively sought to obtain and safeguard. From the mid-thirteenth century on, traders from Lübeck and other towns came to Bergen to fetch stockfish, dried cod, the main export commodity (the same *bacalao* which is still so popular in Spain and Portugal). In the mid-fourteenth century, the groups of traders became organized in the *Kontor*, with its own set of rules and administration. The *Kontor* was subordinate to the Hanseatic towns. Traders could come either as so-called summer guests and leave again, or stay as winter residents for several years, often spending their youth there and learning the tricks of the trade. Researchers have been established that the most important group of foreign traders in Bergen were Lübeckers: they dominated the administration and the exports from Bergen well into the second half of the sixteenth century[19].

The second common feature of our studies is that we both profited from the fact that the so-called Bergenfahrer archives, that is letters and documents of the traders active in the Lübeck-Bergen trade, had recently been made accessible for research. They had been impossible or difficult to access for over 50 years: as a result of World War II, they were relocated to the Soviet Union and the DDR[20]. A chest full of golden nuggets had been opened for two doctoral students!

Burkhardt's objective was to unravel the networks of the Lübeckers engaged in the Bergen trade. In other words, he focused on one group, and the contacts of its members both in Bergen and in Lübeck. His definition of a network is a group (sic) of actors who have social relations with each other. In his view, an individual is a member of a network if he has relations with *at least two other members of a network*. The aim of the relations within a network is to transfer resources[21]. In addition to the aforementioned Bergenfahrer archives, Burkhardt

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19. BRUNS, F. *Die Lübecker Bergenfahrer und ihre Chronistik*. Berlin, 1900; SCHREINER, J. *Hanseatene og Norge i det 16. århundre*. Oslo, 1941; HELLE, K. *Bergen bys historie I. Kongssete og kjøpstad. Fra opphavet til 1536*. Bergen, 1982; NEDKVITNE, A. *Utenrikshandelen fra det vestafjelske Norge*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Bergen, 1983.

20. ASMUSSEN, G. *et al* (Eds.), *Archiv der Bergenfahrerkompanie zu Lübeck und des Hansisches Kontors zu Bergen in Norwegen von (1278) bzw. 1314 bis 1853*. Lübeck, 2002.

21. BURKHARDT, *Bergenhandel…*, *op. cit.*: 43-44. In this respect, he diverges from many network definitions, where at least *one* connection is seen as necessary, especially when the analysis is focused on bridgers in networks or weak ties.

used other sources from the town archives in Lübeck to identify and analyse the relations. A prerequisite for his study – and I have to stress it here – was that a large number of individuals could be identified by names. To handle the large quantity of data, he chose three periods of investigation, 1360-1400, 1440-1470 and 1490-1510. Still, this meant constructing a database for almost 1,000 Bergenfahrer from Lübeck, and almost 700 additional contacts. His main conclusions were that family ties seem to have been most important in establishing long-term trade connections during the first period. Short-term business was also done with people who were not members of one's family. In the two later periods, it seems to have become usual to do business with non-family members, and the majority of both long-term and short-term business partnerships were with non-family members. Like in the Hanse at large, reputation played a major role in the choice of trading partners[22]. Most of the business networks of Bergenfahrer from Lübeck operating in the fifteenth century and early sixteenth were five-person networks, which again fits with the general picture of the Hanse as an egalitarian organization of small-scale enterprises (although the volume of trade could of course differ). Burkhardt also concluded that these traders were very well embedded in the social structures in their hometown, and permeated also the highest strata in the urban society of Lübeck. An analysis of who the so-called testament executors were shows again that, while in the early period Bergenfahrer from Lübeck relied on kin and family, they extended their network in this respect later, and trusted non-family to fulfil this task.

