

THE TRADE OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE: THE NORTH*

I. THE TRADE IN GENERAL

(1) *Commodities*

1

The international and inter-regional trade of Northern Europe and its principal industries bear little resemblance to the conventional image of medieval economy. The traffic across the continent of Western Europe, or between the European mainland and the lands immediately to the north and to the north-east, evokes in a modern reader none of that romance which clings to the trade of Southern Europe. The latter brought to Western Europe exotic goods of every kind: pepper, ginger and other spices of the East Indies, silks, brocades and tapestries, sweet wines, oranges, raisins, figs and almonds. It enticed the merchant into the mysterious lands of the Near and Middle East, to Byzantium and Syria, often to Africa, and sometimes even to China. It was also the trade of the caravans, the galleys, the junks; and of the Venetian, Genoese and Florentine adventurers and merchant princes. This was the medieval trade as popular writers know it, and this is the trade which some serious writers have in mind when they insist on the luxury character of medieval commerce.

The trade of Northern Europe was quite different. It was not greatly concerned with oriental and Mediterranean commodities. At various times between the sixth century and the tenth, traders and warriors brought goods from the extreme north of Europe to Byzantium and re-imported Byzantine goods into Northern Europe. In later centuries Italian merchants frequently sailed into the harbours of England and Flanders, bringing with them all the infinite variety of Levantine and oriental products. Still more regularly – in fact throughout the Middle Ages – Italian merchants and the men of the North, Germans, Flemings, English and French, mingled in the great inter-

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national marts of Central and Northern Europe: in Champagne during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in Bruges in the fourteenth and the early fifteenth centuries, in Geneva, Antwerp and Bergen-op-Zoom in the fifteenth, and there exchanged the Italian and the Italian-borne products for other goods.

Yet generally speaking, in the economic life of Northern Europe these contacts were of secondary importance. The main currents of trade across Northern Europe and between Northern Europe and other countries flowed with products of the northern hemisphere, cruder, bulkier and altogether more indispensable than the luxuries and the fineries of the text-book convention. This convention is not altogether true even of the South, for foodstuffs or raw materials also entered into the trade of the Mediterranean region. Nevertheless, what gave the southern trade its peculiar character was not the trade in the bulky essentials, but those luxury trades which we associate with it. By contrast, the trade of Northern Europe was almost exclusively devoted to the necessities of life.

Of the luxuries originating in the North and circulating in Northern Europe furs were probably the only one worth noting. Modest furs of local origin – the ‘conies’ of England, the Low Countries and France, the goatskins and the sheepskins of peasant wear – could perhaps be counted among the modest pre-requisites of humble existences. Not so the rare and rich furs of Scandinavian and Russian origins – fox, bear, beaver, sable, ermine. They were ceremonial wares, an insignia of wealth and standing; they rivalled the senatorial purple in the early Middle Ages, the Italian brocades and oriental silks in the later centuries, as marks of rank and worth. And so important did they become in European trade that by the end of the thirteenth century they formed one of the mainstays of Hanseatic commerce and wealth.

Furs, nevertheless, were something of an exception, for the main articles of northern trade were bulkier and cheaper necessities of life. Its main, and certainly the most permanent, branch was traffic in food. The very conditions of Germanic settlement in North-western Europe made it inevitable that some areas should early in their history have come to depend on food imports. Throughout the Middle Ages large portions of Scandinavia could not grow on the spot all the food they needed. Ever since the early days of the great migrations a relatively large population settled in the water-logged and sandy lands of the estuary of the Rhine – the Frisian country of the seventh-century nomenclature – which could not raise crops large enough to feed their population in normal years. Later in the Middle Ages, i.e. from the middle of the twelfth century onwards, the regions of the North-western littoral, Flanders, Brabant and Holland, maintained an industrial population which they could not feed

out of their own agricultural production. If we are to believe a fifteenth-century description, the Dutch of that time still largely subsisted on dairy produce, birds and fishes. Farther south and west, on the Atlantic coast of France, lay the rich lands of Gascony which specialised in wine and had to bring in some of their food from outside.¹

What made it possible for these needs to be covered was that side by side with the regions deficient in foodstuffs there were to be found regions with exportable surpluses of food. It is doubtful whether the estuary of the Rhine before the ninth century and the flourishing areas of Flanders and the Netherlands in later centuries could ever have fed themselves had not rich grain-growing areas existed at their very back-doors. In the early Middle Ages grain came down the Rhine from the rich agricultural areas served by the upper reaches of the river. In the later centuries some grain came from the agricultural areas bordering on German Rhineland (Gelder, Gulik and Cleves), but the bulk came from Northern France. The valleys of the Somme and the Seine were the granaries of Northern Europe. The agricultural surpluses of the lower Seine went mainly to the south, to feed Paris. But the wheat of the rich loam lands of Santerre, Vermandois and Cambresis, went not only by the Oise to Paris, but along the Scheldt to Flanders and along the Somme to Rouen and overseas. Amiens, Abbeville and St Valéry became the *foci* of grain trade between France and the Low Countries, and the trade continued till the very end of the fifteenth century. Throughout the earlier Middle Ages, but more especially in the thirteenth century, England was an exporter of foodstuffs, including grain. Later still, another and much more important source of grain appeared. As a result of German colonisation of the Slavonic lands beyond the Elbe vast new agricultural resources were opened up, and from the end of the thirteenth century onwards East German and Polish rye flowed to the West. By the beginning of the fourteenth century Baltic grain began to contribute to the Flemish food supplies, and by that time also it ousted English grain from the Scandinavian markets.²

Grain, however, was only one of the essential foodstuffs carried across the continent and the seas of Northern Europe. The history of European dairy farming and milk trade is a somewhat neglected topic of economic history, but the importance of butter and cheese as articles of international commerce is now beyond doubt. There were apparently several regions of specialised butter production whence butter was exported to other countries: Holland, Scandinavia, Southern Poland, and

¹ Quoted in J. E. Niermeyer, *De wording van onze volkshuishouding* (The Hague, 1946), 34.

² W. S. Unger, 'De Hollandsche graanhandel en graanhedelspolitiek in de middeleeuwen', *De Economist* (1916). Also Z. W. Sneller in *Bijdragen tot de Vaderlands. Gesch.* vi, 2 (1925).

to a smaller extent England. In historical records of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries butter appeared so suddenly as to suggest to some historians that there was a sudden change of diet among the inhabitants of Northern Europe as a result of which oil was displaced by butter. In England, however, the high-water mark of the dairying industry is in the earlier centuries – a time when the Earls of Lancaster pastured vast herds of cows on their *vacaries* in Lancashire and Yorkshire and when Ipswich, Boston and Lynn exported butter and cheese by the ton.

Even more important was fish, for the consumption of fish in the Middle Ages was high, and sea fisheries were many. Some fish was caught in and off all the estuaries of Europe and along its sea coasts. In the early Middle Ages the fishermen of Brittany and Normandy may even have brought in the flesh of whales and seals. But great international fishing grounds were relatively few. One such fishing ground was largely exploited by English fishermen: it was the herring fisheries off the coasts of Norfolk and South Lincolnshire. Its centres, and especially Yarmouth and its fishing suburb of Gorleston, became famous as the home of England's herring, though it is doubtful whether the red herring of Yarmouth, so important in the food supplies of England, ever figured prominently in international commerce. More international was the Scandinavian fishing industry, that of the white herring and the stock-fish. From Norway the art of 'white' curing or salting spread to other countries, and it was very largely from Iceland that the bulk of medieval supplies of stockfish came. Farther south, the estuary of the Rhine formed throughout the Middle Ages another centre of the fishing industry. In the sixth and seventh centuries much herring must have been fished by the Frisians in their estuary waters and exported from there all over North-western Europe. But throughout the greater part of the Middle Ages, and certainly from the thirteenth century onwards, by far the most important of the fishing grounds of Europe and also the busiest centre of the curing industry and of the herring trade were the Baltic fisheries of Skania off the south coast of what is now Sweden. They rose to prominence at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and as late as 1537 more than 90,000 tons were still salted there. By that time, however, the herring fisheries off the coasts of the Northern Netherlands, modern Holland, had risen to rival those of Skania as the main source of fish supplies.

It would not be difficult to catalogue a whole list of other staple food-stuffs which entered the international trade of North European countries. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries England exported bacon from her eastern counties, largely from Ipswich. Throughout the later Middle Ages vegetables, especially very large quantities of cabbages, garlic, onions and onion seed, regularly came from France and the Low

Countries, and apples – the pippins of Normandy – from Norman ports. Towards the close of the Middle Ages hops and beer began to come in from Holland and West Germany. Indeed so important had become the beer traffic that historians have sometimes ranked it among the primary causes of Holland's rise in the fifteenth century.

Nevertheless, with the exception of grain and fish, no other comestible product was more indispensable to medieval diet, or was carried in larger quantities than wine. Large quantities of wine were apparently drunk in Europe as well as in the wine-growing areas of France and Germany. In the eleventh-century *Colloquium of Alfric*, Alfric did not drink wine because he was not rich enough to buy it. Four centuries later, on the morrow of the battle of Agincourt, Henry V would not allow his soldiers to celebrate on the heavy wines of Champagne, for they had been brought up on ale and beer and were not used to strong wines. But men of all stations above the lowest drank it in large and, as far as England goes, increasing quantities.

The significance of wine in international trade was not only in the quantities in which it was drunk, but also in the conditions under which it came to be produced. In the course of centuries the commercial production of wine, once widespread over the face of Europe, gradually concentrated in regions of highly specialised viticulture. There had once been vineyards in what would now be regarded as most unpropitious parts of England and the Low Countries. In France itself wine of some repute was grown everywhere. But by degrees the wines of three or four areas – Poitou, Gascony, Burgundy (Auxerrois) and the Moselle – all of them seats of flourishing viticulture since the days of Rome, rose to dominate the international demand. In a thirteenth-century *fabliau* narrating the combat of wines an English priest is made to pass in review some thirty or forty regional vintages. Having excommunicated a dozen or so of unworthy wines he leaves the field of battle to the northern vintages of Argenteuil, Meulent, Auxerre, Soissons, Épernay, the various wines of Guyenne and Limousin, and above all, the wines of Angoulême, Saintes, Bordeaux and Poitou. The prize goes to what were undeniably the most highly valued of medieval wines, the sweet wines of Cyprus, and the troubadour himself shows a true gift of prophecy in preferring the white wines of Chablis and Beaune. But the wine most generally drunk 'all over England, among Bretons, Flemings, Normans, Scots, Irish, Norwegians and Danes' and bringing in return good sterling is the wine of La Rochelle.

Had the *fabliau* been written a century or so later, it would not only have excluded from the list a number of local vintages, but would also have placed La Rochelle as a source of sterling-earning wine in a second place after Gascony. By the beginning of the fourteenth century these

two regions had come to supply the bulk of wine entering into international trade. But whereas the products of Poitou and La Rochelle went mostly to other parts of France and to the Low Countries, the clarets of Gascony went mostly to England, forming a close and continuous link between the two countries.

As a result of the wine trade the two countries developed economic systems which were mutually supplementary. Wine was Gascony's chief product, and she was not self-supporting in either food or textiles, while England was one of Europe's chief importers of wine (she imported over four million gallons in 1415), and was also from time to time able to supply Gascony with grain – with her own in years of good harvests and with re-exported Baltic grain in other years.

Yet although the 'French' wines flowed between countries in quantities far greater than any other, the wine of other nations also contributed their quota. There was a regular flow of sweet wines from Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean to the countries of Northern Europe: the 'Malmsey', the 'vin muscadet', and a few others. Above all, there were the wines of the Rhine valley. They were one of the staple commodities of Frisian trade in the sixth and seventh centuries; they were also one of the principal commodities imported into this country by the merchants of Cologne when they began to come here in large numbers at the end of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. And it was Rhenish wine that German merchants sold in Scandinavia before they had large surpluses of Eastern grain to dispose of.

2

So much for trade in food. It was large and, being food, was indispensable, but both in value and in bulk it was rivalled by the trade in basic raw materials. Of these, one of the most important and certainly the bulkiest was timber. Timber resources were unevenly distributed over the face of Europe, and were all but lacking in the areas where the population was at its thickest: in Flanders, in the Netherlands, and eventually in Southern England. As a rule, timber was becoming scarcer as the countries of Western Europe were getting settled and as forest was giving place to fields and pastures. But even in those regions of Northern Europe which were still well wooded, as in parts of this country, hardwoods predominated, and 'tall timber' suitable for shipbuilding and for standard domestic structures had to be brought in by water. In this trade water transport was even more important than the ecology of native forests. Timber growing away from navigable rivers and seaports, such as the timber in the forests of the West and North Midlands of England, was often more difficult to transport to other places

within the country and much costlier than timber imported from abroad by sea.

Timber was therefore an important article of water-borne trade. In the earlier centuries, from the eleventh to the thirteenth, the chief exporters of timber were Scandinavia and the wooded regions of South Germany; but in the fourteenth century, with the opening of the Baltic, this trade, like the grain trade, changed in direction and volume. The vast coniferous forests of Eastern Europe including Russia, Poland and Livonia now became available, and from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards eastern timber shipped from the Baltic, and more especially from Danzig, all but ousted from the western markets the other types of 'white' timber. Pine, yew and fir of Baltic origin and occasionally some birch, both in logs and in sawn boards – 'wainscot' and *Klapholz* – became one of the main articles of Hanseatic imports into this country and also one of the chief magnets which drew English merchants to the Baltic regions. At one time in the fifteenth century hulls of boats and whole ships came to be imported from Prussia in lieu of shipbuilding material. Some wood shipped from Baltic ports may have come from countries even farther afield. The bowstaves which won the battles of Crécy and Agincourt probably came from the Carpathian mountains and were shipped to England through Hungary and Prussia.³

The forest resources of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia were not exploited for timber alone. Russia was by far the most important source of medieval pitch and tar, and pitch used in this country in the later Middle Ages was nearly all of Baltic origin, though a little came also from Bordeaux and Bayonne. From Russian and Polish woodlands also came potash, obtained by the burning of wood.

The industrial raw material *par excellence* was wool. The cloth industry was the first, and for a long time the only, medieval handicraft to grow into a *grande industrie*. It was also the first industrial occupation to transform whole parts of Europe into specialised manufacturing regions. In Southern Europe specialised industrial centres of this kind sprang up in Florence, and centres of cloth industry were also to be found in Champagne and the south of France. But it was mainly in Northern Europe, at its north-western corner, that an industrial society wholly based on the cloth industry came into existence.

Industrial societies, in the plural, would perhaps be a better term. Several contiguous regions of Northern Europe became successively industrialised as the Middle Ages drew to their close, and all this

³ Th. Hirsch, *Danzigs Handels- und Gewerbe geschichte unter der Herrschaft des deutschen Ordens* (Leipzig, 1858). For a comprehensive, though possibly exaggerated, survey of Norwegian timber exports, see A. Bugge, *Den Norske Traelasthandels Historie*, 1 (Skien, 1925).

industrial activity – ever shifting but never broken – grew up on imported wool. Some of the wool came from Central France, and the original prosperity of the Artois cloth industry was largely based on the wool of Auvergne and the Cévennes. But by far the most important centre of wool, a source which at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries overshadowed all others, was Britain. By the second half of the thirteenth century the average annual exports of wool from England averaged more than 30,000 sacks, or about seven million pounds. Some of it went to Italy, but most was worked into cloth in the North – in the Low Countries and later, to an ever-increasing extent, in England herself.

Cloth, thus made, was in itself a very valuable and by far the most important example of a ‘wholly manufactured’ export. In the seventh century we hear of English cloth exported to Carolingian Francia, and throughout that and subsequent centuries we find in the records stray references to traffic in Frisian cloth, which may have been cloth made in the Frisian lands and in their immediate vicinity or English cloth distributed on the continent by the Frisians. Various other regional varieties of cloth entered into the international trade of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. But from the end of the eleventh century onwards, Flemish cloth began to overshadow all other cloths of Europe, and by the end of the thirteenth century we find it exported to the remotest corners of the then known world. In the later centuries it became the chief commercial *quid pro quo* for the grain, furs and timber products which the Baltic countries yielded up to the West, and therefore one of the pillars of German strength in Novgorod, Riga and Reval. When in the late fourteenth century English and Dutch cloth began to appear in large quantities on the continent it naturally flowed in the wake of the Flemish exports, gradually replacing them in all their ancient channels. Like the Flemish cloths they were soon to be found all over the civilised world – in Hungary, Russia and the Asiatic East as well as in countries nearer home.

Compared to cloth, the other textiles, though worn by men of all ranks, were not of very great importance in the inter-regional trade of Northern Europe. Silks and other luxury fabrics of Byzantine, Italian and oriental origin came in from the South throughout the Middle Ages. More important were linen and flax of northern growth. The damp and cool flax-growing areas of Europe were as clearly defined as its sheep-farming regions. They were as a rule to be found on land ill-suited to the growing of good quality wool, just as the chalk uplands and the salt marshes of Europe, which carried the largest and the best flocks of sheep, were ill-suited to the cultivation of flax. Hence the broad geographic demarcation between the flax areas of the Low Countries, North-west France, Poland and Russia and the wool-growing areas of England, Central France and

Spain. Yet in some areas the two textiles were mutually competitive, if not mutually exclusive, and in no other country were they more so than in Flanders. Parts of the Low Countries were well suited to the growing of flax and in fact grew and worked it throughout the Middle Ages. From the end of the eleventh century, however, the making as well as the wearing of woollen cloth spread so rapidly that to an observer the change might well appear as a combat between flax and wool. In a rhymed pamphlet of the eleventh century an anonymous pamphleteer defined the problem as *conflictus ovis et linis*. In the end, linen became one of Flanders' secondary exports. Some linen goods were still imported from there into England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but by that time the bulk of linen imports came from other sources; mostly from Northern France and from regions of Central and Eastern Europe controlled by the German Hanse. From Brittany and Baltic regions came also most of the canvas for sails and much of the hemp for ropes and cordage.

