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# Urban networks and emerging states in the North Sea and Baltic Areas: a maritime culture?

W. BLOCKMANS and L. HEERMA VAN VOSS

The relation suggested by the title of this book, 'The North Sea and Culture' is not self-evident at all: what can be the relations between a geographical entity and a social one? In the eighteenth century, such a remarkable spirit as Montesquieu suggested that climate and other physical conditions exerted some influence on the forms of government. If we pretend to have reached a higher level of sophistication in our thinking, by what methods can we avoid causalities as those which nowadays would generally be refuted as simplistic?

What we would like to do here is to look into the argument that a sea can constitute a cultural entity. After these preliminary remarks, we will elaborate on the concept of the urban network as an approach to delineating a system of relations. Then, we will discuss the relations between emerging states and the coastal areas in the early modern era, after which we hope to reach a conclusion about the cultural impact of both urban networks and states around the Baltic and North Seas.

## The concept of a maritime culture

For a discussion of the concept of a maritime culture, Braudel is the inevitable starting point. Although it had been argued earlier that a sea can unite its shores, nobody has done so more convincingly than Braudel. His book has sparked off a series of studies claiming the same for other seas and oceans, which form a rich store of relevant arguments.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We consulted J.L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony. The world system A.D. 1250-1350* (New York and Oxford, 1989); S. Arasaratnam, *Merchants, companies and commerce on the Coromandel Coast 1650-1740* (Delhi, 1986); A. Bang-Ansdersen, B. Greenhill and E. Harald Grude (eds), *The North Sea. A highway of economic and cultural exchange. Character - history* (Stavanger, 1985); R.J. Barendse, *Konningen, compagneen en kapers. De Arabische zeeën 1640-1700* (Leiden, 1991); S. Chandra (ed.), *The Indian Ocean. Explorations in history, commerce and politics* (New Delhi, 1987); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe. Economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1990); K.G. Davies, *The North Atlantic world in the seventeenth century* (Minneapolis, 1974); K. Fritze, E. Muller-Mertens and J. Schildhauer (eds), *Der Ost- und Nordseeraum. Politik, Ideologie, Kultur vom 12. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 1986); K.R. Hall, *Maritime trade and state development in early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 1985); P. Holm, *Kystfolk. Kontakter og sammenhænge*

With the help of these studies, we can therefore ask ourselves under what conditions it is plausible that a sea can stimulate the growth of a common culture on its shores. If we have established that, we can try to determine whether these conditions apply in the case of the North Sea. To summarise our findings there are three ways in which these studies explain unity in coastal areas. In the first place, they look for a causal explanation to common geographical conditions. Secondly, they point to human contacts, especially trade. The third approach is to simply establish – without giving causes – that there are common cultural traits. Most often one finds these three approaches used together in one analysis.

We will discuss one aspect of potential commonness, state formation, in the third part of this essay. Human contacts in the form of trade networks will occupy us in the second part. Let us turn first to common geographical conditions.

When we are looking at the physical environment, we are at once confronted with the question how wide we want to cast our nets. At first glance, geography did not favour the supporters of a 'North Sea Culture' in the same way as did the Mediterranean with Fernand Braudel. The Mediterranean (or the Baltic) looks more closed, turned in on itself, and the North Sea looks open to outside influences. Indeed, in times of war the Mediterranean could be closed at Gibraltar (and the Baltic at the Sound). But, on further analysis, this proves to be an illusion which the maps impose upon us. We must conclude that both the Mediterranean and the Baltic were in fact open to outside influences, as the Sound Toll Registers still remind us. Indeed, we will argue that this openness was an essential feature of the trade network which constituted the central link between the northwest European shores and that the Baltic was open enough to be included within the North Sea area.