The network analysis employed by Burkhardt thus has several merits. He puts a large number of individuals in a social context and shows what kind of social connections coincided with business connections. He shows what structural changes took place in the scope of 150 years. And, by using graphics, he determines which individuals were the 'stars' of their network (centres of networks) and which individuals were so-called 'bridgers' (placed at the outskirts of networks, connecting with other networks – often functioning as so-called brokers, providing new information). One can say much more about an individual when his whole (identifiable) entourage is studied and, looking through different sources, one can compile bits of information about a person into a greater whole – bits that, on their own, would otherwise seem too small to collect.

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22.   EWERT and SELZER, "Verhandeln"…, *op.cit.*

At the same time, as Burkhardt states in his book, there are several drawbacks to the network analysis. First of all, it is a very work-intensive method which often yields poor results (you need a lot of time and other resources!). Secondly, data is often fragmentary and fraught with uncertainties connected to the identity of the individuals (was it always the same individual? the variation in writing down names is certainly of no help) and the quality of the relations (how good and intensive were they actually? what were all the motives for starting business with this particular person? – qualitative network analysis versus quantitative). Finally, one encounters considerable difficulties when making a graphic representation of networks: when trying to fit more than 30 connections on a page, the graph becomes difficult to read. Also, the changeability in the network is difficult to represent (people join and leave networks, and of course they die). Furthermore, Burkhardt had to take issue with the more theoretical view of some scholars that it is impossible to conduct prosopographic studies (and, as he states, his method was a form of prosopography) before the sixteenth century because data would be too fragmentary and uncertain. His solution was not to try to reconstruct as much as possible about the individuals he investigated, but to focus on certain issues. All in all, he points out that there are serious limitations which have to be taken into account when using networks – specifically network analysis in combination with prosopography – as a tool[23].

The objective of my doctoral study was different. I studied the relations *between* groups, specifically chosen groups in the Hanseatic *Kontor* (Lübeckers and Overijsslers – Hanseatic traders from Kampen, Deventer and Zwolle) and their relation with non-Hansards like Hollanders. The period of analysis was from the thirteenth century to the 1560s, with special emphasis on the interaction from the second half of the fifteenth century on. In addition to formal, continuous groups, ad hoc groups, which could be created in a specific situation, were also taken into account[24]. The primary reason for choosing the concept of groups was that, in the groups of Overijsslers and Hollanders, there were few individuals who could be identified by name *and* whose connections could be identified. Most of my traders were anonymous and, of those who were not, few specific pieces of information regarding their business connections could be found. On the other hand, it was remarkable that collective terms of des-

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23. BURKHARDT, *Bergenhandel…, op.cit.* 31-61.

24. WUBS-MROZEWICZ, *Traders…*, *op.cit.* 28-29.

cription and self-description prevailed. Amsterdammers and Hollanders were generally called 'Hollanders' or 'foreigners' (in the Norwegian sources), or 'Hollanders' and 'non-Hansards' in the Hanseatic sources[25]. Traders from Kampen, Deventer and Zwolle were called 'Zuiderzee' merchants by other traders in the *Kontor*[26], while Norwegians saw them as part of the general group of '*Kontor* traders', 'Hansards' or 'Germans'. The traders from these three towns themselves used the more specific term of 'Overijsslers' as a self-description of their group (which made me choose it as term of analysis and thus coin it in the English-speaking context). My attention was also drawn to the fact that, in a host of sources, there was implicit and often even explicit discussion as to who belonged to which group, and what consequences this had for their position and opportunities in Bergen. This called for a systematic analysis. I examined privileges, the organisation of life and trade, trade with various import and export goods, manners of conflict resolution and the general embedding in the Hanse, all by taking the group perspective. Specifically, I used the concept of ingroups and outgroups, that is divisions into 'us' and 'them', adapted to highlight changes and flexibility in the boundaries of these groups (I will elaborate on it in the following paragraph). To summarize some of my conclusions, the Bergen case shows how the concept of the Hanse and Hanseatic traders emerged and changed. Until the early fifteenth century, the group of Hanseatic traders was inclusive, as, for instance, some of the Overijssel traders (from Deventer) 'grew' into it. Later, the boundaries became much more pronounced and the admission to the group became a perceptible step (for traders from Kampen). Also, the attitude towards those who left the group (ex-Hansards) became much harsher in the course of the sixteenth century: from ostracism to imprisonment, breaking fingers and persecution all over the Hanseatic world[27]. Moreover, it appeared that even though there could be inner tensions in the *Kontor*, especially between Lübeckers and Overijsslers (up to a point where Overijsslers were