Wool and flax, however, were not the sole raw materials needed for the manufacture of northern textiles. Other subsidiary clothmakers' materials entered into northern commerce, and chief among them were woad and madder, the two commonest dyes of the Middle Ages. Both were to some extent grown in Northern Europe. Some woad came from Italy and was in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries carried in Venetian galleys. A great deal of woad for English use came also from the region of Toulouse via Bordeaux. But before the fourteenth century Picardy was the chief northern home of the woad industry, and it was on woad that the economic prosperity of Amiens and Corby and the fame of their merchants were based. More exotic dyes especially the much valued and highly priced *granum*, came from Portugal, the still more precious ultramarine came from the East. Of the other materials used in the making of cloth, alum, black soap, mostly Spanish, and potash, mostly Eastern European, were the most important.

3

Potash, though a product of the Baltic timber industry and a raw material of the clothmakers, should perhaps be classified with the next important group of commodities in northern trade – the minerals. The basic mineral of modern times, coal, was worked in Northumberland throughout the Middle Ages – certainly in the thirteenth century – and was carried from there by sea to London and to the Low Countries. From the thirteenth century onwards coal was also mined in Hainault and, perhaps, Westphalia and elsewhere.

By far the most important of the mineral products was salt – one of the essential ingredients of medieval food, the indispensable preserver of

meat and the mainstay of the great fish-curing trades. Salt was both mined and obtained by evaporation from salt pans, and local centres of both kinds of salt industry were to be found all over Europe. The economic rise of Venice in the ninth century may well have begun with the development of local salt supplies. Farther north the salt deposits of the Eastern Alps, already exploited in prehistoric times, revived in the closing stages of the Middle Ages. In this country the salt deposits of Worcestershire were also worked throughout the Middle Ages. But for the purposes of North European trade the most important salt-producing areas were the Lower Saxon region of Lüneburg and, still more, the Bay of Bourgneuf on the Atlantic coast of France. The Lüneburg salt deposits were conveniently situated for export to the Baltic as well as to the Netherlands. But in the course of the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries Lüneburg deposits, like most other important salt industries of Europe, shrank in importance by comparison with those of Western France. The shallow waters and flooded areas between the mouth of the Gironde and the Isle of Oleron – mainly in the Bay of Bourgneuf – formed natural salt pans of great extent and remarkable productivity. They were worked from early times, but it was not until the later centuries of the Middle Ages that they began to attract buyers from all over the world. In the first half of the fifteenth century, when our documentary evidence about Bourgneuf becomes most abundant, we find it frequented by great salt fleets of all the northern nations. Hanseatic 'Bay fleets' sailed there several times a year, and Dutch and English ships and merchants also resorted there in large numbers. By that time Bay salt also entered northern politics as well as northern trade. The lawless and riotous life of this salt 'Klondyke' generated international conflicts and quarrels, and the safety of the 'Bay route' preoccupied the Hanseatics throughout the fifteenth century and gave rise to at least one war – that between England and the Hanse in the middle of the fifteenth century.⁴

Relatively less prominent in the annals of northern trade and in the records of its shipping were the exports and imports of metal. The mining of precious metals, especially of silver, was a great industry, and its products played a part in economic development of Europe so crucial that they should not perhaps be treated as mere items in a list of commodities. But bullion was not the only metal worked. Some ironstone was mined in most places, and some iron was smelted in almost every great country in the Middle Ages. But of important centres there were only three or four; one was Westphalia, others were in Saxony, in the Basque country in the Pyrenees, and above all in Sweden. It is doubtful whether there ever was a period since the twelfth century when the high-quality

⁴ A. Agats, *Der Hansische Baienhandel* (Heidelberg, 1904). About the importance of salt from Zeeland, see H. J. Smit in *Bijdragen etc.*, vi (1930).

iron of Swedish origin, the 'osmund' of medieval records, was not exported from that country to other parts of Northern Europe. We find it in the documents referring to Swedish trade in the twelfth century, in the records of Westphalian trade to Sweden in the thirteenth and fourteenth, in the English customs accounts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was the most highly priced and internationally the best known of medieval irons.

Of other metals and metal wares, copper, mostly of Swedish and Hungarian origin, and lead and tin, mostly of English and German origin, were distributed all over Northern and Western Europe by Hanseatic merchants. So were also other miscellaneous metal goods, mostly produced in the area of Liège, Dinant and Cologne, and pewter goods of English make – altogether a current of trade not very abundant in comparison with grain, wool or timber, yet sufficiently important to attract the attention of the makers of commercial treaties and of legislators.

This catalogue of goods entering the commerce of Northern Europe could be continued almost indefinitely. Miscellaneous commodities of European origin crossed and recrossed the frontiers of northern countries and passed its tolls. Bricks from the Low Countries, swords and helmets from Cologne, tapestries and painted images from Flanders, books from France and the Low Countries, amber 'paternosters' from Prussia, wax and honey from Russia, thread and lace from Cologne and Brabant, hawks from Bruges and Calais, feathers for pillows from all over Germany. But it is not from these commodities, whether luxuries or playthings, that the commerce of Northern Europe took its colour. Its essential feature was trade in bulk, its characteristic commodities were the necessities of life and industry, its economic function was to bind the peoples of Northern Europe by real economic ties – ties without which life in many places would have been difficult if not altogether impossible.

(2) *Quantities*

1

The catalogue of commodities cannot be complete, and as long as it is confined to the main branches of trade it cannot be even wholly representative. Above all, it cannot do full justice to the complexity of medieval commerce. The regions of Europe depended on each other's products or, to use the jargon of the economists, benefited from the geographical division of labour, to a far greater extent than a mere list of commodities would suggest. In spite of all the difficulties of long-distance trade the network of commercial exchanges had in the course of the Middle Ages

come to be woven into a tight and complicated mesh. That whole industrial societies, like those of Flanders and Italy and later also that of Holland, should have come into existence even though the essential raw materials, as well as food, had to be imported, is an instance familiar enough. Less familiar, but equally characteristic, is the example of the export of beer from North-western Germany and later from Holland where it was brewed from grain imported from abroad. But nothing illustrates better the complexity of multi-lateral exchanges than the various secondary currents of trade which crossed and recrossed the main lines of commercial traffic. In the same years in the fifteenth century we find England exporting grain through Chester and Bristol to Ireland; importing grain through the eastern ports from the Baltic; exporting red herring from Yarmouth (to Holland of all countries!) and importing white herring through every port; exporting malt and ale and importing beer; exporting faggots and stakes and importing every other kind of timber; exporting figures made of alabaster and importing saints carved in wood; importing wax and exporting tallow; exporting pewter and importing Dutch pottery. And although these subsidiary currents were all small, they went far to give the economic geography of Europe the shape it has borne ever since.

Eloquent as these facts are, they cannot provide a full substitute for the missing statistics. They might, however, be sufficient to demonstrate how wide was the range of needs which inhabitants of Northern Europe covered by purchases from outside, and they might even support the surmise that the volume of the trade must have been high. For bulky goods would not be worth exporting or importing except in bulk, and a regular trade in essentials over long distances presupposed exporters relying on regular and substantial deficiencies in the importing countries as well as importers relying on a regular and substantial flow of supplies from abroad.

Here and there this general argument can be illustrated by numbers drawn from an occasional *cache* of figures. Thus the English trade returns, which are more abundant than those of any other country – they will be discussed later – make it clear that in the first half of the fourteenth century the value of British exports was at times not less than £250,000, or the equivalent of about 1½ million quarters of wheat or 2½ million quarters of oats at prices prevailing in the last decade of the fourteenth century. The evidence of the Hanseatic *Pfundzoll* – a war tax on sea-borne imports – suggests that in the seventies of the fourteenth century the annual value of the taxable sea-borne trade of the principal Hanseatic ports for which evidence is available was in excess of three million Lübeck marks or about 600,000 of contemporary pounds sterling.⁵

⁵ The value of seaborne exports of the four Hanseatic ports listed by Stieda

Even more concrete, though not necessarily more precise or relevant, may be the few surviving figures of individual commodities imported and exported. We are told that the total amount of herring salted on the fishing grounds of Skania in a good year could be as high as 120,000 tuns and that some 24,000 tuns of salt were imported in a curing season. In some years at the beginning of the fifteenth century Dutch grain imports by the Somme route may have been as high as 230,000 quarters. At the beginning of the fourteenth century wine exports from Bordeaux reached 100,000 tuns (some 25 million gallons)⁶ per annum. In 1334 a few English merchants received royal licences to export to Bordeaux more than 50,000 quarters of grain. The English records show that in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries this country at times exported as much as 35,000–40,000 sacks, the equivalent of about 15 million lb of wool. In the good years of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this country exported more than 50,000 pieces of cloth of 28 yards per piece, and it is possible that at the height of their prosperity the Flemish cloth towns turned out a number of cloths at least three times as great.⁶

2

Similar estimates could be cited for a number of other places and other commodities, but however varied, they cannot and perhaps need not be turned into true measurements. The show of precision which they may impart to the history of trade is largely deceptive. Some of the figures are, to say the least, ambiguous; but even those which are not, have survived more or less in isolation and cannot be fitted into reliable estimates of total trade and still less into measurements of social income. It may be significant that in a fourteenth-century parliament it was confidently asserted that the wool of England represented half the total produce of the land; but what was the total produce of the land? It might also be important to know that the value of English exports in the thirteenth century was probably equivalent to the annual earnings of approximately 100,000 agricultural labourers. But even this figure, large as it is and close as it comes to a real measurement, does not mean very much unless related to the total size of English population or to the distribution of income between the various classes of the English people: a subject still shrouded in darkness.

The most that these figures can do is to build up in a cumulative and circumstantial fashion the general impression that the volume of medieval

approached 1.5 million marks in 1370. W. Stieda, *Revaler Zollbücher*, lvii ff. The other German figures in this and preceding paragraphs come from G. Lechner, *Die Hansische Pfundzollisten des Jahres 1368*, 57–8.

⁶ Below Table 4.3; also M. Gouron, *L'Amirauté de Gascogne*, 47.

trade was considerable; the least they can do is to make it unnecessary to disparage the part trade played in medieval life. No doubt, in comparison with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, medieval trade at its highest would appear very small. But why compare with the nineteenth century, and indeed why compare at all? For all we know, the record of international trade in the nineteenth century may well turn out to have been a mere aberration in the economic development of the world. It has been argued that in the course of that century factors of production – land, labour, capital – were distributed more unequally over the face of the globe than in any other period of world history. As a result, inter-regional trade may have been greater in relation to total income than it would have been had the movable resources and especially capital been more evenly spread. By the same argument the international flow of resources has been slowly reducing the relative importance of trade, even though it may have raised its total volume and value. But even if the argument with all its implications were not accepted, it would still remain true that in the nineteenth century foreign trade was so great that, by comparison, the trade of all other centuries, the seventeenth and eighteenth as well as the thirteenth, would appear insignificant. And if historians and economists insist on matching century against century, they would be less open to accusation of irrelevance if they compared the Middle Ages with the earlier centuries of the modern era, the sixteenth, the seventeenth, the eighteenth. Thus compared, medieval trade of European countries would appear (and the argument is one of appearances and not of measurements) both smaller and greater than that of, say, the seventeenth century: smaller in the fifteenth century, greater in the thirteenth.

All such comparisons, however, are highly questionable. Not only must the magnitudes of commercial exchanges always be matters of vague surmise, but they must remain mutually incomparable even if they were capable of exact estimate. From this point of view more relevant than any attempt at a measurement of foreign trade are the simple historical facts indicating the place of trade in medieval life – the existence of specialised economies, the number and relative wealth of towns, the attention paid by kings and parliaments to trade and navigation, the readiness to engage in political and military conflicts on behalf of trade. The geographical and political implications of medieval trade will be discussed separately, but they must also be borne in mind in considering the problem of quantity. Did not the wool trade supply a link between Flanders and this country stronger than political, dynastic or cultural ties with France? Did not Gascon wine trade to England forge a link of political loyalty stronger than affinities of race, language and distance? In the twelfth century interruption in English imports could produce famine in Western

Norway. In the early fourteenth century disturbances in Northern France could produce famine in the Low Countries. In the fourteenth century conflicts with England resulted in mass unemployment all over the Low Countries. And in the fifteenth century the seizure of the salt fleet homeward bound from the Bay of Bourgneuf could produce a major political crisis all over Northern Europe.

The economic interdependence of distant regions and the essential character of certain branches of trade may appear out of scale with the small quantities of goods in fact exchanged. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Thomas Barnaby, an enthusiastic sponsor of the coal trade, could argue that 'the thing that France can live no more without than the fish without water; that is to say the Newcastle coals, without which they can neither make steel work nor metal work nor wire work nor goldsmith work nor guns nor no manner of things that passes the fire'. In the Middle Ages coal exports were probably smaller than in the sixteenth century. The French were as yet rare visitors to the coal wharves of Newcastle: their calls there did not become at all frequent until about 1500. And before the advent of the French, the Flemings and the Zealanders did not apparently take out of this country more than about 10,000 tons in a good year. Yet, even then, coal was, as in the nineteenth century, a bulky return cargo without which the voyages might not have paid and would not have been undertaken.

It is therefore not surprising that in time of war some countries appeared to be even more vulnerable to blockade than in more recent times. The readiness with which embargoes and economic boycotts were used as political weapons is in itself evidence of the store men laid by foreign trade: indeed, of foreign trade in its most specialised manifestations.

(3) *Impediments and facilities*

1

The scope of medieval trade is all the more remarkable for the various obstacles which beset the merchant. It is perhaps true that medieval commerce could not have functioned as it did, had the obstacles in its way been quite as formidable as their history might suggest. Yet formidable they doubtless were, and none more so than the innumerable payments on the frontiers, along the rivers and roads, on town markets and in sea ports: payments which must have burdened commerce nearly as much as similar payments were to burden the trade of France on the eve of Colbert's and Calonne's reforms, or the trade of Germany on the eve of Napoleon's conquest.

England was perhaps the largest area of Northern Europe in which trade was free from any but small tolls. If tolls were paid at all, they were usually in the nature of a *pontage* or a *viage*. Like the turnpike tolls of a later age they were levied to defray the cost of constructing or of maintaining a road or a bridge. As a rule, the king's government seldom granted the right to impose a toll except in exchange for a true equivalent in road service; and grants were frequently preceded or followed by inquisitions into the revenue of tolls and their employments.

By comparison with these service tolls, or 'tolls-thorough' as they were known to a later age, the 'tolls-traverse' – payments based on ancient right and functioning as a customary source of revenue irrespective of the road service rendered – were not many. They were remarkably few in comparison with similar tolls in medieval and post-medieval France and Germany. There, at the best of times, no major trade route was entirely duty free. Even the much frequented international land routes from Flanders to France in the thirteenth century had to pass numerous toll stations, of which several, those of Bapaume on the French border and those of Péronne, Nelse, Compiègne, and Crépy-en-Valois on the roads of Northern France, were more or less inescapable. There were also provincial tolls all over the internal roads beyond Paris, and there were payments at the frontier stations on the south and the east leading to the upper Rhine and the main Alpine passes. Above all, there were innumerable tolls on the Loire, the Somme, the Oise, the Rhône and the Garonne. The allegation that towards the end of the fourteenth century there were 130 toll stations along the Loire is probably far-fetched. But it is known that the tolls on the Loire, such as there were, grew as much in the following 25 or 30 years as they had grown in the preceding fifty. The Garonne and the Rhône were no freer than the Loire, and even on the Seine the toll charges on grain shipped in the late fifteenth century over a distance of 200 miles equalled more than half of its selling price.

The German picture was less uniform, for the country contained the relatively free arteries, like the great Hanseatic routes to the East, as well as the much taxed and restricted roads which connected the route with the interior. The surviving lists of tolls along the main German rivers may exaggerate the actual weight of impositions, but however much discounted, they make formidable reading. At the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there were said to have been more than 30 toll stations along the Weser and at least 35 along the Elbe. In the middle of the thirteenth century there were more than fourscore tolls along the Austrian stretch of the upper Danube and a score of tolls on the river Main. But the most advertised, the most bitterly resented and, from the point of view of trade, the most damaging, were the tolls on the Rhine.

According to a recent account there were about 19 toll stations along the Rhine at the end of the twelfth century, about 35 or more at the end of the thirteenth century, nearly 50 at the end of the fourteenth, and more than 60 at the end of the fifteenth century; mostly belonging to the great ecclesiastical princes of Western Germany. Writing in the middle of the thirteenth century, an English chronicler, Thomas Wykes, could find no other way of describing the system on the Rhine than 'the raving madness of the Teutons' (*furiosa Teutonicorum insania*).⁷

The total weight of the internal tolls was thus heavy and growing and may in part account for the gradual clogging of internal trade in the closing centuries of the Middle Ages. At the same time it is important not to misunderstand their incidence and their effect on commerce. The system as a whole may have been sufficiently exorbitant and sufficiently anarchical to impose here and there a weight of charges greater than the traffic could bear. Yet the yield of the main toll stations on the Rhine, the Main, and the Elbe remained to the end sufficiently valuable to justify their owners, and especially the great ecclesiastical princes, in fighting for their retention to the bitter end. The presumption, therefore, is that, generally speaking, they did not choke trade altogether. Extortionate as were the lords of the Rhine tolls, the trade of certain towns, and Cologne in the first instance, remained relatively free over long stretches of the river. And although in the later Middle Ages grain from upper Germany was eventually forced out of the river and took to the land route, timber could still be floated downstream to Holland. The same is broadly true of the Elbe, for the merchants of the Wendish towns never ceased to use the river for the bulkier goods originating beyond Magdeburg and for shipments of fish and salt up the river.

The general impression is that the main weight of the toll taxes fell upon local traffic, thereby reinforcing the particularism and self-sufficiency of local economies. Their chief effect on long-distance trade was to raise local prices for imports and to reduce local prices of exportable surpluses. This in turn may have reduced production for exports and narrowed down the markets for imports. But how great the reduction in fact was in different fields of trade will not be known until local prices have been studied in greater detail than has so far proved possible. The general impression is that among the factors, which at times held back the output of industry and agriculture, high tolls *en route* to distant markets were of relatively little importance. The ability of medieval agriculture to yield surpluses for export, or its failure to do so, depended much less on differences in costs of distribution (including tolls) than on variations of climate, of soil, of seasons, and above all, of social structure. The same argument may not apply to products of industry and mining.