What, indeed, constitutes a sea? Braudel himself is not very clear on this point. On the one hand he declares that the Mediterranean is not one sea, but a series of seas, each with their own character.<sup>2</sup> But at the same time Braudel also sees the whole of the Mediterranean as a physical unity. It has one climate, in contrast to the Atlantic Ocean which has all kinds of different climates.<sup>3</sup> Other sea historians have had to deal with this same question. Jones, Frost and White concede that there can be no meaningful history of the whole Pacific Rim or Basin, since it was never an integrated unit. But then they proceed to divide it

*over Kattegat og Skagerrak, 1550-1914* (Esbjerg, 1991); E.L. Jones, L. Frost and C. White, *Coming full circle. An economic history of the Pacific Rim* (Boulder, 1993); E. Knol, *De Noordnederlandse kustlanden in de vroege middeleeuwen* (Groningen, 1993); K. McPherson, *The Indian Ocean. A history of people and the sea* (Oxford, 1993); A. Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450-1680*. 2 vols, (New Haven and London, 1988, 1993); S. Subrahmanyam, *The political economy of commerce. Southern India 1500-1650* (Cambridge, 1990) and R. Vaughan, *The Arctic. A history* (Stroud and Dover N.H., 1994).

<sup>2</sup> F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London, 1975) vol. I, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, vol. I, p. 232.

in five regions, for instance East and South East Asia. Some of these regions still stretch from tropical to polar waters.<sup>4</sup> Other authors, not surprisingly, take parts of these mega-regions, and see these smaller units as a cultural entity. Reid, for instance, declares South East Asia an entity, among other reasons because of its common physical environment, which led to a common diet and building in wood.<sup>5</sup> Several writers have treated the Indian Ocean as one cultural entity, which was dominated by the monsoons.<sup>6</sup>

But if these authors give the natural environment a role in their analysis, it is rarely without human agency. Even if Braudel sees natural boundaries for the Mediterranean as a physical unit, it is a man-made entity. It ‘has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow’.<sup>7</sup>

### Urban networks

Braudel goes on to say that the Mediterranean ‘as a human unit is the combination over an area of route networks and urban centres, lines of force and nodal points. Cities and their communications, communications and their cities have imposed a unified human construction on geographical space.’<sup>8</sup> These words point to the kind of societal construction we have to look for in the Baltic and North Seas as well.<sup>9</sup>

Even if we take into account the existence of trading farmers in Norway and West Jutland, trade is an urban phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Certainly our sea histories see it that way. The Hanse with its typical civic culture had extended over the North

4 Jones, Frost and White, *Coming full circle*, p. 6

5 Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* vol. I, p. 5

6 McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, p. 8

7 Braudel, *Mediterranean*, vol. I, p. 276

8 Braudel, *Mediterranean*, vol. I, pp. 276-7

9 Virtually all literature mentioned in note 1 ascribes a special role to trade in creating coastal cultures. However, in principle all forms of human movement can lead to communication of culture. The formation of coastal cultures can be influenced by war, conquest, colonisation, trade, migration, travel and – for some regions and periods – pilgrimage (M. N. Pearson, *Pious passengers. The Hajj in earlier times* (New Delhi, 1994)). Some of the studies argue that those especially committed to the sea, like fishermen and sailors, constitute a special liminal group, which can be instrumental in intercultural contacts (McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, pp. 122-123, Holm, ‘Coastal life, “Nordic culture” and nation state. Reflections on the formation of the nation state and maritime history’ in L. R. Fischer and W. Minchinton (eds), *Research in maritime history* (Dec. 1992) 3 (Special issue People of the Northern seas), pp. 191-204, 192). The focus on trade has doubtlessly to do with the fact that most studies focus on the pre-industrial period. In the twentieth century modern mass media brought other means of international or cross-cultural communication into prominence.

10 Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony*, p. 253. More generally J. Jacobs, *Cities and the wealth of nations. Principles of economic life* (Harmondsworth, 1986).

Sea and Baltic coasts. In succession the Southern Netherlands, the Northern Netherlands and – after 1800 – England developed into the most urbanised areas of Europe. The northern shores of the North Sea and Baltic were not strongly urbanised, even if the few cities to be found in Scotland and Scandinavia at the start of our period were mostly to be found on the North Sea shores.