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25. "Holland" and "Hollanders" refer to the historical province and are not synonymous with the modern terms "the Netherlands" or "the Dutch". The towns of Overijssel were not part of this province, but are part of the Netherlands.

26. WUBS-MROZEWICZ, *Traders…*, *op.cit.*: 15.

27. Broken fingers were recorded in the context of Hanseatic craftsmen, who were partly connected to the *Kontor*, see WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. "Shoes and shoemakers in late medieval Bergen and Stockholm", *Collegium Medievale*, 18, 2005: 7-36. On a case of conflict and persecution in Bergen and Hanseatic towns in the 1540s, see WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. "Hinrick van Hasselt. Rebell und Bergenfahrer aus Deventer. Problemlösung im *Kontor* in Bergen in den 40er Jahren des 16. Jahrhunderts", *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 124, 2006: 1-20.

perceived as a bothersome if not hostile outgroup), there was a powerful social and economic glue that held this group tightly together. This glue consisted of shared trading rights, trade interests, rules which furthered coherence, like the vow of secrecy, and simply the daily life together: living on the same premises, having undergone the same initiation rites, eating and drinking together, not being allowed to have wives (and thus going *en masse* to brothels), and, at the same time, being part of the same confraternities – which were for Hansards only[28]. Other than in the Hanse at large, there was a fixed administration in the Bergen *Kontor* (as there was in the other *Kontore*), and there were means to impose authority and punish trespassers, collect money and even take up arms if necessary. In these respects, one can say that the *Kontore* were the most 'organized' elements in the organization of the Hanse[29]. Yet, we have to keep in mind that the *Kontore* were made up of more than one group of traders. Its traders came there from different towns and kept their own ties with their autonomous hometowns (and these towns defended their autonomy ferociously at Hanseatic diets, among other instances). In order to function as one settlement for all, an important principle in the *Kontor* was that all its members were to have equal rights. The *Kontor* group was to be egalitarian. Again, it proved to be horizontal (that is non-hierarchical rather than vertical) lines which created the boundary of the group. Finally, by focusing on the boundaries of the groups of Hansards in Bergen, I was able to observe a whole range of relations between them (cooperation, competition, coexistence). This variation also existed in relation to non-Hansards, specifically Hollanders. As social sciences nowadays stresses, membership in one group (i.e. being part of an ingroup) does not mean there is only 'ingroup love', nor can the relation to outgroups (i.e. those who are not members of your group) be simplified to so-called 'outgroup hatred'[30]. One wonders how much time it will take for these academic insights to change the picture in popular culture that 'Us' is not only different but irreconcilably hostile to 'Them'.

28.   WUBS-MROZEWICZ, J. "Rules of Inclusion, Rules of Exclusion. The Hanseatic *Kontor* in Bergen in the Late Middle Ages and its Normative Boundaries", *German History*, 29, 2011: 1-22.

29.   JÖRN, N. "Die Herausbildung der Kontorordnungen in Novgorod, Bergen, London und Brügge im Vergleich - 12.-17. Jahrhundert", RUHE, D.; SPIESS, K.-H. (Eds.) *Prozesse der Normbildung und Normveränderung im mittelalterlichen Europa*. Stuttgart, 2000: 217-235.

30.   BREWER, M.B. "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?", *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 1999: 429-444.