⁷ *Annales Monastici* (Rolls Series), iv, 222.

The supply of most industrial products was greatly affected by costs, and the demand for textiles, metal articles and luxuries was apparently quite elastic. Everything that helped to raise their final costs was therefore bound to restrict the volume of production and sales. But for reasons to be expounded later, long-distance trade was not as a rule greatly affected by local taxes, from some of which it was exempted and most of which it could avoid.

From the point of view of inter-regional and international trade, more effective because more unavoidable, were the national or princely taxes at the frontiers or the great international toll-stations, like those of Bapaume. But in the nature of things these taxes were not as a rule so high as to be crippling. Among the highest was the English export duty on wool in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The taxes, i.e. customs and subsidy, rose to, and at times exceeded £2 to £2 13*s* 4*d* per sack, to which about 1*s* should perhaps be added for various local dues in English ports and 6*s* 8*d* for customs charged in Calais and sometimes levied as a special excise on wool shipped to Italy. The total customs payments thus computed exceeded 20 per cent of the value of good quality wool in Calais. The tax in the end penalised British wool exports and greatly stimulated production of cloth at home, but it never stopped the wool exports altogether; and had it threatened to do so it would almost certainly have been moderated. Tax on cloth exports at a rate which varied from 1*s* to 2*s* 9*d* or from about 1.5 to 4 per cent *ad valorem* was not much higher than stamp duties and registration fees were to be in the free-trade decades of the nineteenth century. Miscellaneous imports paid a tax of 3*d* in the pound, to which frequently the poundage of 1*s* in the pound was added. The additional duties levied on imports and exports were on the whole very small. Local dues such as 'anchorage' on boats or tolls on merchandise brought into ports varied from place to place and, on the whole, fell less heavily on distant trade than it might appear from the toll lists. In the Cinque Ports in the thirteenth century the tolls on wine, their main imports, varied from 2*d* to 4*d* per cask. The charges in Southampton averaged about 2*d* per pound worth of merchandise; in Winchester they were at the rate of 1*d* per cwt of wool. But in all these ports most merchants and merchandise coming from other English towns were exempt from local tolls by royal charter or else paid reduced tolls by inter-urban agreements. In a port like Yarmouth where remission was not so general, local dues might vary from about 2*d* per cloth to 4*d* per pipe of wine or a last of herring: by no means an exorbitant charge. No doubt in a number of foreign ports, where local taxation was employed as a means of enforcing the monopoly of the residents, the taxes could at times be much higher than they were in English ports. The various dues which were levied on strangers along the roads

leading from the vineyards to the port of Bordeaux were sufficiently high to deter them from buying wine directly from the growers. But customs in Bordeaux itself were not such as to impede the flow of wine exports.

2

There was indeed every reason why most taxes and tolls actually borne by long-distance trade should not have been as heavy as those which weighed on local trade. Where princely authorities were so many and so ill-coordinated, as on the Rhine, the total weight of dues might in fact pass the limit of what the international traffic would bear. Yet even at times and in places where this limit was passed, trade was merely forced into alternative routes.

For alternative routes there always were. In considering the much misunderstood history of medieval trade routes, it is important to remember that what made a route was not the physical attributes of a road – a stretch of tarmac or an immovable railway track – but a combination of conveniences, mostly of political and social character: residential and trading facilities *en route*, guarantees of safety and security, and above all, comparative freedom from imposts and taxes. Geographical and physical conditions were of course essential; mountains could only be crossed by passes, rivers by fords and bridgeable places. In general the medieval carrier stuck as long as he could to navigable rivers and to the greater ancient highways, some of which were Roman in origin and construction, and most of which contained sections made and maintained by the work of men. But within limits set by geography, the man-made conveniences – even such conveniences as bridges – could be duplicated and multiplied, and their sites could be shifted. In a famous capitulary Charlemagne had to lay down that if the twelve bridges over the Seine were to be reconstructed they should be placed *ubi antiquitus fuerant* and not moved to new sites. The same motif recurs more than once in the history of European bridges, as in the clause of the Magna Carta providing that no man should be distrained to work on bridges on sites where they had not been *ab antiquo*. When in the later judicial proceedings we find the parties pleading that the bridges in question still were in *locis quibus esse consueverant tempore Ioannis regis* the main object was to prove that the bridges still had to be maintained, but the presumption was that the permanence of a bridge site could not be taken for granted.

What is true of bridges is even truer of the social and institutional components of a trade route. These could be combined and re-combined into linked chains stretching across the face of Europe in double, treble,

and multiple strands. Thus between England and Flanders on the one hand and the Mediterranean on the other there were during the Middle Ages at least a dozen of geographically feasible lines of communication from which merchants could take their choice. There was, in the first place, the major alternative of land routes and sea routes. The latter did not become important until the closing of the Champagne routes by the action of the French kings in the late thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries; but eventually they rose to great prominence. In the last hundred years of the Middle Ages the bulk of English wool exports to Italy went that way, and whereas in the early fourteenth century the Genoese wool importers paid toll on wool in Milan, in the fifteenth century the merchants of Milan paid toll on their wool in Genoa. Among land routes, the Italians and the other merchants trading to the south rang the changes over a wide scale of trade routes across Flanders and France. There were in the first place the main lines of the Flemish rivers, and there were routes which were wholly or largely land-bound. In the thirteenth century, in addition to a number of secondary routes, there were two main arteries – that of Arras and that of Douai – which crossed Flanders to the south; and there were also at least several routes from Brabant to France which grew in importance in the later Middle Ages; a network of routes across Northern France, most of them converging on Compiègne and Troyes, and spreading out from there to Paris or to Saulieu, Dijon and the other places *en route* for the south-east. Marc Bloch has drawn attention to the several routes between Paris and Orléans, but a cursory study of French internal trade would reveal the several variants forming the routes between Paris and Brest, Paris and Lille, Paris and Rouen, Paris and La Rochelle, some following the main rivers of France, others mainly land routes.⁸

The same variety of routes traversed the continent from the west to the east. The time when the *Hellweg*, which bisected Northern Germany from Dortmund in Westphalia to Magdeburg or Bardowiek on the Elbe, was the sole line of communication to the Slavonic East passed away (if such time ever was) with the twelfth century. In the thirteenth and later centuries there were at least four transcontinental routes between Bruges and the Baltic: the sea route by the Sound, the two older land routes via Lübeck and via Münster and Stettin, and eventually the new southern route via Frankfurt-am-Oder. Historians have uncovered at least six main routes between the German ports on the Baltic and South-east Europe; two in a northerly direction: one by Gnesen and Posen and the other by Kalisz and Breslau; four in the south: by Sando-

⁸ H. Laurent, *La Draperie des Pays-Bas en France*, 48 ff., 246–53; Armand Derouy in *Revue du Nord* (1939), 40 ff.; F. Imbertin in *Les Annales* (1939); and M. Bloch's postscript, *ibid.* 416.

mir, by Cracow, by Lwow, and by Opozno; and a network of other routes to and beyond Bohemia, round and into Hungary.⁹

The feasible lines of transcontinental traffic, whether complementary or competitive, were so many as to defeat the attempts of many a hopeful beginner at an exhaustive list or a comprehensive map. In this maze trade could be relied upon to pick its way and to shift when necessary. The history of the embargoes and staple laws imposed during the Middle Ages is one continuous record of old routes abandoned and new routes opened up. If some arteries of trade were closed by excessive imposts and restrictions (as the Champagne route across France was closed by the vexatious policy of the French Crown), others could be opened up by free-trade treaties negotiated between the interested parties. The early development of Brabant in the thirteenth century is generally ascribed to the liberal commercial policy of the far-seeing Counts of Brabant; the use of the eastern artery from Brabant via Lorraine in the late Middle Ages was made possible by 'free-trade' treaties which extended in an unbroken series from the fifties of the fourteenth century to the sixties of the fifteenth, and above all to the agreements between the merchants of Milan and Rudolf of Hapsburg for the remission of tolls and duties along the route which led from Bâle to Brabant. The Venetian merchants for a time developed the Bavarian route to the Alps, through Nuremberg, as an alternative to the French route, and there too the way was 'made' by agreements with princes for remission of dues and for greater safety of traffic.

3

The freedom of long-distance traffic was thus in essence a freedom of choice between routes. It was therefore imperfect and unstable and, from every point of view, inferior to the great liberty which European trade was to enjoy in periods as truly free as the honeymoon decades of the Victorian *laissez-passer*. For not only were routes newly chosen sometimes more expensive than the routes which had to be abandoned, but the whole system of communications suffered from lack of permanence and stability. In addition it was often insecure. Political conditions on which it depended changed frequently; princely whims and aims were often unaccountable; and above all wars were apt to break out at all times. And the crippling effect of war on trade must not be underestimated. Here and there war demands might inject a stimulating dose of inflationary expenditure into certain branches of trade; but on the whole

⁹ Th. Hirsch, *Danzig's Handels- und Gewerbgeschichte*, 178–80 and *passim*. G. Köster in *Forschungen zu Brandenburgischen u. Preussischen Gesch.* XLVIII (1936), 120 ff.

war meant taxation, forced loans, monetary disturbance and physical hazards. Contrary to all the current notions, medieval conflicts could approach very closely the recent models of total war, for medieval princes did not as a rule hesitate to sacrifice their long-term economic prospects to the strategic or fiscal necessities of war. It was not so much the mere fact of annexation by France as the exposure to the demands of Philip le Bel's war strategy and war finance that ruined the cloth industry of Artois, the transit trade of France and the prosperity of the fairs of Champagne. It was Edward III's war finance that brought havoc into the English wool-growing and wool trade and into the Italian investment in this country. It was the Hanseatic war policy and its accidents that all but ruined in the fifteenth century the German position in Eastern Flanders.

Above all, in time of war and within the range of its operations, pillage and piracy reigned. Piracy and robbery along roads and rivers could at times develop into a major disaster, and it is therefore no wonder that it has now become one of the major themes of medieval history. The records are full of the complaints, petitions and counter-petitions arising from the seizure of ships and goods on the high seas, and it is doubtful whether there was any major act of piracy which remained unrecorded in the surviving medieval evidence. It is therefore not surprising that in modern accounts of medieval trade piracy figures very conspicuously.

It may even be that piracy has received more attention than it deserves. For if on some continental land routes ambushes and attacks on convoys were endemic, piracy on the high seas was not. Generally speaking it was much less a permanent feature of the medieval scene than an accident of war. In some parts of Europe, on the south-west coast of England, on the west coast of Brittany, and along the creeks of Normandy, and no doubt elsewhere, there was to be found a sea-faring population who at all times engaged in occasional piracy. But most of the piratical acts in medieval records were committed not by professional pirates practising their occupation in all seasons, but by merchants who turned pirate and sometimes acted as privateers under official letters of mark. They either were pressed into service by their princes or turned to privateering while trade was at a standstill, or were trying to recoup themselves for acts of piracy they or their compatriots had suffered at the enemy's hands. Pirates and privateers preyed on the French and English shipping in the Channel every time war between France and England broke out; with the result that during the Hundred Years War, i.e. for nearly 150 years, the sea-borne trade between Brittany and Normandy on the one hand and the English south coast on the other was reduced to a small and fitful trickle. The North Sea was thrown into a chaos of universal and promiscuous privateering of this kind in the fifties and sixties of the

fifteenth century, and there were occasional outbursts of wholesale piracy in the disturbed periods in Anglo-Flemish relations in the early fourteenth century. But in the times when wars were not raging and in areas outside the range of privateering bases, the main channels of sea-borne trade were maintained more or less open.

On land the only true remedy was the enforcement of the king's peace. When and where the princes were strong enough to keep the roads safe – as in Flanders and Champagne in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, in Burgundy in the fifteenth century, in Prussia and Livonia in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries – merchant traffic flowed unmolested both in peace and in war, and the wealth of their countries grew at the expense of lands and routes not so blessed. In Germany the safety of the routes was sometimes enforced by the action of the towns. In the later Middle Ages the great Hanseatic routes to the East were almost wholly free from the dangers of piracy and robbery. Somewhat more restricted and on the whole less successful were the activities of the inter-urban police unions (*Landfriedensverbände*) of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which, with the occasional assistance of local princes, waged battle against the robber barons and their nests along the West German rivers.

On the high seas, however, the security of traffic was almost entirely the concern of the merchants and shippers themselves. Where shipments were valuable and regular and followed established sea lanes, they were as a rule made in convoy. The English wool was shipped in two great bi-annual convoys elaborately organised and controlled. The German and Dutch ships carrying salt from the Bay also as a rule sailed together, and so did often the English cloth boats sailing to the Baltic and the Prussian and Dutch boats plying between Danzig and the West. The system must have been effective, for very few of the great convoys were ever seized or disturbed. There was hardly any instance of the Venetian galleys being seized or plundered in northern waters on their annual visits to England and the Low Countries; not one of the great wool fleets which sailed from the main wool ports of England was ever seized; and of all the great Bay fleets, which regularly passed through the Narrow Seas on their way from the Atlantic coast to the Baltic, the first ever to be attacked was the great Bay fleet which was seized by Warwick in 1449. In short, piracy even more than the other disturbances of trade was a characteristic feature of the Middle Ages only in so far as the Middle Ages were specially prone to war. When and where peace prevailed trade flowed unhindered.

(4) *Transport*

1

In times of war and on routes which happened to be no more than ordinarily insecure the dangers of the routes must have added to the cost of trade. But in most years and especially in the years of peace they were by no means the main constituent of costs and could not be blamed for the high expenses of distribution. Commercial distribution was bound to be a costly service, but – tolls apart – the main element of cost was undoubtedly transport. It is not that transport was as primitive as it is sometimes represented, but like all transport of the pre-railway age it was wasteful of time, equipment and manpower.

On land routes goods were carried by horse and ox, but not necessarily by pack. Carrying services on medieval estates in this country and abroad consisted of both summage, i.e. carriage by horseback (indeed sometimes on human backs), and cartage; but English manorial accounts make it quite clear that, for bulky goods or for carriage over distances, carts and, where suitable, boats were used. On some stretches, e.g. across mountain passes, pack animals might be the only feasible means of transport, and the *vectuarii* of Genoa and Asti who ran the traffic across the Alps to Champagne at the end of the thirteenth century apparently employed horses for the purpose. But carts of varying sizes as a rule made up the bulk of medieval trade caravans. A thirteenth-century tariff of Péronne suggests that the purposes of local traffic were served by the *colliers* – the medieval coolies – who drew barrows and other small vehicles *ad collum*; and that some local traffic also went by pack-horses. But the bulk of the traffic was apparently borne by the *bronnette*, a cart on two wheels, which according to a text of 1327 was capable of carrying a fardel of thirteen cloths; and more still by *car* or the *carrette* on four wheels capable of carrying a cargo two or three times that of the *bronnette*.

The Péronne cart was not substantially different from the vehicle commonly used by peasants in the daily routine of their agriculture, and peasant carts therefore provided the main reserve of medieval transport. Wherever the accounts of local bulky traffic have survived, more especially of stone, brick, wood, or charcoal, we find it carried by horse and cart or ox and cart hired or requisitioned from nearby villages. Peasant carting was, however, in the nature of things seasonal and could not supply the needs of trade all the year round. It is therefore not surprising that regular traffic along the main lines of communication was in the hands of men who specialised in the business of transport and acted

as common carriers. English records have preserved evidence of common carriers traversing the country in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from Southampton to Winchester and Oxford, from the Cotswolds by road and river to London, from the midland counties to the Stourbridge Fair near Cambridge, from Westminster and Oxford to York and Newcastle-on-Tyne. In towns like London there was a recognised profession of 'brokers of carts' who acted as intermediaries between carters and owners of cargo. Sometimes whole rural areas specialised in carting services. In the middle of the fourteenth century the carriers who transported wool from Flanders to Bâle were mostly Alsatians and Saarois; the Brabant route to the South was used mainly by carters from Lorraine, and the overland routes from Toulouse to the Atlantic seaports mainly by the wagoners of Béarn.

2

Wheeled traffic could not have been so general had roads been as impassable as some of the roads which Arthur Young depicted in the eighteenth century. Judged by modern standards they were certainly bad beyond all comparison, and most local roads were no more than mud tracks barely usable in bad weather. To conclude, however, that every King's road 'made and maintained itself', or to argue, as so well-informed a historian as Marc Bloch did, that medieval roads in general were no more than *l'endroit où on passe*, barely differentiated from fields and field tracks, is perhaps too disparaging a generalisation.¹⁰ It may be true of the very early local example Bloch quotes: the village road which, in Flodoard's story, St Theodulph prevented from being ploughed up. On the other hand it could not possibly have applied to at least one local road in thirteenth-century Cheshire. For when the Cistercian abbey of Vale Royal in Cheshire was erecting its buildings, peasant carts transported stone from the quarry at Eddisbury about eight miles away, and made thousands of journeys, most carters managing to make two complete journeys – a distance of about 30 miles – per day for months at a time: and winter months at that.

The generalisation applies even less to main roads. Main roads artificially levelled and drained were not universal; roads with artificial metal or paved surfaces must have been very uncommon. Yet road approaches to a number of towns were frequently paved, and artificial road beds were also to be found in the open country. In origin they were mostly Roman, for in spite of all the shifts and changes in medieval routes,

¹⁰ C. T. Flower, *Public Works in Medieval Law*, II, xvi, Selden Soc. Publications, vol. XL for 1923.

Roman roads were used whenever possible. In England ancient Roman ways shared the medieval road system, and some main roads on a surviving fourteenth-century map were little different from what they had been ten centuries earlier. Nor were they in this respect much different from what they were to be four centuries later, and it is also doubtful whether their surfaces were much worse. Their foundations were that many centuries 'newer' than in the eighteenth century, and in addition the average medieval cart was probably lighter than the later wagon. It was seldom furnished with metal tyres, which the Elizabethan legislators found so destructive of road surfaces.¹¹

It is also probable that in England, parts of France and the Low Countries, surfaces and drainage were kept up to a standard well above that of a mere track. In most European countries the law of the road and the surveyance of roads were lax and rudimentary. Yet to assume, as Marc Bloch did, that roads were not subject to special legislation and control is not altogether true, even of France. For the legal notion of *strata publica* was part of the legal doctrine of thirteenth-century France, even if it may not have been greatly respected in practice. In this country, where documents have survived in greater abundance, they contain numerous indictments of people guilty of obstructing public roads, encroaching on them, or neglecting their duties of maintenance. And the indictments are evidence not only of the disrepair and neglect of roads but also of the legal and administrative provisions for their upkeep. In Common Law, as defined by Bracton and enforced by royal courts, the definition of the King's highway included not only military roads but all roads leading to ports and markets, and their destruction or obstruction was an offence against the King. In addition, law and custom charged landlords and vills with the maintenance of the *via communis* in good passable order.