This points to a more general problem of the North Sea cultural system. There is a clear distinction between the urbanised, modern and rich Southern part (Southeast England, Flanders, the Dutch Republic and the German North Sea coast) and the less developed and poorer Northern part (Scotland, Denmark, Norway). The Dutch Republic and England especially can be seen as in many respects comparable powerful entities. However, many of the histories of other seas confront the same situation. In fact, trade only makes sense between areas that differ, that are specialized in different ways. The same argument applies to most forms of human movement.<sup>11</sup>

Trade routes linked cities into networks. They display a higher density of mobility of persons and of goods than in the surrounding areas. Through these, material culture was integrated by markets which were located in cities, in Northwestern Europe at least since the twelfth century. Beyond any doubt, the urban density around the North Sea and the Baltic represented only a fraction of that around the Mediterranean, even in early modern times. Nevertheless, in the rhythm and with the means imposed by its size and geographical conditions, the same pattern applied. That implied that the ship was by far the cheapest transportation method for bulk goods which were necessary for the survival of large cities. Only these large centres, however, allowed for the highest differentiation of specialised services and products to be available on the market. For those goods with a high value per unit of weight, transportation overland could very well remain profitable. Harbour cities needed to be linked to a hinterland by various types of routes in any case. The more central a place was in a trading network, the better it was connected to other markets with a lower position in the hierarchy: that made it possible for it to fulfil its central role in offering the widest variety of specialized goods and services in a whole region. The pattern of urbanization and mobility can better be understood by identifying the networks underlying the diversity of cities and their spread in space.

These insights, so eloquently expounded at first by Braudel, help us to reconstruct an adequate geographical unit of analysis. More recently, research in urban history has elaborated the geographical theory of central places and tested it to historical realities.<sup>12</sup> It proved to offer a suitable model for the analysis of

<sup>11</sup> McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, ch. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Originally developed by W. Christaller, *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland. Eine ökonomisch-geographische Untersuchung über die Gesetzmäßigkeit der Verbreitung und Entwicklung der Siedlungen mit städtischen Funktionen* (Jena, 1933). For a recent application, see C.M. Lesger, *Hoorn als stedelijk*

urban systems and the relations within them. Essential in this line of thought is that streams of persons, goods and information are patterned through centres offering a greater variety as they are more central in the system. Population size is an important, but certainly not the only determinant for centrality: the geographical infrastructure, implying its accessibility, could outweigh other factors.<sup>13</sup> Logically, intensive linkages within urban networks created some homogeneity not only in material culture, but necessarily also in other cultural fields. When thinking of the second concept in the title of this book, that of 'culture', we should be aware of the multiplicity of cultural phenomena, which are certainly not to be limited to the traditionally elitist forms and practices.<sup>14</sup> Products and services made available on new markets at a commonly accessible price innovated cultural behaviour. The position the Low Countries occupied in the maritime routes implied that many new fashions originating in Southern Europe reached the Baltic area through the intermediary of the North Sea harbours. Communication necessarily implied linguistic connections, and reciprocal knowledge about value orientations and attitudes, this is to say culture generally.

Applied to our region, information about regular trade relations between Flanders and England dates back to the eleventh century<sup>15</sup>, that about the activities of merchants from northern Germany in Gotland and those from Cologne in London date back to the middle of the twelfth century. In the course of the following centuries, these routes became increasingly integrated, reaching the formation of the famous Hanseatic League by the middle of the fourteenth, uniting nearly two hundred cities in the Baltic and North Sea areas for the protection of their trade. It is important to note that the structure of the Hanse was designed to encompass cities in various regions in the Northern parts of the German Empire, from Prussia to the Zuiderzee. From the earliest times it included cities on the North Sea, and three of its four external principal places of business were located along the North Sea (Bruges, London and Bergen). The possible obstruction by the king of Denmark of the Sound passage was at the origin of many armed conflicts initiated by the Hanse, such as the war of 1368-70 for which the League levied its own taxes. There can not be any doubt about how vital this interest was for the Hansa cities in the Baltic. On the other hand, the participation of a Dutch fleet in the blockade of the Sound in those years marked the beginning of the penetration by English and Netherlandish skippers into the Baltic, which was to last and increase for centuries.