What are the opportunities and challenges connected to the use of the group terminology? An obvious advantage is that I could systematically analyse changes in the interaction of traders without having to take the names of individuals as a point of departure. As mentioned before, this kind of data was lacking for most of the issues I wanted to discuss. Groups are about boundaries, and these boundaries proved discernible enough in the sources, whether it concerned discussions about who was allowed to profit from the privileges or with whom one was or was not to interact. Moreover, this approach allowed me to get closer to the contemporary perspective on collectivities: I analysed the terms of self-description and description of others. It seems that it was common for various types of group terminology to be used, and these changed not only over time but also depending on context. For instance, it was symptomatic that Overijsslers referred to themselves with this term (meaning traders from Overijssel) when they wanted to demand their rights within the Bergen *Kontor*. In such situations, they did not present themselves as traders from individual towns; apparently, collective action was considered more effective. On the other hand, when they encountered problems outside the *Kontor*, especially with Norwegian rulers, they stressed their membership in the *Kontor* and the Hanse. In this case, it was better to point to membership in a larger, more powerful structure. Another advantage of taking the group perspective is that it allowed me to discover that the continuity of the trade and the position of Hansards in Bergen was closely connected to this group membership, and that it made them guard the group boundaries ferociously. This revealed an inner logic when it came to contact with Norwegian women: officially, all contacts were banned. In practice, visiting prostitutes or even having a mistress and children was accepted as long as one did not marry, which would involve settling permanently in Bergen and leaving the Hanseatic group[31]. Finally, since the continuity of the settlement in Bergen was not connected to particular traders and their businesses (i.e. networks), but to rights and structures which were given to a group, there was room for what social psychologists call 'depersonalized trust'. Traders arriving in Bergen could, at least to a certain degree, trust in the structures and people in the *Kontor*, even if they did not know them personally, because the boundaries of the group were safeguarded. According to social theory, such individuals

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31. WUBS-MROZEWICZ, "Rules of inclusion"…, *op. cit.*

within a group are more likely to cooperate[32]. This seems to fit the general view on the Hanse as an organization which was built upon trust. Trust in others was one of the aspects which made it possible to conduct long-distance trade. In research, this has been particularly stressed in the context of personal relations within a network in the Hanse[33]. Here, I can add that it was not only personal trust in members of networks but also depersonalized trust in the group, and that being a declared member of the Hanse group could further cooperation.

Of course, there were also problems with the concept of groups. First of all, the group itself: because groups are inherently attached to their boundaries, they often appear as fixed (and are treated this way). It is a convenient shortcut to think that Hansards meant the same thing in 1350 as it did around 1500, just because the same term was used by contemporaries and is used by researchers now. The same applies to 'Germans', 'Englishmen' and so on, and national group terminology runs even a higher risk of appearing fixed. The challenge of using 'groups' as a tool is to take into account the changeability of the boundaries of the group. The diachronic changes could pertain to whether it was expanding or diminishing as well as to what degree it was closed, and what constituted it in a different period and context (e.g. territory, language, wealth). If we want to include various (synchronic) contemporary perceptions, the picture might become even more complex.

The second problem is also connected to the sometimes too easy pigeonholing and simplification of the view of the past (or present, for that matter). It concerns the fact that people can be members of not only one, but various groups at the same time. If we accept this fact, analysis of this picture becomes even more time-consuming. Some of the groups can be embedded, like Overijsslers in Bergen being part of the larger group of *Kontor* traders. In other cases, there might be an overlap. Yet, perhaps most importantly, membership in one group can differ in its form of engagement and intensity, among other things. As Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen points out, people can be both members of group X and Y, and in the second case 'be *somewhat* Y'[34].

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32. BREWER, *Intergroup relations…, op. cit*: 34.

33. EWERT; SELZER, "Verhandeln"…, *op. cit*.

34. ERIKSEN, T.H. *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*. London, 2002: 174 (2nd edition).

Therefore, it is in my view vital to take into account that group membership is not a given, but a variable.