That the law was not always enforced may be taken for granted; and at certain periods the gap between law and practice was bound to be wide. In England the work of maintenance was as a rule confined to the upkeep of drains and ditches, and a road was not deemed impassable except when flooded or barricaded. Moreover, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the system, linked as it was with feudal obligations and manorial dues, may have suffered from the commutation of services and from the general tendency on the part of the landlords to cut their capital investments. The Royal commissions of walls and dykes to some extent succeeded in checking the deterioration of bridges

¹¹ Lamprecht in his well-documented appendix on roads in Rhineland (*Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter*, II, 236 ff.) emphasised the continued use of Roman roads in the early Middle Ages; but his evidence does not support his argument that as time went on waterways replaced the Roman roads.

as well as of the main sea walls and dykes, but could not and were not expected to establish an effective national control over roads.

Yet, if in some respects daily practice fell short of legal ideal, in one or two respects the ideal was sometimes outstripped by practical achievement. Thus substantial towns paved their roads and levied a special pavage tax for the purpose. Roads across moors and fens often included causeways and reinforced beds which cost much to build and to maintain. The causeway by the Holland bridge near Boston was made up of thirty bridges; a road across Sedgemoor near Glastonbury was built of stone on a foundation of brushwood and alder sleepers held together by oak balks.

Some of the road works were carried out by princes. The French kings may have neglected to enforce the law of roads, but English thirteenth-century records have preserved evidence of work on roads and bridges undertaken by the Crown on its own initiative. In England the Crown in preparation for its military expeditions often undertook works on a very great scale, as in 1277 when Roger Mortimer was appointed to enlarge and widen roads and passes into Wales, or in 1283 when Royal Commissioners were appointed to widen the passes into Wales to a bow-shot in width. But not all road works were fruits of state initiative. Religious houses, municipalities, landlords and private benefactors, all made their contributions. The Holland causeway was built by a religious house; the Glastonbury causeway was in fact maintained by another religious house. The Stecknitz canal which in 1398 cut across the base of Jutland peninsula was a part of Lübeck's endeavour to support the land road in competition against the sea route by the Sound. Similarly, when in 1332 the town of Ghent busied itself with the repair of a distant stretch of road near Senlis in the neighbourhood of Paris, this was taken for what it was – an act of enlightened self-interest of a community dependent upon traffic across France. History has not preserved the names of the anonymous masons (some writers thought they might have been smiths) or donors who by 1237 opened up the pass of St Gotthard by constructing a road and a bridge across the gorges at Schöllenen, thus establishing a great new line of communication between Italy and Europe. But records of all European countries have preserved scores and hundreds of references of charitable gifts, by will and otherwise, for the building and improvement of communications: gifts which contributed as much as acts of municipal and princely governments to the main system of European communications.

In the main, private enterprise and private benefactions were primarily concerned with bridges and causeways: so much so as to suggest to one historian of public works the generalisation that, whereas the Romans were road-conscious but were quite prepared to cross rivers by fords, the men of the Middle Ages were essentially bridge-conscious. The

writer has cited the part bridges played in the ancient feudal obligation of *trinoda necessitas*, as well as the frequent references to pontage, a local tax levied for the upkeep of bridges.¹² But he could also have cited, if he wished, the English evidence of the building and repairs of bridges and the more stringent enforcement of legal obligations for the upkeep and maintenance of bridges. And if there is anything in this generalisation, it may well be connected with what is now known about Roman inefficiency in the use of draught animals. Where the Romans moved themselves and their goods on horseback, medieval men used carts.

3

The main alternative to wheeled traffic, however, was not the pack-horse but the barge and the boat. Here and there records have preserved curious instances of short sea routes for a time becoming unaccountably dear, but generally, in the Middle Ages as in modern times, carriage by water was much cheaper than by land; and this was one of the reasons why river traffic was able to bear the heavy tolls which weighed on it in so many countries. Traffic in heavy goods, such as timber and coal, over long distances was only possible where cheap waterways were available. Mineral coal was known as 'sea coal', not because it was necessarily mined by the sea but because it came to the south by river and by sea. Water transport explains also why in the south and east of England it was cheaper to import timber from the Baltic and Norway than from the North-west Midlands and why it paid to import building stone from Normandy for the erection of cathedrals and castles in southern England.

Sea transport was cheap in spite of the small size of the medieval boat and in spite of the costly methods of navigation. Medieval shipping was as a rule coastal. Whether because navigation was mainly by sounding, or whether because the high seas were thought dangerous, masters preferred to hug the coasts. Whenever possible they left the sea and sailed by internal waterways, and Holland owes much of its importance as a centre of entrepôt trade to the medieval seaman's liking for the shallow and sheltered waters of Dutch rivers and canals stretched along the east to west route. Farther east and west along the same route ships plied when possible in the narrow waters between the islands and within sight of dry land. As long as these methods prevailed, sea transport was bound to be relatively expensive, for it involved constant reloading at points where the coastwise route was interrupted by land masses. Lübeck and Hamburg were two such reloading places half-way from Bruges to Danzig. Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the two terminal points of the Dutch waterways, were two other ports serving the same function. There was also a great

¹² C. T. Flower, *op. cit.*, xix.

deal of reloading into lighters in sea ports which, like Bruges, happened to be situated in silted-up river estuaries. Cranes – and they were to be found in a number of large ports – lightened the labour, but they could not do away with it altogether.

Both the size of the boats and the methods of navigation may have improved as the Middle Ages drew to their close. The history of the shipbuilding industry in the Middle Ages has not yet been written, and the technical history of medieval ships, though better known, is still incomplete. But in so far as it is possible to generalise from the present state of knowledge, it appears that in the later Middle Ages more merchant ships were carvel-built than in earlier centuries and that clinker-built boats were being ousted from the main trade routes across the north seas. The Genoese and Spanish carrack, a swifter though not necessarily a larger vessel, did not as a rule go much farther east and north than the ports of Flanders and Southern England, but towards the end of the Middle Ages it dominated England's western approaches and the sea-borne trade to the Mediterranean. In addition, in the later Middle Ages once a year there came into Southampton and Bruges the great Venetian galleys. But the mainstay of the new merchant shipping in the northern seas were the slower and roomier boats of local origin. The typical ships of the English wool and wine fleets and of the Dutch and Hanseatic shipping in the North Sea and the Baltic were the cogs and hulks frequently displacing as much as 100 or 200 tons and sometimes approaching the 400 and 500 ton limit.

Whether as a result of these improvements or through the spreading use of the compass or through the growing knowledge of their element, the seamen of the later Middle Ages ventured more frequently than before into the open sea. Such voyages had, since times immemorial, been occasionally made by Irish, Scandinavian and English merchantmen trading to Iceland, but from the economic point of view the most important instance of navigation not wholly coastal was the *Umlandfahrt* – the route to the Baltic round the Sound which was probably opened by seamen of Zealand some time in the middle of the fourteenth century. The direct routes as well as the larger ships must have helped to reduce the freights, and it was on lower freights that the Dutch established their sea power in the course of the fifteenth century.

In addition there were the internal waterways. The classical country of river navigation was east of the Elbe and more especially east of the Oder, in Lithuania, Poland, Galicia. Among the Western Slavs there were whole societies – villages and regions – which lived on and by their broad and sluggish rivers. In the course of centuries the Lithuanian and Slavonic peasants and fishermen had developed a system of river navigation ideally adapted to the transportation of timber and other bulky cargoes. The

usual transport was by a local variant of a raft – the Slavonic *dubassy* – large timber platforms capable of carrying temporary huts and a great deal of miscellaneous cargo as well as large quantities of timber. Hence the importance of eastern river ports like Thorn, Kovno and Brest-Litovsk. Hence also the prominence which rivers and weirs occupied in the records of Eastern European trade and in the trade treaties between the Germans and the Slavonic princes.

It is doubtful whether rivers were equally important in the West, but here and there they formed essential links in transcontinental routes. The Seine was a great trade artery of Northern France and one of its main grain conduits, served and largely dominated by the rival companies of riparian traders of Paris and Rouen. The part which the Somme and the Oise played in the grain traffic has already been mentioned; the Scheldt and the Meuse never ceased to serve the needs of Flemish traffic. At times most of the great rivers of Europe, the Rhine, the Main, the Weser, the Elbe in Germany; the Loire, the Rhône, the Garonne in France, carried much of the heavy long-distance traffic. If they did not always do so and if, in spite of the greater economy of water carriage, traffic was at times apt to desert the great waterways, the fault lay with the owners of tolls who preyed upon them. It has already been shown how the general tendency was for the river tolls to multiply and how at times some rivers, mainly German, came near to being deserted by the merchant and the barge-man. Yet even in the later Middle Ages they were not deserted altogether. Traffic was reduced but never stopped.

In England rivers were freer than in most other parts of Europe and formed an organic part of the English route system. The Thames, the Lea, the Stour, the Wye, the Severn, the Avon, the Humber, the Trent, the Yorkshire Ouse, the Witham and other rivers were busy trade arteries reaching far into the interior. The Thames was navigated well into Oxfordshire, although in the fifteenth-century wool from the Cotswolds was as a rule loaded on barges no farther west than Henley. Nottingham was connected with the sea through the Trent and the Humber. In conjunction with the Ouse and the Fossdyke the Trent formed a chain of waterways from York to Boston. The Humber was also a great waterway serving places as far inland as York and Beverley. Other and smaller rivers with their estuaries were linked to the main rivers and marked the points at which England's inland ports sprang up in the course of the Middle Ages.

In England, in Flanders, in the northernmost reaches of the North German rivers the waterways were kept up more or less continually and more or less efficiently. We read of course of mills and fishing weirs obstructing the passage, of mudbanks allowed to form, but we also read of dredging operations, of repairs to banks and embankments, of prosecutions

for neglecting and obstructing the care of the waterways. Indeed in this country the very frequency of complaints shows what medieval men expected from their waterways and bears indirect witness to the use men made of the transport facilities they found.

4

Viewed in retrospect, medieval trade seems abundantly provided with means of communications – roads, sea lanes, rivers. Drawn on the map the network may indeed appear more imposing than it in fact was, for the final test of a transport system is not its density on the map but its effects on costs; and the costs were doubtless higher than the plethora of routes and quasi-routes might suggest to the uninstructed. What the average costs in fact were, no historian could now so much as guess, and it is doubtful whether the guess would be worth making even if it could be made. The most salient feature of trading costs in the Middle Ages was their infinite variety – a variety which would distort and falsify any attempt to strike an average for the system as a whole. Even a cursory survey of freights and charges would reveal striking contrasts in costs at one and the same time along routes of equal length and of similar physical character. In times unfavourable to commerce and on routes least favoured by governments, the charges could be very high and indeed prohibitive. But it would of course be a truism to insist that being prohibitive they must not be taken to represent the average costs of trade along the main lines of communication. For on routes which were so heavily taxed, or were so badly served by transport, or were so profoundly disturbed by war and piracy as to be unsuited to active trade, traders were not in fact active. They frequented instead those routes on which transport was relatively free and cheap. In theory this may have raised the costs of trade higher than they might have been had the merchants' choice of routes been unrestricted and had all the potential trade routes been in service; but in practice merchants engaged in the main branches of medieval trade could in most times find routes which were reasonably cheap or at least not so costly as to justify excessive 'traders' margins' or greatly to restrict the demand for commodities and their supply.

Thus the few surviving figures of costs of cartage in and around the Hanseatic towns suggest that in the second half of the fourteenth century it was sufficiently low to make it possible to divert the grain trade to land routes at a time when the river traffic was being choked up by tolls and taxes. The same conclusion also emerges from the English evidence which is sufficiently abundant to justify an impression more nearly statistical. The manorial rolls and other surviving accounts suggest that the existence of the peasant reserve of carts kept the level of cartage costs low. In

1278 a long and expensive transport operation on the King's behalf from Rhuddlan via Chester to Macclesfield, a distance of about 70 miles, was carried out an average cost of 6d per day per cart with two horses. The average charge elsewhere appeared to be from 3d to 4d per carthorse per day. Thorold Rogers computed that where the service was carried out over long distances by common carriers, who bore the legal responsibility of bailees of the goods and had to undertake loading and unloading, the charge worked out at about 3½d per ton per mile for the double journey. But the services of peasant carts were much cheaper. According to Thorold Rogers a peasant cart could be hired at any time of the Middle Ages at an average charge of 1d per ton per mile when the journey there and back was made in a day, and the charge did not appreciably rise even after the price revolution of the sixteenth century. For Norfolk a local historian has assembled the local carting charges in the fifteenth century, and these often worked out if anything lower than Thorold Rogers's penny. At these rates the cost of transporting goods over 50 miles would in the middle of the fourteenth century be rather less than 1.5 per cent of the value of the cargo if it were wool, and about 15 per cent if it were grain.

Sea transport was even cheaper, so long as it followed the well-established and regular sea lanes. The cost of shipping a tun of Gascon wine to Hull or Ireland at the end of the thirteenth century worked out at about 8s per tun or rather less than 10 per cent of its f.o.b. price in Bordeaux. It appears that in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the transport charges in relation to the f.o.b. prices were if anything lower than a century earlier. In the fifteenth century the transport costs of wool from London to Calais, including the costs of convoy, worked out at about 4s per sack or rather less than 2 per cent of its f.o.b. price in London or Dover. A weigh (400 lb) of coal cost about 2s to transport from Newcastle to the South, presumably to the Low Countries, whereas transport charges of a certain shipload of about 200 tons of miscellaneous, mostly valuable, cargo from Bergen-op-Zoom to London in the middle of the fifteenth century worked out at £20, or 2s per dead-weight ton.

These charges were not very high, and may largely explain why it was that, in such active and well-established branches of trade as English wool exports to the Low Countries or the Gascon wine exports to this country, the distributors' margins were not exceptionally high even if judged by modern standards. The surviving evidence of the wool contracts and the figures given in a fifteenth-century treatise, the *Nouembre of Weyghtes*, make it possible to estimate the average cost of handling wool on its way from the grower to the foreign buyer. The total cost of packing, transport from a midland county to London, custom and subsidy (the latter at the lower English rate), amounted to

about £2 13*s* 4*d* per sack. To this there has to be added the freight from London or another wool port to Calais, including the expenses of the convoy, which in the second half of the fifteenth century worked out at about 4*s* per sack (6*s* 8*d* per sarpler of rather less than two sacks). The average price which an English exporter was expected to pay for a sack of high quality wool in the Cotswolds in the second half of the century averaged about £8, so that the total expenses would amount to about 40 per cent of the inland price and would bring the total cost of a sack to a stapler in Calais to rather more than £11. The selling price of the fine Cotswold wool in Calais and Bruges fluctuated between £12 and £13, thus leaving a nominal profit of £1 to £2 per sack of fine wool. A certain amount of disguised profit was also made on various allowances and premiums for differences of weight, wastage, etc.¹³

It is also possible to estimate with some accuracy the cost of distribution of Gascon wine. We are told that the f.o.b. prices at Bordeaux in the second half of the fourteenth century established themselves somewhere in the neighbourhood of nine Bordeaux livres and were made up of 5 li. paid for grapes, for the making of wine and for brokerage, 1 li. 10 sous paid for transport to Bordeaux, and 2 li. 10 sous for Great Custom from which the merchants of Bordeaux and the privileged merchants were exempt. Sea transport to English ports of the south and east coast varied between 2 li. 10 sous and 5 li. per tun and about 1*s* 6*d* had to be paid for various dues in English ports. The costs in England therefore worked out somewhere in the neighbourhood of 14 livres or about £5, and the wholesale price for Gascon wine in London appeared to be not greatly in excess of that figure. Considering the length of the route and the many hands through which the wine had to pass on the way from the Gascon grower to the English vintner, the added charges were by no means out of proportion to the costs of transport and handling which were to prevail in the wine trade of later ages.¹⁴

A somewhat similar conclusion would probably emerge from the study of other 'regular' branches of northern commerce – Baltic timber, Skanian herring, Bay salt. In the first half of the fifteenth century the price of salt in Danzig immediately on arrival of the Bay fleet was barely twice that which, following Warwick's attack on the Bay fleet in 1449, the merchants claimed to be the cost of the salt at Bourgneuf. What is more, it competed in price with salt originating from Saxon and other nearby sources. Transport and expenses of handling were obviously not the main constituent of costs.

¹³ 'The Nouembre of Weyghtes', Brit. Mus. Cotton, Vespasian E. ix; E. Power and M. Postan, *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, 70–2.

¹⁴ R. Boutruche, *La Crise d'une société*, 151, n. 1; Francisque Michel, *Histoire du Commerce et de Navigation à Bordeaux*, 1, 123, 127.