The massive presence of merchants of the Hanseatic League in the North Sea area led to close cultural exchanges. The extensive correspondence preserved

*knooppunt Stedensystemen tijdens de late middeleeuwen en vroegmoderne tijd* (Hilversum, 1990)

<sup>13</sup> P. Hohenberg and L. Lees, *The making of urban Europe* (Cambridge, 1985)

<sup>14</sup> On this theme for the North Sea – Baltic area, see L. Heerma van Voss, 'Trade and the formation of North Sea culture', *Northern Seas Yearbook 1996*, forthcoming

<sup>15</sup> F. Blockmans, *Het Gentsche stadspatriciaat tot omstreeks 1302* (Antwerpen, 1938), pp. 150-1, 159-60

from private merchants, the Teutonic Order and urban authorities shows that travellers along the North Sea and Baltic coasts understood each other very well using each their variant of *Nederduitsch*. Hanseatic merchants staying for a longer period in Bruges adopted Flemish words in their vocabulary.<sup>16</sup> Not only did they integrate quite well in local life, buying houses, acquiring citizenship and intermarrying, in Bruges, Antwerp and Amsterdam, they also exported various products of the culture of the Low Countries; this is well known for the arts and is shown for architecture in Juliette Roding's contribution to this book; it also applied to such unaccustomed fields as the massive export of Flemish metallic grave-stones. Recent research by Klaus Kruger showed that from the fourteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century nearly one stone per year could be found back through Europe, with concentrations along the British East coast and the Hanseatic area. Bearing inscriptions mostly in Latin, these stones were exportable goods just as paintings, sculptural altarpieces, jewellery, fashionable clothing, illuminated manuscripts, printed books and other products of the highly specialized crafts and trades concentrated in the metropolises on the continental side of the North Sea.<sup>17</sup>

It is well known that the Hanseatic trade exported mostly raw materials to the West, importing mainly manufactured goods and specialties from southern Europe such as wines and spices. The North Sea metropolises of Bruges, Antwerp and Amsterdam each served in turn as the meeting places between the economic systems of Southern and Northern Europe. The former included colonial trades, as their scope expanded. The Baltic region's initial dependency on Western intermediaries for colonial products was continued in its very limited share in colonial trade in later centuries. The North Sea harbours continued to flourish thanks to the exploitation of their strategic position which inevitably made conditions less favourable for possible competitors from the Baltic.

Instead, from the 1370s onwards, it was the Dutch skippers who succeeded gradually in breaking through the monopoly of the Wendic cities on the West-East route. Their advantages consisted of a combination of factors, of which the cheap offer of cargo space may well have been the key. In the fifteenth century, Hanseatic skippers equally developed the Atlantic route as far southward as Portugal, as did the Dutch. The latter won the contest, mainly thanks to the larger and faster ships they built and to the simple reality that their geographical location halfway between Lisbon and Reval gave them an advantage over the Hanseatics who had to winter in Zeeland on such long journeys in any case. Two observations have to be made in this respect: first, the trade system of the North Sea has always

<sup>16</sup> H. Leloux, *Zur Sprache in der ausgehenden Korrespondenz des hansischen Kaufmanns zu Brugge* (Oosterbeek, 1971)

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Kruger, 'Flamische Grabplatten im Ostseeraum. Kunstdenkmäler als historische Quelle' in H. Menke (ed.), *Die Niederlande und der europäische Nordosten* (Neumünster, 1992), pp. 167–208

been linked to that along the Atlantic coasts and further; second, it has always been linked equally to the Baltic. This double connection, or intermediary position was essential for its lasting strategic role. Without grain, timber, iron and various other Baltic and Scandinavian products, the Dutch could never have developed their sea-borne domination. On the other hand, they needed products from Southern Europe and the colonies as a return freight.

What we thus have been describing are trade networks as the vectors for the spread of the most diverse aspects of cultures. Cities along the coasts of the Baltic and North Sea formed the nodal points of an area characterized by intensive exchanges, cultural interaction, competition and innovation. This intercourse must have been far more intensive than that inland, as can be measured by the population size and density, and sometimes by indicators about traffic. Wherever the expansionist core was located, in the Wendic region or in the Low Countries, the North Sea was its focus because it was the staple for products from all over the then known world. If there was any particular North Sea Culture, it must have been cosmopolitan *par excellence*. Therefore, it seems very difficult to isolate it either from its Baltic or Atlantic connections. If anything, the overlap between the two economic systems, the Baltic and the Atlantic-plus-colonial one, may then circumscribe the specific North Sea Culture.

This brings up the question which area is included in the North Sea culture. Setting both inland boundaries and the boundaries with other coastal cultures is a problem common to all sea histories.<sup>18</sup> We have argued that trade is the relevant factor. We propose that in that case the Baltic ports should be included, certainly when we are thinking of South Baltic ports and the start of our period.<sup>19</sup> To be geographically more correct, we should therefore speak of a North Sea – Baltic cultural system.