GROUPS VERSUS NETWORKS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the graphs of groups and networks: what are really the differences between these concepts? After all, we are talking by and large about the same people, and about the fact that they operated in collectivities?
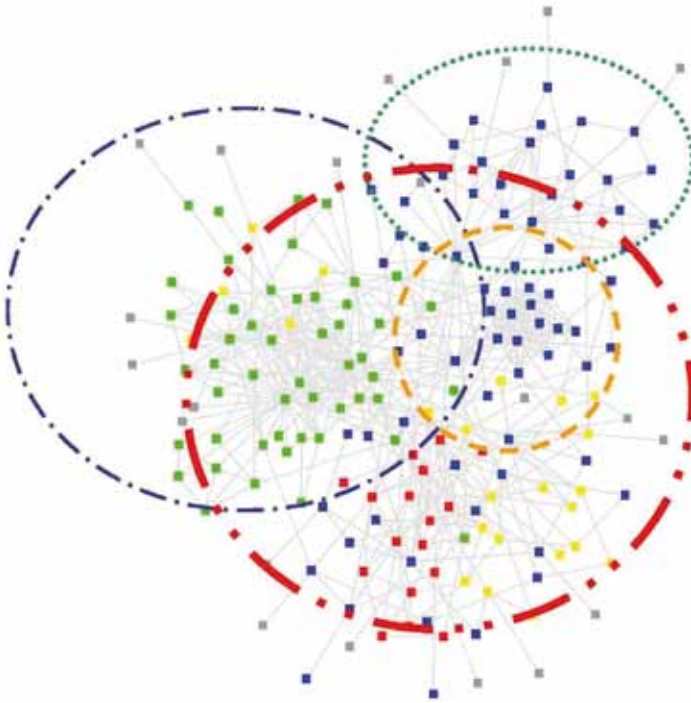
The biggest difference is that the awareness of boundaries is much stronger when we look at groups than when we investigate networks. In order to define groups, we always have to consider who is not part of them and what keeps members within a group. This boundary is often constituted by rules enacted by group members and consolidated by tradition, and these rules are the door into or out of the group. In connection with these rules, there is often an element of hierarchy in the groups, which distinguishes them from networks. In addition, the focus in groups is less on individual, personal relations, and more on things

that are shared. Groups are about 'us and them'. Members of the group who do not know each other and have no direct or even indirect relations with each other, can still be a member of the same group, perceive themselves this way and be perceived as group members by others. There is awareness of group membership. We can assign a collective, depersonalized name to the group, and see it as a *space* in which individuals can operate. It is not necessary to identify all or most individuals within the group in order to be able to draw conclusions about the group and its boundaries. The boundaries constitute the most important structure of the group. Consequently, they structure and support the interaction of an individual, but they are also constricting because they impose rules of behaviour on him or her.

Networks, on the other hand, are all about connections, direct or indirect, between individuals. Networks are about 'me, you and him'. These connections form the structure of the network, and thus no rules or hierarchy are needed. The egalitarian character of networks is one of its most prominent features. In contrast to the awareness of group membership, the awareness of belonging to a network is more complex. Even though one knows who is in one's own network (direct connections), this does not necessarily mean that one knows what the indirect connections are[35]. In network analysis, it is of crucial importance to identify individuals and reconstruct at least some aspects of their past in order to say something meaningful about the network in general. If it is feasible to find this data, networks can succeed where groups do not in filling a lot of gaps in our knowledge. In other words, they fill the spaces (circles) created by the boundaries of groups, and show how individuals in practice crossed these boundaries – sometimes through membership in an overlapping group. Still, there are also some risks and disadvantages to working with the network concept as opposed to the group concept, which can be added to the issues already mentioned by Burkhardt (see above). If the sources are too patchy, any conclusions drawn on the basis of a limited number of individuals and their connections may be too far-reaching. On the other hand, if there are too many sources, there is the risk that network analysis will be presented only