On the other hand, the trades which did not happen to enjoy the advantages of relatively free and cheap lines of communication could at times be weighed down with vast expenses *en route*. What is more, even in favoured trades, like the English wool exports or the Gascon wine trade, war and commercial conflict sometimes obstructed the normal channels and added greatly to costs. Whereas in normal years, e.g. in the first two decades of the fifteenth century, the wholesale prices of Baltic timber in English ports were barely twice those in its Polish places of origin, in the years of 1437 and 1438, when trade between England and Danzig was opened after an interval of embargoes, prices were exceptionally low in Poland, very high in England, and the distributive costs and profits were inordinately high. Wainscoting then cost little more than 2 marks per hundred in Poland and 5 marks in Danzig and fetched 24 marks in Yarmouth; bowstaves which cost 14 marks per great hundred in Danzig were 51 marks in England; planks (*Klapholz*) about 10 marks in Danzig and 35 marks in England.¹⁵ Similarly, in the middle and second half of the fifteenth century, when direct relations between England and Gascony were broken by war and French occupation, and Gascon wine had to find its way through neutral countries and neutral hands, the cost of transport and of handling was so high as greatly to increase both the price in Bordeaux and the price in England and indeed to reduce the English wine trade to a mere shadow. Even in the English wool trade the costs were not elsewhere as low as they appeared to be along the route which led from the wool grower to the stapler in Calais. Thus, the Italian merchants and the Englishmen who sent wool to Italy in the fifteenth century must have found transport and other charges very high. To begin with, the Italian merchants in England had to pay what amounted to disguised bribes for licences to avoid the staple of Calais and they also had to pay higher export duty. The transport was also costlier. According to the record of expenses incurred in the shipment of the King's wool to Italy in the late seventies and early eighties of the fifteenth century, the freight of a sack carried by a galley to Venice amounted to £3 3*s* 4*d* – which was much less than the costs by the land routes – and the total cost of a sack of wool to the exporter came to well over £14. The wool then sold in Venice at about £20 per sack, and the profit of £5 to £6 per sack was much higher than that earned by staplers on their shorter and safer route.

In short, medieval communications, like other trading activities suffered much more from instability and uncertainty, political in origin, than from high costs of an inefficient transport service. Inefficient the service certainly was, wasteful of manpower and other resources; but so was also medieval industry and agriculture. Judged by modern stan-

¹⁵ Th. Hirsch, *Danzig's Handels- und Gewerbgeschichte*, viii.

dards the making and growing of goods for sale may well have been costlier than the carrying of the goods to the consumer. To put it more abstractly, the proportion of trading costs to total costs was probably less in the Middle Ages than it is now, which is merely another way of saying that far greater economies have resulted from industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than from the corresponding improvements in transport and distribution. If so, this may be one of the reasons why men in the Middle Ages found it not only necessary but also possible to trade and why commerce played the part it did in the economic life of the Middle Ages. And if it can be shown – as it appears probable – that local taxation, war and piracy became more disturbing and more difficult to circumvent as the Middle Ages drew to their close, this may also help to account for some of the ‘long-term’ trends of medieval trade. These trends will form the subject of the remaining sections of this chapter.

II. THE AGE OF EXPANSION

(1) *The origins*

1

The goods entering northern trade were as a rule products of local agriculture and industry and were often sold and bought in small quantities out of current production. From this point of view the great inter-regional currents differed in little but magnitude from the operations on the local markets. The staple commodities of international trade were handled in bulk and travelled over longer distances, but there was no hard and fast line between local and international trade. Both depended upon the surpluses of local production, rural and urban, and both grew with the general expansion of population and production.

It should therefore be possible to account for the ‘origin’ of northern trade without invoking any special cause not inherent in the general economic development of north-western countries themselves. Inter-regional trade, like the local trade from which it developed, was more or less endemic in the history of European society. Its use was familiar to prehistoric man, and there is therefore no reason why at the beginning of the Middle Ages men should have had to learn anew the lesson of its necessity and convenience. It has already been suggested that in the very choice of their *habitat* the tribal groups of Northern Europe appeared to assume the existence of inter-regional exchanges. For otherwise it would be very difficult to account for their deliberate migration into the water-logged plains of the Rhine littoral, the fiords and uplands of Norway and

the fenlands of Britain; or for the emergence at the very dawn of the Middle Ages in most European countries of specialised communities of sheepfarmers, fishermen, charcoal burners, saltmakers, and miners. It could of course be argued that in the early stages of medieval settlement men were able to wring a balanced supply of necessities from lands which eventually supported specialised economies. But some regions – fishing areas like the estuary of the Rhine, wool-growing areas of Northern England were fully specialised very early in the Middle Ages; and regional specialisation implies inter-regional exchange.

This does not, however, mean that specialised societies were the only ones to engage in trade. Some trade must have been essential even to agricultural areas capable of highly variegated cultivation and of a highly self-sufficient economy. For, however self-sufficient the large estates or the villages in the continental interior of North-western Europe in the Dark Ages, they were never entirely independent of commercial supplies from outside or unaffected by division of labour within. Few agricultural villages themselves produced their salt, their iron or all their textiles. And however self-sufficient a village, not all households in it were equally self-sufficient. From the earliest centuries of the Middle Ages there were to be found in the medieval villages and estates craftsmen – smiths, potters, and sometimes even carpenters and weavers. Among the peasant cultivators themselves there always existed small-holders, who had to work for wages, and substantial peasants, who had surpluses to dispose of. Rents, reckoned and often paid in money, were older than the oldest manorial documents; while wages were seldom paid wholly or entirely in kind. In order to pay rents the peasants had to sell their produce; and whenever wages were paid in money the wage-earners presumably spent them at the market. Indeed an unbiased student of medieval agriculture cannot avoid the conclusion that social existence in medieval villages would have been impossible without some market and some trade.

This conclusion is in the nature of things hypothetical, but it is sufficiently obvious to shift the onus of proof from those who assume some trade at all historical times to those who wish to deny its existence at any period of the historical, as distinct from the prehistorical, past.

2

In this sense medieval trade never ‘arose’; but it undoubtedly expanded and contracted. During the six or seven centuries of its documented history the quantities of goods entering European markets grew and declined; and so did the area in which they circulated. But whereas the territorial scope of medieval trade is on the whole easy to trace on the

medieval map, the changes in the volume of northern trade are very largely a matter of guess. So scanty is the quantitative evidence of medieval trade that it is not surprising to find historians still differing about the scale as well as the chronology of economic growth. As late as the eve of the first Great War they were still able to assume a trend which closely corresponded to the distribution of the evidence. The paucity of records of trade in the early Middle Ages was taken to signify the scarcity of the trade itself, while the wealth of evidence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was taken to mean that trade had grown in the intervening centuries. In dealing with individual regions historians may sometimes have been unable to fit them into the general curve, but when it came to the trade of Western Europe as a whole they invariably represented the course of commercial development as a line steadily rising from the Dark Ages, when trade virtually disappeared, to the sixteenth century when it flourished abundantly.

Most obvious of all appeared to be the starting point of the story. Historians could take it more or less for granted that the irruption of the barbarians meant a complete break with the economic civilisation of the Roman Empire. The trade of Rome died a violent death, and with its demise, European economy sank into a 'natural' condition innocent of all industry and exchanges. Under the late Merovingian kings the Germanic societies were supposed to have moved forward far enough to acquire some trade and the rudiments of a settled urban life, but the advance did not become really rapid until the so-called Carolingian Renaissance. Soon after, the trade may for a time have been held back by the Norman and Saracen invasions and by the feudal anarchy of the ninth and tenth centuries. By the eleventh century, however, the pressure at the frontiers eased, and economic development and commercial expansion could be resumed and continued without break till the age of the 'great discoveries'.

The line, thus drawn, is straight and continuous – too straight and continuous for the present generation of historians. It is no longer possible to believe in the continued expansion of trade throughout Europe in the closing centuries of the Middle Ages, and more will be said about this later. There are also reasons for being doubtful about the beginning of the story. The starting point of the old version has been assailed and, probably, destroyed by converging attacks from two co-belligerent, though not necessarily allied, historical schools: Dopsch's and Pirenne's. Alfons Dopsch and his followers, basing themselves on their own interpretation of the literary evidence (principally Tacitus) as well as on recent archaeological evidence (principally the excavations in the Roman *Limes*), have attacked both the notion of the primitive barbarism of the German invaders and that of the complete break with the material civilisation of Rome. Dopsch found no difficulty in showing that in the 150 years be-

tween Caesar and Tacitus the Germanic societies had acquired most of the attributes of a fully articulated economic civilisation, including the use of coinage and the dependence on trade. He also discounted the accounts of the total destruction wrought by the barbarians upon the material fabric of the Roman countries in which they settled. Urban life in the older Roman towns had declined but had not wholly disappeared. The Merovingian age, having thus inherited some of the commercial life of Rome, carried it on until it merged into the ascending movement of the Carolingian age.

But for this assumed continuity between the Carolingian and the Merovingian ages, Pirenne's view of Merovingian trade is not much different from Dopsch's. He also found it easy to show that the economic life of the Roman provinces in Western Europe continued uninterrupted, even if impoverished, throughout the Merovingian age. Commercial relations with the East persisted; Syrian merchants and their goods circulated throughout Europe; and Marseilles still remained Europe's doorway into the Mediterranean and the Levantine world. A break did occur in the end, but according to Pirenne it took place not at the outset of the Dark Ages, but in the Carolingian epoch. In the eighth and ninth centuries Saracen invasions and Muslim domination in the Mediterranean broke Europe's commercial links with the South, while in the North, economic life – including urban life in general – dwindled and declined under the stress of Viking raids and conquests.

The difference between the two points of view is thus largely focused on the exact role of the Carolingian age, and to that extent has not yet been fully resolved. The weight of the argument, however, appears to be against the theory of a violent break in the eighth and ninth centuries. The commercial links with the East and the traffic of costly luxuries may have suffered from the Muslim conquests and from the general insecurity of the times. But economic activity – settlement, colonisation, agricultural production – continued to expand; and in the history of European trade, economic activity within Europe mattered more than ease of communication with the outside world. For it has already been shown that northern trade was more dependent on the production of Northern Europe itself than it was on the conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The recurrent periods of disorder and anarchy during the Norman raids may have interfered with economic activities of every kind, but recent evidence from the north of France suggests that the ruin and devastation which the Norman invasions brought with them did not break the continuity of urban life in places like Arras. On the British side, the accumulating evidence points not only to the early development of trade across the Channel but to its continued functioning throughout the Dark Ages.

Yet, whatever is the final verdict on the Carolingian 'break', there can be little doubt about the continuity of development between the fourth and the seventh centuries. In Europe no violent break had intervened between the centuries officially Roman and those officially Barbaric, and there is equally little doubt that from the end of the tenth century onwards trade, like economic life in general, entered upon a period of rapid and general expansion.

(2) *The growth*

1

The course of medieval trade from the tenth century onwards can be traced both in its changing volume and in its expanding geography. From both points of view the trade grew until some time in the fourteenth century. The volumes of medieval production and of trade were on the increase, but quantitatively considered expansion was not its only significant feature. During this period northern economy was, so to speak, formed, for it was then that its separate regions, its trade routes and its commercial connections, composed themselves into a single trading area. In addition, throughout this period the trading area gradually spread eastwards and ended by absorbing the whole of Central and Eastern Europe.

The expanding volume of trade was a part of an economic process so general and so all-embracing that its story is easier to tell as an episode in the history of population and agriculture than as part of a narrower history of trade. For it was in agriculture and settlement that the signs of expansion were most obvious. In countries like England, where from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards manorial documents can be made to yield something in the nature of statistical evidence, the growth of output can be traced for at least a century. But here and there, as on the estates of the bishopric of Winchester in 1209, production at the beginning of the thirteenth century already stood so high that the historian cannot fail to discern behind the later figures the dim outlines of an earlier increase stretching far back into the eleventh century and beyond.

The impression is greatly reinforced by what can be learned about settlement and population all over North-western Europe in the eleventh, twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. England and the continent west of the Elbe were rapidly filling up. In England the comparison of the population data in the Domesday Book with that of the manorial surveys of the twelfth century and the early thirteenth century, and of the latter with the Hundred Rolls of 1279 and the later manorial documents (rough and ready as such comparisons are bound to be), will show agricultural hold-

ings multiplying manifold, and areas under cultivation growing apace. French evidence, mostly monastic, from Burgundy, Normandy and elsewhere in the tenth and eleventh centuries, German evidence from the Rhineland, Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Holstein; and, above all, the evidence from Flanders, tell the same story of growing population and expanding cultivation.

By the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the process had gone far enough for the surplus population to break out of the confines of what was now an old and relatively over-populated land and to spill over into new 'colonial' lands east of the Elbe. Here and there – as in Artois in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, Flanders in the late twelfth and thirteenth, and possibly in parts of Champagne at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth, and parts of westernmost Germany in the thirteenth – population was so abundant as to seek a solution to its economic problem in general industrialisation. It will be shown later that this period saw the rise of most of the great regional industries – that of cloth in Artois and Flanders, and probably Champagne; that of metal goods in Cologne, Liège and Dinant; that of iron and coal, lead and tin, in England, Hainault, Eastern France and South Germany. But even in those parts of Europe, which did not industrialise during this period, the towns were receiving great and ever-growing reinforcements from the surplus population of the countryside.

This was indeed the time when the whole of Western Europe became urbanised. Towns large and small sprang up all over the continent; most of them, whether old or new, grew fast throughout the period. In Flanders and in North Germany surviving topographical evidence, chiefly early maps, has enabled students to lay bare the main stages of urban expansion in the Middle Ages and to show how growing settlement added suburb to borough and repeatedly burst through successive girdles of urban fortifications. Elsewhere, and more especially in England and Central France, the evidence of urban growth is less direct, but is none the less convincing. In the rural records of the time, as well as in its literary sources, the town figures as the place of opportunity to which the villein might flee in search of freedom and wealth. That in most of the greater towns of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries opportunities were more or less unlimited is indirectly borne out by the prevailing freedom of immigration – a freedom which was not to be regulated and restricted until much later in the Middle Ages.

2

Growing production, both agricultural and industrial, and increasing population were bound to lead to greater trade and are sufficient to

account for its expanding volume. Other favourable developments, more purely commercial and more directly involved with the processes of trade, may also have made their contribution; and one of them – the influx of bullion – may have played an important and certainly a conspicuous part. Increasing supplies of precious metals and their expanding circulation, may at times have influenced the prices of commodities (and more about this will be said presently). Now and again they may also have influenced agricultural and industrial investment, and may thereby have given a further stimulus to both prices and production.

Recently, historians have laid special emphasis on the part which gold played as a means for the settlement of international accounts. It was Marc Bloch who first drew attention to the part which gold played in commercial exchanges between East and West, and it was he who first connected the main phases in the early history of international trade with the redistribution of gold in the world. Other students have supplemented Bloch's thesis and tried to show how dependent was the trade of the Roman Empire on Rome's ability to pay for eastern supplies in gold. In the last two centuries of the Empire supplies of gold dwindled away and Rome's purchasing power in the East declined; yet in the early centuries of the Merovingian era enough Roman gold was still available in the West to make it possible for the Frankish society to make some use of the as yet open channels of travel and commerce with Byzantium and the Levant. With the Muslim conquests, however, the world supplies of gold were radically redistributed. The Muslim conquerors acquired both the accumulated stocks of precious metals and the monopoly of supplies of newly mined gold. Starved of gold, European commerce with the East languished, and its *malaise* continued until the tenth century. It was not until the turn of the millennium that Muslim countries began to import slaves, metal goods, timber, and other commodities of European origin in quantities large enough to change the direction of gold movements. Eastern gold entered again into circulation, trade between West and East was resumed, and through it the whole economic life of Europe revived.¹⁶

This thesis, however questionable in detail, has been supported by a certain amount of evidence and frequently accepted as a working hypothesis. Yet, even if it were fully borne out by further researchers, it would still be insufficient to account for the evolution of northern trade. The commercial currents directly dependent upon supplies of gold were those which flowed to and from the Eastern Mediterranean. They doubtless

¹⁶ M. Bloch, in *Annales d'Hist. Econ. et Sociale* (1933), 4 ff. M. Lombard, *ibid.* (1947), 143 ff. In England the issue of 1343 is generally regarded as the first effective gold coinage in the Middle Ages, even though gold coins had been minted some hundred years earlier by Henry III.

touched economic life in the North at many points. Northern and Western Europe as a whole may now have enjoyed (if 'enjoyed' is the right term) an active balance of trade, with the result that gold was now coming into many a country producing raw materials. Italian florins and ducats and perhaps Byzantine and Arabian gold coins now augmented the local resources of currency – mostly silver – and gold coinage began to be minted. But more important than the Italian supplies of Levantine and Byzantine gold was the real wealth which growing commerce generated. Much of it found its way into the hands of merchants all over Europe and could now be invested in industry and trade. Its chief beneficiary was doubtless Italy and, more especially, its great commercial cities, but from there radiating circles of investment and prosperity reached the outlying countries of medieval Europe, and it is doubtful whether any part of the continent escaped their effects altogether.

Yet, the effects on the trade of Northern Europe could only be indirect. The opening of the Levant added relatively little to the demand for raw materials and manufactured commodities of European origin (metal goods being the chief exception). Slaves were the commodity which was most in demand in Islamic lands in the early Middle Ages and which, if we are to trust some recent studies, was mostly responsible for starting and maintaining the flow of gold from the East. But the traffic in slaves touched the economy of Northern Europe at very few points, if at all. In the Dark Ages, i.e. between the seventh and eleventh centuries, the trade was largely in the hands of Jews and Syrians who took their 'cargoes' across Russia, Poland and Western Germany to Spain and countries farther east. Here and there they may have formed commercial *nuclei* within Europe: we are told that Verdun was an entrepôt centre of the slave trade, and it is possible that merchants resident there took part in the traffic. But from the point of view of Western Europe generally, this was merely a transit trade skirting the outer fringes of its territory and leaving behind very little oriental gold. Later, from the eleventh century onwards, other commodities of European origin, such as cloth (and furs!), found their way east, and raw materials imported from the North went into the making of the Italian goods exported to the Levant. Yet the total quantities of continental goods thus exported were as yet barely sufficient to redress the entire balance of Europe's trade with the Muslim world and to support the commercial prosperity of the North.

Did the crusades make much difference? The idea that the crusades were a turning point in the history of European economy is one of the most cherished notions of economic history; and so also is the belief that having conquered the Holy Land the northern world proceeded to help itself to the wealth of the Levant. How true it is and whether true at all is a problem which more properly belongs to the history of Mediterranean

trade. The repercussions of the crusades must however be mentioned here, even if the mention can only be of the briefest and vaguest.