### State power

If we turn now to the structure of state power in the region, one is struck by its weak development by, say 1450. In the Low Countries, the core principalities had been brought under a dynastic union only two decades earlier. Holland and Zeeland kept a very independent position, as they demonstrated in their autonomous actions during the Wendic War in 1438-41 and in their successful refusal of taxation on grain exports in the 1540s. The Northern territories of the German Empire, allotted to various ecclesiastical and lay princes, were tradi-

<sup>18</sup> McPherson, *Indian Ocean*, pp. 122-123; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce I*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Trade with the rest of the known world was a characteristic of this system, but with the possible exception of the North American colonies, this did not lead to the establishment of cultures which closely resembled those of the North Sea – Baltic area.

tionally very distant from imperial power. The Hanseatic League had largely managed to preserve the privileges of the independent member cities. Further to the east, the Lands of the Teutonic Order were ruled in a kind of condominium between the Grand Master, who was a prince of the German Empire, and the *bourgeoisie* of the main trading cities along the Vistula, especially Danzig, Elbing and Torun. The only continuously strong monarchical power in the region was that of the king of Denmark who even succeeded in acquiring the dukedom of Schleswig and in becoming count of Holstein.

From the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, however, dynastic power encroached heavily on the relatively autonomous system of the German Hanse. In general, most of the member cities stagnated economically and demographically, while regular taxation and new military techniques favoured monarchical expansion. In the Low Countries, the central power became consolidated and succeeded in incorporating the Northeastern regions, including the Hanse cities on the IJssel and along the Zuiderzee coast. Warfare imposed by surrounding monarchs ruined cities like Dortmund and Braunschweig which had to resist attacks by the duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. The margrave of Brandenburg forced Berlin and Frankfurt an der Oder into submission and retreat from the Hanse, a measure imposed on all cities in the Altmark in 1488. The aggression of the princes put the cities along the Baltic coast in a defensive position. Much depended on the coalitions both parties were able to mobilize, but in general the power of the cities stagnated while that of the princes increased. As an example, the duke of Mecklenburg created new tolls which in 1476 were abolished as a result of fierce opposition by the Hanseatic towns most involved, Stralsund and Rostock. In 1498, the duke of Pomerania increased the toll tariffs, tried a blockade of the cities, and grabbed the so-called strand right on wrecked goods. Both princes set up an export trade in grain and timber, in competition with the Hanse cities. The urban jurisdiction, the coinage, beer taxes, the feudal duties upon land acquired by burghers: in all these standard matters the ambitions of state building dukes conflicted with the long established practices of the urban bourgeoisie. The count of Oldenburg and the duke of Schleswig-Holstein and the related king of Denmark had a long series of conflicts with Lübeck and Hamburg as a consequence of their rival claims on the control over land, waterways and resources. In 1490, the king launched a blockade against the Hanse, in 1510-12 a full-fledged war. The cities' response lacked continuity and cohesion: a series of urban leagues of widely different composition and duration offered ad hoc resistance but displayed in the long run the Hanse's incapacity to react as a whole. The lack of unity caused, for example, the severe submission of Rostock by a coalition of princes in 1489.

In the lands of the Teutonic Order open war reigned between the Prussian cities and the Order from 1454 to 1466. It was again a war between German princes

and commercial interests. However, Lübeck and the rest of the Hanse League did not dare to support their Prussian member-cities for fear of retaliations by the king of Denmark and other German princes who sided with the Teutonic Order. Again, divisions among the cities weakened their positions altogether. On the other hand, the king of Poland saw his opportunity to eliminate the Teutonic Order by taking sides with the Prussian cities. These could bargain far-reaching privileges with the remote and relatively weak Polish kings. The cities in the lower Vistula basin ensured in this way the maintenance of their factual independence in affairs of international trade and profited fully from the increase in grain exports to Amsterdam. The weakening of the Wendic cities helped to free Prussia from the protectionism the Hanse had formerly imposed. Danzig, Elbing and Torun saw their territorial possessions largely extended while the kingdom of Poland was opened for all Prussian merchants. Even when in the 1560s and 1570s King Sigismund Augustus tried to impose his rule, his attempts could be rebuffed by the mighty Prussian cities. The financiers from Danzig refused credit to the ruler who subdued the Lithuanians and the Lets, since they opposed his efforts towards administrative centralization. Evidently, these cities counting twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants, and whose merchants controlled the immensely important grain trade, were harder to overrule than the unfree rural populations farther to the east.