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35. This only becomes apparent by reconstructing a network, or when tools are used like in LinkedIn (informing of indirect connections). This unawareness raises questions about the usefulness of such concepts as the "Small-World Phenomenon" in network theory. In other words, as long as one does not know of the connections, they cannot be put into use. On the "Small-World Phenomenon", see for instance WATTS, D. J. "Networks, Dynamics, and the Small-World Phenomenon", *American Journal of Sociology*, 105/2, 1999: 493-527.

quantitatively, and that, paradoxically, the individual will be lost again, this time in figures, tables and models[36]. Another drawback connected to the use of network analysis in medieval history, or history in general, is that the focus is primarily on the positive aspects of being part of a network. This creates the impression that being part of a network was all about advantages and, to some, it may appear as a concept which identifies modern, successful interaction. It is only recently that researchers have begun to shed light on the adverse effects of being in a network. David Hancock, for example, demonstrates the serious drawbacks this entailed for Scottish traders on Madeira in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Being tied up in a network meant being forced to operate in a world where structure was unclear, rules either did not exist or were constantly changing, coordination was difficult and a bad connection with trading partners could result in one's bankruptcy[37]. The lack of boundaries in networks can thus be a problem, not just an advantage. In short, the two concepts are definitely close and both offer opportunities to study the collective, but they are not the same.

My argument is that we have to make a conscious choice of the terminology depending, first of all, on what sources are available – there is little point to studying networks if we have too little information about individuals, while on the other hand it may be a missed opportunity if this information is available and no network analysis is done. The goal should be to try to make the most out of the material at one's disposal. Second of all, what we actually want to investigate and what our research interests actually are should be a well-reflected decision. Do we want to look for common denominators, or for evidence of specific relations? How people were included and excluded in collectivities, or how did information and resources travel between individuals? In both cases, it is a choice of research perspective. We should avoid choosing terms and thus the analytical framework just because they are trendy or have a positive ring.

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36. See, for instance, VAN DOOSSELAERE, *Commercial Agreements...*, *op. cit.* A solution in such instances is to add a presentation of chosen individuals along with their network and background, and use them to showcase the general argument.

37. HANCOCK, D. "The Trouble with Networks: Managing the Scots" Early-Modern Madeira Trade", *Business History Review*, 79, 2005: 467-491; see also BERGHOFF, H. and SYDOW, J. "Unternehmerische Netzwerke"…, *op.cit.*: 20-22.

How do groups and networks fit together? As two complementary ways of viewing human collective interaction, and as two phenomena which exist next to each other. This explains why the same people in some aspects of their interaction can have egalitarian relations and operate as specific individuals connected together (for instance in a business network), but in other aspects form more of a hierarchy and appear under one, collective term, which evokes a host of shared issues (for instance in a guild)[38]. Moreover, membership in a group may be an incentive to form a network within it because the potential partners are more or less known and this can provide a sense of security. In fact, is it not the case that so-called *weak ties* (that is relations with people who are perceived in network theory as standing on the periphery of one's network, but who contribute valuable information or resources because they connect one with other networks[39]) are often relations with less known members of one's group? In turn, networks can give rise to groups, when people get connected in multiple ways and become aware of the things shared. A good example of the complementarity of networks and groups are the social networking sites Facebook and LinkedIn. They are based on personal relations between individuals, primarily those who know each other or want to know each other, i.e. networks. Yet, as soon as one wants give shape to these relations and identify those who have something more in common than only the fact that they are connected, a group is created.

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38. HANCOCK, "The Trouble with Networks"..., *op. cit.*, does not discuss the relation between the concept of networks and other structures, but he does admit (p. 484) that while "networks themselves were not hierarchical", "individuals brought their preexisting relationships and expectations to the network; networks that crossed grades, orders, or classes, they brought hierarchical relationships and expectations", This in fact nicely illustrates that the concept of networks covers some aspects of the interaction, while others may be explained by the concept of groups.

39. On weak ties, see GRANOVETTER, M. "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited", *Sociological Theory*, 1, 1983: 201-233.

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