An economic history of the crusades has not yet been written, but until it has been written and the economic balance of the crusades has been struck, it will be difficult to say whether their consequence was to augment the flow of gold from Italy and the Levant to the continent of Europe, or on the contrary to drain the continent of its precious metals. Most probably the trickle of gold frequently changed direction, and at times contrary movements cancelled each other out. The occupation of the Holy Land may, to begin with, have brought in booty and ransom, and so must also have done the sack of Constantinople in 1204. On the other hand, ransom sometimes had to be paid and booty yielded. Similarly, crusading expeditions more often than not set up a drain on the western means of payment. The countries which sent them out financed them with levies and taxes; crusading nobles raised funds at home in many and various ways, but mostly by loans on which they could draw abroad. These methods of financing must have helped to mobilise the hoarded reserves of gold and silver, and thus indirectly to quicken the circulation and to influence prices and economic activity in general. Yet they must also have depleted the total supplies of gold in Northern Europe, since they sent precious metals moving away from continental Europe towards Italy and the Levant. Ecclesiastical taxation in support of the Latin kingdoms, the voyages to the Holy Lands, the military and religious activities of the Templars and the Hospitallers, must all have acted in the same fashion and added to the continental debit balance with Italy and the East.

This does not of course mean that the crusades did not stimulate the economic development of Europe, but the stimulus, such as it was, must have come from factors more general than the mere importation of bullion. If Northern Europe felt it at all, it must have received it in the course of ordinary trading activities of the Italian merchants and through their expanding commercial and financial operations. In this revival bullion played its part, but it did so not by virtue of its function in international accounts, but as a result of its internal circulation and investment. And here again the Levantine current was a mere tributary, and probably a small one, of a far more abundant flow. Although Italians brought into Champagne, Flanders and England a certain amount of gold, mainly of their own coining, the bullion most in circulation was not Levantine or Byzantine and not even predominantly Italian. What is more, it was not gold.

Throughout the Middle Ages, and more especially in their earlier centuries, the precious metal most commonly used in coinage and in everyday payments was silver. The coins of Northern Europe until the

second half of the thirteenth century were all silver, and continued to be predominantly silver until the end of the Middle Ages. The evidence of mints, such as the accounts of the royal mints of England and the surviving registers of urban mints and exchanges, makes it quite clear that silver formed the bulk both of existing stocks of money and of the new accretion of metal. Gold and gold coins were relatively more common in international dealings presumably because gold was more convenient to transport and also somewhat more stable in value. In addition gold coins had the advantage of being as yet few – mostly Italian – and therefore free from the curse of variety and heterogeneity which afflicted the silver currencies of Europe. For these and other reasons, in clearing accounts of Italian merchants at the Champagne fairs of the thirteenth century as well as in commercial dealings of Italian merchants in other parts of Northern Europe, payments were apt to be reckoned in gold coins. Similarly, royal debts to Italian bankers in England and France were frequently reckoned in ducats and florins. Yet there is no evidence that the Italian bankers in fact delivered equivalent sums in gold cash, and there is unmistakable evidence that loans reckoned in gold coins, such as the Frescobaldi loans to Edward I and the Bardi loans to Edward III, were often made and repaid in silver and in goods. And in international payments between merchants of other nationalities active in Northern Europe silver pounds and marks, English and Flemish, were most commonly used both as units of account and of payment. So even if it remains true that gold figured prominently in international payments it did not displace silver even there.

The bullion in circulation was thus predominantly silver, and it is very probable that the amount of silver circulating in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries increased. How large the increases were cannot be said with certainty, but it is obvious that the increases came from several sources. Some new silver doubtless originated from mines recently opened up. Although silver must have been mined in Europe throughout the Dark Ages, the main sources of European silver, in Hungary, in Saxony, in the Harz mountains and elsewhere, were not fully developed until the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. Mines, however, were not the only and may not even have been the chief source of additional silver, for even in the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages the volume of currency depended not only on the additions of newly mined metal but also on the uses of accumulated stocks of bullion. For it appears highly probable that the economic changes of the twelfth century set into motion a great deal of wealth previously immobilised in hoards, plate or ornaments. And that the bulk of the bullion thus ‘de-hoarded’ must have consisted of silver is clearly brought out by the evidence of wills and mint accounts.

So whether any came in through the early medieval contacts with the

Levant, or during the crusades, imported bullion could not be held responsible for the revival and growth of medieval trade. Some of the other monetary factors were more important, but even they were not and could not be decisive. Their influence on trade would normally be transmitted through changes in price levels; yet even changing prices had a limited effect.

3

The problem of prices is, in Italy at least, closely involved with that of monetary circulation. We know now that during the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages, i.e. before the thirteenth, some prices changed a great deal. From the very moment at which documentary references to them become at all frequent, i.e. from the late twelfth century in England, and from the middle of the thirteenth century abroad, until the first quarter of the fourteenth century, food prices appeared to move steadily upwards. The English prices alone have so far been assembled for the earlier period. The work of collection and tabulation is as yet far from complete, but Thorold Rogers and later Lord Beveridge's team of archivists and historians have been able to analyse their data in a manner which enables a statistical trend to be traced.

Expressed in percentages the prices of 1150 were about 30 per cent of those in the first quarter of the fourteenth century; in other words the price rise in the intervening period was about three-fold. The price rise did not, moreover, begin in 1150, and, as far as the scanty evidence suggests, it went beyond that date. In so far as the meagre data of South-western Germany collected by Lamprecht can be trusted, it suggests a progressive rise in prices from the eighth and ninth centuries to the tenth and eleventh, continued, though not so violently as in England, to the early thirteenth. Yet even Lamprecht's figures show a rise of at least 50 per cent between the second half of the twelfth century and the first half of the thirteenth.¹⁷ (Table 4.1.)

This was a veritable price revolution. Yet, in considering its economic effects, it is important not to argue by analogy with price revolutions of later centuries. For reasons which will have to be mentioned again more than once, the effect of price changes could not have been very general or widespread.

Agricultural output was bound to react to a secular rise in grain prices so steep and continuous, but its reactions may have differed from region to region. In the wine- and wool-growing areas of Europe, where the rural economy was one of cash crops, and even in certain areas pre-

¹⁷ K. Lamprecht, *Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter*, II, 512 ff.; esp. tables, etc., on pp. 612–13.

dominantly arable, such as parts of Western and Northern France and above all Southern England, estates continued to be run as large units producing mainly for the market, and even peasants marketed a considerable proportion of their output. And where the proportions to be sold were high, rising prices must have favoured and stimulated both output and sales. Indeed, the social historian of English agriculture cannot escape the conclusion that the high prices of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the commercial boom in agricultural produce were to some extent responsible for the continued survival of the large-scale units of agriculture.

TABLE 4.1 *English wheat prices, 1160–1939*¹⁸ (twenty years' means)

Period	Wheat price in shillings (per qr)	Wheat price in grains of silver (per qr)
1160–79	1.89	534
1180–99	2.60	744
1200–19	4.33	1082
1220–39	4.19	1047
1240–59	4.58	1144
1260–79	5.62	1404
1280–99	5.97	1491
1300–19	7.01	1734
1320–39	6.27	1547

To this extent the agricultural boom left its impression on European trade. As cultivation of cash crops expanded, larger quantities of agricultural products came on the markets; as rural wealth grew, opportunities for miscellaneous trade widened. Thus far the effect of prices is clear enough. What is not so clear is whether regions where the bulk of agricultural production was in the hands of peasants were equally affected. And it is not known how far industrial commodities, industrial raw materials and industrial regions were directly involved in the price changes. Historians do not even know how the prices of non-agricultural commodities moved, if they moved at all. Evidence is very scanty and difficult to interpret. Such as there is, suggests that prices for commodities like cloth and iron goods rose less steeply and less continuously than food prices. Prices for some commodities like coal and timber may even have fallen.

It is thus probable that price movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were not 'general' in the sense in which the term is sometimes employed to indicate more or less simultaneous and synchronous shifts

¹⁸ Cited by the courtesy of Lord Beveridge.

in the price levels in all the main groups of commodities. If so, the probability is that such changes as there were were not due to monetary causes. Not only the influx of foreign gold but even the far more important supplies of silver and the still more important changes in its employment and circulation, could not have been the prime movers in the great economic transformation of the period – a transformation of which the expansion of trade was merely a part.

There is no need, however, to end the discussion of prices on this agnostic note. For even if the price movements fail to establish bullion's responsibility for the commercial efflorescence of the age, they can still reveal the action of other and perhaps more effective causes. More especially, steep and continuous changes in food prices unaccompanied by similar changes in other prices make it more or less certain that the relative costs of agricultural production were rising, and this again indicates a growing pressure of population against land.

This is not the place to discuss general problems of medieval land and population; in so far as they are relevant to the history of trade they will be discussed again in a later section. Here it will suffice to note that all available evidence, especially for France and England, shows land rents, land prices, and entry fines rising on a scale fully consistent with the hypothesis of 'pressure of population'. In this way the discussion of prices merely brings the argument of this chapter to the point at which it digressed to gold and monetary causes. Trade grew because Europe expanded. The lands of continental Europe carried an ever-growing population; growing population, in its turn, meant that agricultural production increased, that industries developed and that whole regions became industrialised. And growing wealth of rural Europe and economic specialisation of its regions meant bigger and better trade.

(3) *The professional merchant*

1

Growth quantitatively considered was by no means the only important change in the history of medieval trade in its age of expansion. It was accompanied by other phenomena, less material, and more obviously related to the condition and behaviour of men.

One of them was the extension of professional trade. In general, the part which full-time merchants played in economic life, very insignificant to begin with, was becoming more important as time went on. Doubtless, some professional trade there must always have been. We are told of the Syrian and Jewish merchants visiting Gaul at the dawn of the Merovingian age, and probably forming in the predominantly rural societies of

Western Europe alien *nuclei* of resident merchants, not unlike the Jewish towns and townlets in the eastern states of nineteenth-century Europe. A travelling Jewish merchant of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries arriving in Western Europe from the East counted on finding there his coreligionists with whom he could trade, live and pray. When we are told by Gregory of Tours that, on his entering into Orléans, King Guntram was welcomed in Syrian, Latin and Hebrew, the presumption is that in the sixth century these were the native tongues of the merchants of Orléans.

Yet be it noted that merchants whose tongue was Latin were not altogether absent from the rudimentary communities of merchants. Evidence of indigenous merchants is scanty but is not altogether absent. We may know little about Philo, the merchant, whom Ausonius knew, or about Euphron of Bordeaux or about Eusebius of Paris, both mentioned by Gregory of Tours – their names like their age still appear to belong to Rome. But from the seventh century onwards evidence of merchants wholly indigenous becomes more frequent and more certain. In the seventh century King Dagobert founded the Fair of St Denis which Franks, Frisians and Saxons (Anglo-Saxons?) frequented; in the same century we hear of Frankish merchants travelling into the lands of the Slavs and Avars.

Some of the indigenous merchants were doubtless men of substance, like Christopher of Tours, who, we are told, speculated in the wine of Orléans, but in the main they must have been small fry, travelling hucksters of foreign wares. Their stock-in-trade must have consisted almost entirely of the small luxuries required on the medieval estates and villages: spices, silks, and other exotic fineries. For when it came to the buying and selling of agricultural commodities or of industrial articles locally produced, the services of the merchant were not always necessary. In medieval Europe, as in agricultural areas of our own day, the average producer was able to dispose of the petty surpluses of his household (eggs, cheese, hens, vegetables, milk, cattle and even grain) without the assistance of a professional trader. Similarly, wherever an industry happened to be organised in small handicraft units and goods were made in small quantities or to order, producers and consumers could deal with each other without the intervention of a trader. Not only the village smith and potter, but the urban butcher, baker and candlestick-maker themselves disposed of their produce. Even in the later centuries of the Middle Ages the distinction between craftsman and trader remained a very nebulous one, and men commonly traded with goods they themselves produced.

Merchantless trade, moreover, was not confined to transactions which were purely local. Manorial produce often travelled over long distances, and manorial trade in the early Middle Ages was sometimes in the hands

of manorial officers themselves. Some of the larger estates were sufficiently large, and the quantities of marketable commodities which they produced were sufficiently great, to enable them to do their own selling, though perhaps it would be rash to assume that they always did so. Historians have made great play of the monastic *negociatores* of the early Middle Ages, who were trade representatives of monastic houses selling their output in distant markets and sometimes making there the necessary purchases for their communities. The term *negociatores* must not however be taken too literally. Some of the *negociatores* were monks and manorial officials, but some may well have been professional merchants acting in the name of monastic houses and under their protection, just as the 'king's merchants' of the English kings of the thirteenth century traded under the protection of king's letters, but in a manner and on a scale wholly professional.

Much more important were certain other forms of non-professional or not wholly professional commerce, and most important of all was the commercial activity of certain semi-rural communities. There was nothing to prevent the members of the fishing and seafaring communities of Zealand and the Rhine estuary from venturing far away from their homeland in pursuit of markets and goods. The sea could not by itself provide for all their needs, but it enabled them to go anywhere they pleased in search of customers and supplies. Similarly, the fiords of Norway could neither feed nor occupy all the population throughout the year, and there was nothing to prevent the free Norse peasants from roaming the seas and visiting foreign lands. In this way a great deal of trade could be conducted all over Europe by men who were, so to speak, part-time merchants.

There was thus a great deal of non-professionalised commerce: rather more in the early Middle Ages than later. Indeed, what historians sometimes describe as the period where medieval trade 'arose' may merely refer to the time when conditions favouring part-time trade disappeared and a professional merchant class spread.

Some such unprofessional commerce could of course be found even in the later Middle Ages. Monastic communities acted as traders whenever and wherever they happened to derive their income from large and regular production of marketable commodities. The English wool-growing monasteries of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries not only sold their wool clip regularly to foreign exporters but often undertook to supply them with *collecta*, i.e. wool they themselves bought up from the surrounding countryside. We can also find English landlords dabbling in wool trade in every century of the Middle Ages; squire and squireen of Gascony taking a hand in wine trade, landlords on both sides of the English channel – in Devon as well as in Brittany – maintaining ships for

piracy and trade. Similarly, seafaring communities of Zealand, Holland, Normandy and Brittany continued to combine a little trade and occasional piracy with their main occupations of fishing and shipping.

Broadly speaking, however, conditions in the later centuries were less favourable to part-time commerce than they had been at the dawn of the Middle Ages. In a number of medieval towns production of some commodities soon outstripped the potentialities of the local market. Cloth of the principal cloth-making towns of Northern France and Flanders, metal goods of the towns of Western Germany – to name only two most obvious instances – came to be made in large quantities for the distant and unknown demand; and whenever this happened the petty producer could not market his output, and the services of a merchant intermediary became unavoidable.

Still more significant and less obvious were the similar developments in the countryside. Feudal society and feudal law soon made it impossible for the average members of a rural community to combine agriculture with trade, while the passing of the large-scale demesne economy removed the *raison d'être* for the manorial *negociatores*. In England it is possible to lay bare in the records of the wool trade the process whereby the social changes in wool-growing areas called forth a new merchant class. As the number of small sheep-farmers grew, so professional wool merchants interposed themselves between wool growers and wool exporters. The history of the grain merchant and fishmonger has not been investigated as fully as that of the wool merchant; but it seems more than probable that a similar connection was also to be found there.

2

The development of trade as a whole-time occupation played its part in the rise of towns. The story of the towns, their appearance and growth, does not belong to this chapter. Growth of towns has so far been mentioned as evidence of the general expansion of medieval economy, and need not be mentioned again except in so far as it was linked with the social transformation of trading activities. For so linked it doubtless was. Most historians are now agreed that the towns multiplied and grew in the two centuries following the tenth, for the simple reason that trade grew. Yet the logical and historical connection between growing trade and emerging towns is by no means an inevitable one. The Norsemen proved capable of engaging in active trade without towns; it is not at all certain that Dorstad and some of the other places mentioned as centres of Frisian trade in the seventh and eighth centuries were towns in the medieval and modern sense of the term and not merely clusters of fishing and seafaring settlements. At the very close of the Middle Ages most of

the English wool trade was in the hands of merchants living in the country, and the bulk of cloth industry was in the hands of men who combined spinning and weaving with some agricultural pursuits and lived in what still were essentially rural habitations.

Indeed as long as industry and trade could remain part-time occupations and be in the hands of men who were also peasants, fishermen, landlords or monks, there was no need and little opportunity for commercial and industrial towns. The reason why at the height of the Middle Ages towns became necessary and indeed inevitable was not merely that trade expanded, but also that conditions of feudal society made it difficult for the expanding trade to remain in the hands of the rural classes and to be combined with other rural pursuits. At a time when life and all its vocations had become wholly professional, when war and government had become the exclusive occupation of the landlord and the freeholder, and when agriculture had become the whole-time occupation of the semi-servile peasant, trade had to become equally professionalised. Gone were the times when farmers from Norwegian fiords, fishermen of Frisia, and monk procurators of monastic estates or privileged officials of the Carolingian estates were able to run all the trade there was. Trade was becoming to an ever-increasing degree the affair of whole-time merchants and artisans trading in a professional way.

The effect on towns was obvious. In order to be professional and to conduct trade all the year round merchants and artisans had to be exempt from the ties and liabilities which restricted the liberty of movement and freedom of contract of the lower orders of feudal society. Their houses and tenements with their shops had to be free from the obligations which burdened the rural tenures; their transactions had to be judged by a law better suited to dealings between merchant and merchant than were the feudal custumals and common law. Hence the essential function of the medieval towns, as non-feudal islands in feudal seas; and hence their appearance in large numbers in the eleventh century – the time when trade grew and feudal order matured. Hence also the crucial part which the charters of privilege (which were nothing else than guaranteed exemptions from feudal order) played in the origin and development of towns. Charters of this kind created boroughs out of villages, and cities out of castle suburbs; and charters of this kind punctuated the subsequent progress of urban communities on their way to full urban status. The rising town was thus essentially a political and legal phenomenon, even though it served an obvious economic function.¹⁹

¹⁹ This argument is not affected by the well-known fact that agriculture continued to play a part, often an important part, in the economic activities of smaller towns. However agricultural the small town was, what differentiated it from the regions purely rural was its nucleus of traders and artisans.