Even when the Hanseatic cities in the Northwestern parts of the Empire became severely restricted in their privileges, the princes still had to handle them with care since, after all, they continued to concentrate important economic resources. Hamburg could even retain its status as free imperial city until the end of the eighteenth century. Its position on the North Sea also ensured better economic opportunities than those of its former counterpart Lübeck. Hamburg also retained the cultural and political characteristics which the relatively free North Sea trade centres had in common.<sup>20</sup> What can be observed thus in a more general way is that those cities which assumed a leading role in the world economy, such as Amsterdam, Danzig, Hamburg and London, each with their dependent centres, enjoyed far reaching political autonomy. Their economic strength and their financial assets especially provided them with means to resist monarchical centralization. In regions with a dense urban network, a relatively high level of freedom remained even when monarchical power had subdued cities which were on the wane, such as those in the Spanish Netherlands and in Northern Germany.

Along the other coasts of the North Sea and especially of the Baltic, strong monarchies took the lead in launching territorial expansion and economic development. However remarkable the statecraft developed by Danish and Swedish absolutism may have been, it would have been unthinkable in a previously highly urbanized area. The economic organization brought about by monarchical

20 J Whaley, *Religious toleration and social change in Hamburg 1529-1819* (Cambridge, 1985).

states had to serve the dynastic interests, as did the Sound tolls or the copper mines. The two paths of development are clearly juxtaposed in this region: on the one hand, monarchical states aiming at territorial conquest and exploiting for that purpose their own population – the Swedish recruitment system for the national army preceded in this respect the Prussian *Kantonalsystem*; on the other hand relatively autonomous commercial cities developing trade networks. In the competition with ever-expanding dynastic states their small scale made them vulnerable, especially in periods of decline. There is therefore some reason to see a separate path for the Baltic areas after they become decisively subjected to these strong monarchies.

### **Conclusion: A Baltic and North Sea Culture?**

From the eleventh to the eighteenth century the Low Countries were ahead of surrounding regions in so far as the level of urbanization is concerned. The density of its natural and artificial waterways and the possibility of building harbours for larger vessels surely formed the infrastructure for that high concentration of men and capital. As a matter of fact, this continues to the present day. In the pre-modern era, the extraordinarily intensive communication linked to the mobility of men and goods must have differentiated this area from the surrounding ones, where relations were less dense. Open economies implied markets where imported goods were largely available, and products may thus have created a relatively large similitude in consumption patterns. Relatively high transportation costs overland made the spread of these sea-borne products less likely, which differentiated cities on coasts and rivers from those further inland.

If all this were true, one could expect cultural differences in coastal and river areas, as compared with landlocked areas, especially in this highly interactive area around the southern North Sea. Its characteristics were formed from the tenth or eleventh century. Through the centuries, links with both the southern and eastern areas proved to be essential for activities around the North Sea. Linguistic similitudes, the easy, gradual transition of dialects from Dunkirk to Reval in particular, will have played a role, but it cannot have been dominant, since trade contacts were also intense with Normandy, Gascony, Galicia and Portugal. Netherlandish products of non-literate high culture were sold in Scandinavia, Northern Germany, Eastern Britain, but also in Iberia and Italy. The distribution of this category of goods seems to have been determined more by general market patterns than by any cultural pre-conditioning. However, as we stated above, we do not want to limit our discussion to this category of goods.

Neither do we want to lose ourselves in scholastic discussions. There is no reason to reify 'North Sea Culture'. The cities on the shores of the North Sea

formed the arena for the intersection of the south-north and the west-east linkages along European coasts. Cultural phenomena form part and parcel of commercial connections, and tend to show more common characteristics as the relations are more intensified. Trying to bring more sophistication into this concept on a general level, seems to be rather vain. It will be more than enough if this essay has suggested possible cultural links within the Baltic and North Sea area, has pointed to the role of urban networks in this respect and called attention to the concomittant characteristics in state formation.