3

The argument is obvious enough, yet it may at first sight appear to clash with what historians have recently discovered about the social history of the early medieval towns. The growing volume of historical studies of the so-called patrician families suggests that the upper layers of urban society in the Middle Ages sprang from the families which happened to own land in the towns in the early stages of their history, and got rich as the rents and land values of town property rose. In detail the process may have differed from region to region, but in general, towns as different as Arras in the eleventh century, Barcelona in the twelfth century, and Lübeck in the early thirteenth seem to conform to the common pattern. In all of them political and economic power in the early phases of their history belonged wholly or in part to the urban landowners or their descendants. Indeed, so general and so obvious was the landed interest in medieval towns that a generalising sociologist like Sombart was able to base on it his entire theory of medieval capitalism and to find in rising land rents the chief source of the 'initial' capital of medieval industry and trade.

Stated in terms so general and so simple the theory may indeed be difficult to reconcile with the impression of the town as the seat of a professional merchant class. But was the history of the 'patriciate' in fact so uniform and so simple? In the first place not everywhere in Northern Europe was the citizen landowner a lineal descendant of the original owner of town sites. Some towns in the early Middle Ages had grown up on land belonging to their feudal overlords, whether kings or great feudatories. In some towns feudal landlords proceeded to alienate the income from urban property by sub-infeudation, by sub-letting and by outright sale of full property rights (burgage tenures in England, allodial tenements in France). But in some places, especially in the *Villes Neuves* of Western Europe – artificial foundations of a somewhat later age – the feudal founders sometimes retained the superior title to property as well as its income. In the English boroughs and in some towns abroad, e.g. Bordeaux, the freehold and burgess tenures of urban sites were as a rule shared among a whole number of manorial landlords of the surrounding countryside: a fact which stimulated several German and English lawyers, and Maitland among them, to propound the famous garrison theory of borough origins.

Wherever the land was in feudal hands, and as long as it stayed there, the rising profits of urban landownerships largely by-passed the burgess inhabitants. Yet even in towns, where in the twelfth century the burgesses owned or otherwise held most of the land, they did so not so much by

succession from the original landowners as through later investment. The famous history of the market of Lübeck, as expounded by Rörig, may indeed prove that the great Lübeck families had all sprung from a narrow circle of men who had taken part in the founding of Lübeck and owned the sites of the market place. But the same history also makes it clear that the urban landowners of Lübeck had come from merchant families of Westphalia and that their venture into landownership was merely an investment and part and parcel of their great commercial speculations beyond the Elbe.

Altogether the distinction between investment in trade and investment in land in the early medieval town can be drawn too rigidly. Not only did investments in land and urban rents come naturally to medieval merchants, but the reverse process – the investment into trade of wealth mainly derived from urban rents – was equally common and equally easy. Commercial partnership serving the purposes of investment had been known to European law since times pre-medieval. The sleeping partnerships of the *commenda* type were the general practice in Italian towns in the eleventh century; and the life of St Godric, which will be mentioned again presently, shows that the commercial partnerships were an established practice in eleventh-century England. And commercial partnerships, especially of the ‘sleeping’ kind, made it possible for urban wealth to be employed on a large scale in foreign trade, even if it happened to be derived from land.

Indeed this employment of wealth in speculative ventures to distant lands was more characteristic of the leading figures in medieval towns than their connection with land. If we are to trust Pirenne, the typical representatives of North European trade in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the men he calls ‘early capitalists’, but who should be described more exactly as merchants trading abroad on a large scale. The trace they left in records is very faint, but here and there Pirenne was able to discern behind the fog and silence of early sources the fleeting shadows of the early capitalists. In one instance he was even able to draw a full-scale portrait of a merchant engaged in far-flung speculative trade. Godric, a trader of East Anglia at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, began as a beachcomber, became in the fullness of life a substantial merchant and a member of a partnership, and ended his life by becoming a saint and inspiring a *Vita*.

In this the merchants of this age differed both from the class of small pedlars from which some of them must have originated and from the more sedate and less adventurous burgesses who were to dominate the trade in a later age. They were not primarily interested in the daily trade of the local market, and their indifference imprinted itself on the very economic character of towns. As long as they formed the governing

group, the economic and social policy of the town itself was one of expansion, free immigration and relatively free trade. Our direct evidence of free immigration and free trade is of course very scanty: perhaps because it is in the nature of free trade to leave behind scanty traces in documents. But had settlement and local trade been as restricted as they were to become later, towns and town population could not possibly have grown as we know that they did. For growth and expansion was the hallmark of the age.

(4) *The moving frontiers*

1

The expanding and professionalised trade also had obvious geographical and political implications. Indeed, the economic geography of medieval trade and its involvement with international politics have been studied more fully and are understood better than almost any other aspect of the subject. For, unlike the other aspects of the history of trade, the story of moving frontiers and of emerging trade routes is compounded of war, politics and exploration, and has therefore been well illuminated by fully documented events. No wonder historians of trade have given them so much attention.

The attention, however, has been by no means unwarranted, for the political and geographical features of medieval commerce were not only conspicuous but also important. As trade increased and declined and as new regions were opened and old ones decayed, the whole balance of power in Northern Europe altered. Nothing indeed proves more the essential function of inter-regional commerce in medieval life than the part it played in the rise and fall of European principalities or in their political, military and naval power.

The purely political implications of economic geography are perhaps most obvious in the opening phase of medieval trade. The one geographical feature of North European trade in the Merovingian and early Carolingian period which historians take more or less for granted is its withdrawal from the world economy of the Roman Empire. The fall of Rome meant that in the sixth century Gaul, Brittany, and Rhineland no longer stood in the same relation to each other and to the rest of the world as three centuries previously. The economic links with Italy and the Mediterranean were not altogether severed, but the trade was undoubtedly becoming more localised. At the height of imperial prosperity, i.e. in the second century, the Empire formed an economic system dominated by the needs and policy of metropolitan Italy. Needless to say, there were exchanges between the provinces and within each province

taken separately, and it is a mistake to think that even at the height of the imperial era all roads led to Rome. Yet, broadly speaking, the main currents of Roman trade formed a co-ordinated system, to which each province made a distinct and sometimes a highly specialised contribution. This system began to disintegrate in the closing centuries of the Roman era and was all but gone in 473.²⁰ In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, movements of inter-regional trade, such as there were, conformed ever more to the shifting needs and opportunities of the different northern regions and ceased to form part of an imperial network or to be dominated by imperial merchants.

Here are a few examples. In the third and fourth centuries Britain exported foodstuffs to feed the Roman legions on the Rhine. In the Merovingian age the exports to the lower Rhine did not cease – for all we know they may have grown – but they were dominated not by the needs of the Roman legions but by those of the population of the Rhineland and they now probably consisted of metals and cloth, both of which in the imperial times used to be taken elsewhere. Another example is the North Sea fisheries. At the height of the imperial era Roman merchants conducted from Utrecht an active fish trade between the delta of the Rhine and the more southerly provinces of the Empire. In the Merovingian times fish continued to be exported, but it now went in many other directions, including that of France and South Germany, and was carried by local merchants. Similarly, Flemish, Frisian and possibly English cloth, which may previously have been used to clothe the Roman legions, was now carried, among other places, to Scandinavia.²¹

2

This picture of northern trade, grown more local and directed away from the centres of the Empire, is wholly compatible with what we know of the activities of the Syrian merchants and the continued imports of oriental goods into Marseilles. What Syrian merchants and the port of Marseilles handled were probably the exotic goods of the orient. The trade which was now becoming local and separate was the trade in the bulky and essential goods which was the northern trade *par excellence*; and such network of inter-regional exchanges as was now emerging was woven, not by Syrian merchants, but by other and more local groups of intermediaries.

Of these intermediaries, the earliest and the most prominent were the

²⁰ See F. W. Walbank, 'Trade and Industry under the Later Roman Empire in the West' in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. II, ed. M. Postan (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 76–85.

²¹ In Pirenne's view this orientation would not presumably take place until the eighth century. Cf. F. Vercauteren, *Civitates de la Belgique Seconde*, 451–2.

Frisians. They owed their importance to the geographical opportunities as well as to the geographical limitations of their land. Frisia stretched along the coast of the North Sea from the estuary of the Sincfal (now Zwin) to the estuary of the Weser. It was relatively infertile, but its network of navigable rivers opening into the sea, and its well-sheltered channels between islands, fitted it well for fishing, navigation and water-borne trade. Within it, the point which gathered to itself most of the commerce was Dorstad on the old estuary of the Rhine: a place of great renown, the 'city of forty churches'. Whether it in fact was a great city or merely a conglomeration of fishing and trading villages is a problem which archaeologists will have to decide, but irrespective of its topography, it was important enough to stamp itself upon most references to Frisian trade. Later, especially in the ninth century, it rapidly lost its importance, partly through its destruction by the Normans, but chiefly through the change in the bed of the river from its old arm to the Waal. When this happened, the town of Tiel on the Waal took Dorstad's place, though in the process some of Dorstad's trade and much of its political importance may have passed to Utrecht.

From these centres, and from the delta of the Rhine as a whole, an entire network of routes radiated in every direction: to England, to Gaul and Western Francia, to Scandinavia and the Baltic. When we read in a seventh-century sermon, such as Bede's, that London was an emporium of trade housing many foreign merchants, we have to think in the first instance of the Frisians, for Bede expressly mentions Frisian merchants in another place. In most references to foreign trade and foreign merchants in the eighth and ninth centuries the Frisians invariably figure. Liudger, a visiting Frankish ecclesiastic of the eighth century, mentions Frisian merchants in London, and so does Alcuin.

We know much more about their trade to the South. Their main point of entry into Western Francia was Quentovic (near modern Étaples), from which they visited Rouen, Amiens and the interior of Western France. Certain records of the first half of the eighth century show them active at the fair of St Denis, which was at that time the most important internal market in France. But most of their commerce to the South probably flowed along the Rhine. Down the Rhine they shipped corn and wine from Alsace; up the Rhine they took their cloth, fish and other goods to pay for the corn. They established settlements in the chief Rhenish towns, in Cologne, Duisburg, Xanten near Düsseldorf, Worms; but Mainz was probably their most important destination. The town was well placed at the junction of the Rhine route with the routes which came from the South and the South-east, and there the trade of the Danubian plain and the Black Sea region entered the commercial currents of Western Europe.

Even more ancient, if not more abundant, were their trade connections with Scandinavia. Archaeological and literary evidence points to the immemorial antiquity of Scandinavian trade. This trade was largely in the hands of Scandinavians themselves, but in one period some of it was in the hands of the Frisians. A ninth-century *Vita* of St Anscarius, a priest engaged in missionary work in Denmark and Sweden, reveals by a number of accidental details the commercial activities of the Frisians. Anscarius apparently travelled with Frisian merchants to Schleswig and from there to Birca, the Swedish trading centre in the Baltic.

Such was the territorial scope of Frisian trade. Yet the part the Frisians played in it must not be misunderstood. They were its chief intermediaries, but they did not dominate it. The commodities they imported did not all stay in Frisia and did not even necessarily pass through it. Nor were they alone to serve the trade routes on which we find them. Though very active in the Anglo-Saxon trade, they did not dominate it to the exclusion of English merchants. Similarly, Frisians seem to have traded very actively to Western Francia, but we know that there was also direct trade between the Franks and their neighbours, and that some of this trade was in the hands of native merchants.

3

Even more independent and more important was the part played in the northern trade by the Scandinavians. In the economic history of the ninth and tenth centuries Norsemen left, if anything, deeper trace than the Frisians had done in the preceding period. In doing so they, like the Frisians, were largely impelled by the necessities of their geography. Like the Frisians, they had to seek their livelihood on the high seas and in foreign lands for the simple reason that their own land was unable to feed them. Here and there, in Eastern Denmark, in Southern Sweden, in parts of Southern Norway, men were able all through the Middle Ages to lead lives little different from those of agricultural communities in other parts of Western Europe. But elsewhere in Scandinavia society was of necessity made up of part-time peasants – men who lived on their farms part of the year and roamed the seas or navigated distant rivers the rest of the year.

Some of them went to sea as fishermen, others as robbers, adventurers, colonists and conquerors, still others went as traders; in fact, most of them were fishermen, traders and conquerors in turn. It is very largely as Vikings, i.e. as sea robbers and conquerors, that they appear in history textbooks, but economic historians meet them as traders long before their Viking expeditions began and long after they had ceased.

The Viking expeditions began in the first quarter of the eighth century,

but archaeological evidence shows that there had been some trade between Scandinavian countries and the rest of Western Europe since pre-historic times. Even in the worst period of the Viking wars there was a great deal of purely commercial intercourse not only between the Viking settlements, but between Scandinavia and non-Scandinavian lands. The journey of St Anscarius, already mentioned, took place shortly after the reputed burning of Dorstad by the Vikings. Yet he travelled in a Frisian boat, and in Schleswig he met Danes who were apparently in the habit of going to Dorstad with purely pacific aims.

We must not therefore allow the tumult of the Viking era to obscure the story of common trade done in the ordinary way. The fact that it was both common and commonplace explains why so many of the contemporary sources pass it in silence. Our chief evidence of the raids are the sagas, and sagas were heroic stories about heroic men. Yet even in the sagas we find references to trade in its peaceful and prosaic forms. They sometimes refer to people who were merchants pure and simple, and also mention expeditions undertaken without any predatory aims. We also know that the Scandinavians built and navigated not only the swift assault boats in which they carried out their raids, but also the slower and roomier cargo boats for commercial traffic. It is indeed probable that some parts of Scandinavia specialised in trade to the exclusion of raiding expeditions. Thus the Gotlanders who traded with all the countries of Northern Europe did not, as far as we know, send out any identifiable Viking expeditions, even though we find them occasionally engaged in Nordic wars.

Thus considered, Scandinavian trade formed part of that network of commercial connections which we saw taking shape in North-western Europe under the leadership of the Frisians. In some respects, however, its part in North-western commerce was different from that of the Frisians, the Anglo-Saxons or the Franks. In the first place, the Scandinavian trade reached its highest point after the Frisians had begun to decline. In the second place, it far transcended in its range the older limits of northern commerce. In their voyages the Norsemen penetrated to Greenland and the coast of North America in the West, to the Bosphorus in the East; and while their western expansion was not of very great importance to European commerce, their eastern voyages were to have the greatest political and economic consequences. They forged a link between North-western Europe and the Baltic, and in addition they established important land routes across the continent of Eastern Europe.

The Baltic and the lands round it were until the eleventh and twelfth centuries well outside the scope of western commerce, just as they were outside the range of Germano-Latin Christian civilisation. But they were

well within the range of Scandinavian contacts. The Scandinavians crossed and recrossed the sea on their way to the Baltic islands and from there to the Baltic coasts of modern Mecklenburg, Pomerania, Prussia and Livonia, and apparently maintained an active commercial intercourse with the inhabitants of these shores, Slavonic and Ugro-Turkish.

We know very little about the trade and navigation of the Baltic before the tenth century. There is little doubt that the Slav tribes inhabiting the Baltic coast had navigated the sea routes and traded by them. Jumne, on the Isle of Wollin at the estuary of the Oder, was the site of a Slavonic centre, and legend has preserved the fame of an ancient Baltic seaport on the same or a nearby site, the Vineta of the Slavs, the 'nobilissima civitas' of the chronicles, the reputed residence of great merchants and the repository of fabulous riches. Like the other legendary seaports, Vineta is said to have been engulfed by the sea, and, like the other *villes englouties*, it was reputed to toll its submerged bells in times of ill omen. Whether Vineta was in fact a town in the western sense of the word we do not know. Other towns of the Western Slavs depicted in the chronicles – Oppeln or Heithabu – were, we are told, little more than haphazard huddles of cabins made of wattle and mud. Nor can it be said with any certainty that Vineta was ever regularly visited by Scandinavians. It is, however, certain that, on the very border of the Slavonic East, near Lübeck, the Scandinavians possessed a trading settlement known to the chronicles as Reric, and that another settlement, Truso, sprang up not far from modern Elbing in West Prussia. But of all the towns and settlements they established on the fringes of the Slavonic East, none was more famous or endured longer than Novgorod. Novgorod the Great, the ancient city on Lake Ilmen, guarding the western terminus of a trade route from the Baltic to the interior of Russia, had drawn Scandinavian traders to itself since very early times, possibly since the eighth century, and we know of a Scandinavian settlement there in the tenth century.²²

Scandinavian penetration into Russia did not, however, end with Novgorod. Before the eighth century was out the Scandinavians under Rurik established themselves as rulers of the 'Russian' tribes. Both before and after their conquest of Russia they regularly crossed and recrossed the great Eurasian plain en route to the East. Starting from the Baltic they went up the Neva and the Great Lakes, recrossed the Central Russian watershed by dragging their boats after them, and then sailed south and south-east by the rivers flowing into the Black and Azov Seas. Byzantium was their goal, and there they served as mercenaries, traded

²² N. Vogel in *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* (1935), 181; idem in *Festschrift* in honour of Professor Koht; cf. F. Rörig in *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* (1933), 22 ff.

as merchants, and at least once pillaged the great city itself. But Byzantium was probably not the only eastern land they touched. We do not know whether they themselves penetrated into the trans-Oxian region of Baktria or into the trans-Caspian provinces of Persia. But they must at least have touched upon the fringes of the Asiatic steppes and traded with the Khazars and the Bulgars of the middle and lower Volga.

In this way the Scandinavians provided an economic link between Northern Europe and the lands farther east – a link which became more important after the direct maritime connections with the orient had been severed in the eighth century. And this part they continued to play for several centuries. They were still active in the Russian, Polish, and Livonian centres in the twelfth century, still visited Utrecht in the second half of the same century and the east coast ports of England in the thirteenth century. But by that time their trade had already been overshadowed by the commercial activity in other parts of Europe, and before long it disappeared altogether under the weight of the rising German tide.

4

The time when the Scandinavian fortunes began to sink and the German flood rose to engulf them coincides with the beginning of the most rapid phase in the expansion of European economy and trade. The story of the expansion between the eleventh century and the thirteenth has already been told. So has also been the role of the Italians in starting it and in maintaining its momentum. Yet in spite of the Italian stimulus and the part they were beginning to play in the internal trade and finance of most continental countries, the two trading areas – the northern and the southern – remained more or less distinct. The great and growing exchanges between them were sometimes in the hands of the Italian houses with branches in England and France and the Low Countries. But most were carried on, so to speak, on the frontiers of the two areas – the places where the Italians met the merchants of the North-west and where the goods of northern origin and the Italian imports changed hands.

One of these frontier regions, at which the two commercial spheres touched, was the region of East-central France, and in the first place Champagne. The story of the great Champagne fairs will be told elsewhere. Here it will suffice to note that the reasons why Champagne emerged in the twelfth century as the point of junction were to a large extent political. Under the rule of the Counts of Champagne and Blois, their country was one of the earliest in Europe to benefit from the feudal peace which in the eleventh century replaced the feudal anarchy of the preceding epoch. Its population and production grew. As now appears

probable, it acquired very early in the period a flourishing cloth industry. But what favoured most its development as an intermediary was its convenient position at the intersection of ancient land routes leading from the Mediterranean to the North German frontier, and from Flanders to Central and Eastern France. Its ancient towns, Troyes, Langres, Rheims and Laon were well placed at the focal points of the transcontinental traffic and therefore provided convenient meeting places for the merchants of Italy and Provence on the one hand and those of Germany and the Low Countries on the other. It was at these meeting points that the great Champagne fairs sprang up in the twelfth century and developed in the course of the thirteenth century into veritable nerve centres of medieval trade.

What made the confluence of trade in Champagne so important is that the commercial currents which flowed into it had in the meantime swollen into broad rivers. It will be impossible in this chapter to describe them all, and still less to follow in detail their manifold courses. Thus the southern stream – that which flowed from the Mediterranean countries – was the most important of all, but its story is outside the territorial scope of this essay. The western current, which issued from the central and western regions of France, may be part of this essay's subject, but it has been little studied and may at first sight appear to be hardly worth studying. For it may be argued that so well-provided were each of the main regions of Northern and Western France that they were able to cover their needs from their own production and were not dependent on foreign supplies or markets. This notion of international trade as an occupation in which only poor countries need engage must not, however, be taken too literally or indeed too seriously. The richer provinces of France, perhaps because they were rich, had important surpluses to dispose of. There was grain to spare in Picardy and Normandy, wine to sell in almost every province of Central and Western France, wool in the uplands of Auvergne and the Cevennes, flax in the north-west, and other specialised products of agriculture elsewhere. As medieval countries go, France was a thickly populated country, and early in her history cities of Roman pedigree as well as towns of more recent origin began to attract large numbers of migrants from the country. By the thirteenth century, Paris, with its 30,000 inhabitants, was one of Europe's most important cities, and between the tenth century and the thirteenth urban centres of more than local importance sprang up everywhere – some of them, like Amiens and Orléans, were commercial capitals of large provinces; others, like Rouen and Bordeaux, great river ports or sea ports; others still, like Lille, Chartres, and Bourges, were seats of textile and metallurgical industry; others, like Paris herself, were all these things together.

A country so furnished could not remain a mere *congérie* of self-sufficient arcadias. That it in fact did not, is shown by such evidence of French trade as we have. The documents show foreigners visiting the fairs of Northern France – St Denis, Boulogne, Chartres, Compiègne – long before the fairs of Champagne rose to their fame. The ports of Northern France, Étaples (Quentovic) in the seventh and eighth centuries, Havre, Rouen, Barfleur and others in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and countless other ports of call in the later centuries, figure prominently in the surviving records. In the English records the merchants of Amiens and Corbie importing woad are to be found among the earliest foreign visitors to London.

If, nevertheless, in the records of the Champagne fairs, the French current appears to be relatively unimportant, the reason for that is that by the end of the thirteenth century, when documents became abundant, commodities of other more highly commercialised regions (English wool, Flemish cloth) dominated the scene while France's economic connections with the outside world were beginning to suffer from the territorial conquests of Capetian kings and from the consequent industrial conflicts, war taxation and military operations.

By comparison, more abundant and better illustrated was the stream which issued from the North and the North-east. It was fed from a multitude of tributaries and, of the latter, one issued from a region which was itself destined to succeed Champagne as a meeting point of north and south.

This region was Flanders. Flanders, like Champagne, was unusually fortunate in its political beginnings. In the course of the Dark Ages different political fortunes befell the two halves of the Roman Belgica Secunda. The southern part, that of the lower Seine and the Marne, plunged into feudal anarchy early in the Carolingian era and was just emerging from it as it fell under the domination of the rising power of the French Capetians. The economic prosperity it enjoyed at the turn of the eleventh century under the French kings proved ephemeral, for as a border country on the very front line of the Capetian expansion, it was not too well suited for active industry or trade. Not so the northern part of the Belgica Secunda. By a fortunate accident the feudal fiefs and baronies of the South-western Low Countries were early in the tenth century assembled into a strong principality of the Counts of Flanders. Under their rule a large portion of the Low Countries, from Arras to Ghent, came to enjoy peace and order in advance of most other parts of Europe. And in the shelter of the Count's peace, arts could flourish, trade could prosper and towns could grow.

The geographical situation of the country was equally favourable. The country lay on the coast of the North Sea, open to sea-borne trade from almost every quarter; it was also cut across by navigable rivers,

more especially the Scheldt, and was well provided with sheltered estuaries for harbours. Yet Flanders owes its industry as much to its geographical limitations as to its geographical facilities. While, under the shelter of Flemish peace, population grew, the yield of the land remained relatively small. The Flemings carried out a great work of internal colonisation, added polder to polder, erected dykes all along the coast and along the main water-courses. By the middle of the twelfth century they had acquired all over Europe a reputation as experts in land drainage, and their qualities – the Flemish system of reclamation, the Flemish freedom and the Flemish experience in organising new settlements – they carried with them at the invitation of German princes into the new lands beyond the Elbe. Yet neither internal colonisation nor emigration could solve their population problem, and the solution was found where such solutions normally lie, i.e. in industrialisation.

By the middle of the twelfth century Flanders became the foremost – and possibly the only – predominantly industrial country in Northern Europe. The chief centres of its cloth industry, Ypres, Ghent, Douai, came to rank among the most important towns of Northern Europe. Together with the commercial port of Bruges which served them, they formed by the end of the century the four members – the Four *Leden* – of Flanders, which began to rival the political power of the Counts in the thirteenth century and were to challenge it in the fourteenth.

Flanders also possessed certain other industries and trades. But until the end of the fourteenth century none of the other occupations compared in importance with cloth, and cloth was also the mainstay of Flemish commerce. Cloth was also the magnet which drew to Flanders the merchants of the world and gradually helped to develop in Bruges another international mart, rival and eventual successor to the fairs of Champagne. Bruges' greatness was probably rooted in the function it fulfilled at the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries as the point of entry of English wool and of English merchants. Before long the Italians came there in search of English wool and English custom, but by the end of the thirteenth century the Germans had established themselves in Bruges as the chief exporters of Flemish cloth, the principal buyers of Italian imports and the chief providers of Eastern European foodstuffs and raw materials.

5

By that time the Germans had come to dominate the international economy of Northern Europe. The thirteenth was indeed their century, but their pre-eminence in the economy of continental Europe had begun to reveal itself at least a whole century earlier.

Eventually the range of predominantly German trade, like the area of predominantly German speech and culture, stretched from the eastern borders of North Holland and Lorraine to the heart of Central and later also Eastern, Europe. But its focus, especially at its beginning, was in the Rhineland and its capital. For in the course of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries all the trade routes and all the cultural influences which radiated from the Rhineland – its architecture, its crafts and its mystic art – came to centre upon one town, and that town was Cologne.

The early history of Cologne is shrouded in a certain amount of controversy. There is no doubt that its urban nucleus had survived from the Roman era and that as an administrative centre and as an episcopal residence Cologne preserved some semblance of urban life throughout the Dark Ages. It may also have preserved its economic function, for it could boast of an annual fair in the tenth century and housed merchants and artisans much earlier. By the end of the eleventh century Cologne had already become an emporium of trade and industry. Its two fairs – one at Easter and the other in August – were already well established, and so also was its fame for wealth and power. Writing early in the twelfth century Otto of Freising could assert that there was not a town in contemporary Germany or Gaul as rich as Cologne; and Cesarius of Heisterbach, a Cistercian compiler of miraculous stories, spoke of Cologne in somewhat the same way in which New York used to be spoken of in European books. There was something in the very air of Cologne that made men rich.

Some of Cologne's wealth was derived from industrial products: textiles, mainly linen, cloth and thread, and especially metal goods. Its bells were famous in thirteenth-century Europe, and so were other products of its copper-beating crafts. One of Cologne's masters, Frederick of St Pantaleon, ranks among the greatest metal workers of all ages. Still, it is in commerce and not in industries that the mainsprings of Cologne's wealth will be found. Its main field was the Rhine valley itself. Owing mainly to the growth of the hinterland, the estuary, once the focus of European trade, now ceased to occupy this position. Most of the delta's trade now passed through Cologne and, in the end, came to be handled by Cologne merchants. At the beginning of the period the merchants of Utrecht appear to have traded along the Rhine on their own account, but eventually Cologne ousted its competitors and succeeded in appropriating to itself the bulk of the valley's trade. In the twelfth century we find its merchants active as far south as Austria and Carinthia and also in Augsburg and Regensburg – the latter a town which gathered into itself the economic threads of the Danubian region.

Needless to say, the lands along the Rhine valley itself were not the

only region to which Cologne's commercial connections extended; just as the Rhineland with Cologne was not the only area to play its part in the commercial development of the continent. Another such area was Flanders itself. Much of Flemish trade was with England, France and Southern Europe, and in the early phase of their commercial expansion, and especially in the twelfth century, the Flemings appear to have frequented the markets of Cologne and also the upper Rhine and Saxony as far east as the Elbe. But in the course of the thirteenth century as the active trade of the Flemings died out, the Cologners gradually became the chief intermediaries between Flanders on the one hand and Central and Southern Germany on the other. For a time in the thirteenth century they even succeeded in penetrating into the Anglo-Flemish wool trade and interposing themselves between the English wool growers and the Flemish cloth makers.

Another similar area lay to the west of the Rhine, between the Rhine and the Maas. The trade of this region, which the Germans usually describe as Maasland, was founded on the industries of its towns: Huy, Namur, Liège and Dinant. Huy and Liège produced some cloth for export, but their chief industry was metals, and Dinant was especially famous for its metal goods.

Almost equally important was the activity and greater still the future potentialities of the regions to the East of the Rhine. The territory between the Rhine and the Weser, usually described as Westphalia, was a valuable source of agricultural exports and of metal ores mined in the south-east of the region. Yet it was not in the export of domestic produce and not in Western Germany that the historical destiny of Westphalia lay. Ever since Frankish times the region had served as a corridor to the lands farther east. Several important east-to-west routes crossed it, and none were more important than the famous *Hellweg* which began at Duisburg, went between the Ruhr and Lippe and passed the towns of Dortmund and Soest before crossing the Weser into Saxony. On this route were to be found the Westphalian towns which were to lead in the commercial development of Eastern Europe: and it was thanks to the men of these towns that Eastern European trade before long fell into German hands.

The eastern specialisation of Westphalia was largely Cologne's own fault. Faced in the west with the barrier of Cologne's power, the rising towns of Westphalia naturally turned to the as yet virgin fields farther east. And although the merchants of Cologne were as active in the east as the men of any other German town, they could not claim there that position of overwhelming economic privilege which they enjoyed elsewhere. It is therefore no wonder to find the Westphalian towns taking a leading part in the exploratory period of eastern trade and forming the

earliest trading stations in the east. We find them also acquiring a lion's share in the work as well as in the profits of urban colonisation and town-building all over North-eastern Europe from Lübeck to Riga.

Some of what has been said about Westphalia applies also to the region immediately to its east, i.e. Saxony. Saxony, as the documents reveal it in the twelfth century, had for more than four centuries been part of the Holy Roman Empire and was now an integral part of the German homeland. Like Westphalia, it owed its first entry into the commercial system of Europe to its mineral resources, for by the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Harz mountains were rapidly becoming the principal mining area of continental Europe, the main source of copper and lead, as well as of precious metals. The industry was centred round Goslar, and the fame of Goslar as the capital of the mining industry outlasted, even if it did not outshine, its fame as the residence of the Saxon and Hohenstaufen Emperors. Yet Goslar was not the principal commercial town of the country, for the simple reason that in Saxony, as in Westphalia, the most flourishing commercial activities were those which led its merchants to the east. To this activity Saxony and its towns were especially suited. In the early Middle Ages, i.e. before it was wholly assimilated to the Empire, it lay across the German route to the east like a barrier. Now the barrier had become a corridor. Whereas in the opening centuries of our period – eleventh and early twelfth – the regular overland traffic stopped at the Elbe crossings – chiefly at Bardowiek, but also at Magdeburg and at a few smaller places – at the end of the twelfth and all through the thirteenth century the frontiers of German trade moved eastwards, and men from the border towns of Saxony took part in the movement and greatly benefited from it.

6

The eastward spread was indeed the most characteristic trend of the epoch. Its beginning can be traced as far back as the Frankish era. From about the sixth century onwards the civilisation of the Latino-German West began to expand into the continental interior of Central Europe; and, in consequence, the entire economic balance of the continent gradually shifted to the east. In the early Merovingian times the focus of the Frankish state and society was in Gaul, but in the sixth and seventh centuries it moved from the left bank of the Rhine to the right. In the centuries between the fifth and eleventh the lands between the Rhine and the Weser were being fast reclaimed and settled by the overflow of their own population, and by the time Charlemagne became Emperor, the eastern and more purely Germanic parts of his kingdom were able to supply him with the bulk of his power and of his armies. But no sooner

was this transference completed than a still further move to the east began, and the Saxon lands beyond the Weser were laid open to Frankish conquest and assimilation. It has been argued that to the Franks the acquisition of Saxony was a military and a political necessity, for they had to subjugate the Saxons if they were themselves to be saved from being submerged by the next wave of Germanic invasions. Whether in fact Charlemagne's Saxon expeditions were nothing more than preventive wars we do not know, but we know that the Saxon lands had been an object of attraction long before they could possibly have become a source of danger. Their military conquest was well prepared by missionary activity and was itself preceded and followed by commercial ventures and trading settlements. Before long Saxony was wholly absorbed in the trading area of Western Europe, and by the beginning of the eleventh century it had itself become the starting point for a further leap in the same direction. This time it was the turn of the Baltic and of the Wendish lands east of the Elbe.

This final phase of the process was also its most important one. It began with the conquest of Slavonic lands which was led largely by princes, and it continued as a great enterprise in settlement and colonisation. And long before the work of colonisation ended it brought fundamental change into European, and, more especially, German commerce. Urban colonisation by merchants and for commercial motives accompanied, and in some places even preceded, rural colonisation by knights and peasants. Not all the Westphalian merchants in search of Slavonic markets and sources of supply stopped at the line of the Elbe. As often as not they themselves ventured into the interior of the Wendish lands, and now and again penetrated into the Baltic region. With the permission of the Slavonic princes they began establishing trading stations all along the main routes leading to Novgorod and Smolensk, which were the two main points of entry into medieval Russia. In Schleswig, the starting point of the Scandinavian sea-route to the Eastern Baltic, Westphalian merchants possessed something in the nature of a factory in the early twelfth century. At the next stage of the same sea-route, at Wisby on the island of Gotland, they established themselves at about the same time. But from the point of view of subsequent history, the most significant of their trading factories was the one they apparently built up very early in the twelfth century, or even at the end of the eleventh century, at the Slavonic town of Lübeck. Profiting by the liberality of the Wendish prince, they formed there a permanent settlement at least as early as the twenties of the twelfth century. But in the late thirties Adolph of Holstein conquered the land and burned the city, and in 1143 the new Lübeck, this time a purely German town, was founded.

Lübeck was to be followed by other new towns. In the extreme

north-east the German merchants founded at the very beginning of the thirteenth century the town of Riga, henceforth the centre of their trade in Livonia. By the end of the twelfth century the trading settlement in Wisby grew to turn the entire town into a German port and strong-point, and at the opening of the thirteenth century the town of Hamburg rose to match Lübeck at the eastern foot of the Jutland peninsula.

Of this first generation of new German towns none could rival Lübeck. It soon drew to itself the trade which had previously gone overland to Bardowiek, replaced Schleswig as the chief starting point for sea journeying across the Eastern Baltic, established itself in the fisheries of Southern Scandinavia and of the island of Rügen, and in the rising trade with Bergen and the interior of Sweden. By degrees the old overland routes as well as the old Scandinavian sea routes fell into desuetude, and the bulk of the trade with the east was forced into the channel which ran along the south coast of the Baltic and across the foot of the Jutland peninsula – the channel which Lübeck served and dominated.

This first generation of new German towns was soon followed by another and a larger crop of secondary formations. Lübeck, the first daughter town of the Westphalian cities, in itself became a generation or two later the 'mother' of other eastern towns. Immediately to the east, as to the south-east, it helped to found the towns of Schwerin, Wismar and Rostock, and a number of smaller towns. At the farthest east there sprang up Riga's sister towns of Dorpat and Reval and the chief towns of Prussia (but not yet Danzig). The whole chain of German towns sponsored by the Westphalian towns and Lübeck was practically completed by the end of the thirteenth century.

These new towns had a double function to perform. In the first instance they connected the lands of the west with the sources of Slavonic goods: furs, honey, pitch, tar, timber and rye. This was essentially a Baltic trade, and Russia was its chief source and market. The second function was to serve as an outlet for the goods of the newly colonised lands. Bremen and, above all, Hamburg collected corn from the regions of the Weser and the Elbe, and exported it to the west. Lübeck and Hamburg became the centres of the fishing industry of the Western Baltic, the salt trade of the Elbe, and the forest goods of Brandenburg. Somewhat later the Prussian towns of Marienburg, Elbing, Thorn and Königsberg, and later still Danzig, became the outlets for the corn and timber trade of Prussia, Lithuania and Western Poland.

was of profound, almost of revolutionary, importance. It transformed the whole composition and direction of northern trade. The industrial nations of the north-west and especially Flanders were now offered markets and new and very abundant sources of essential supplies. England, hitherto dependent on Scandinavian timber, began to import large and ever-growing quantities of Baltic wood. She also began to buy, sometimes for her own use, sometimes for re-export, quantities of Baltic grain. Other sylvan products – pitch, tar, potash, as well as furs and wax – now came from Eastern Germany, or from the Slavonic lands tapped by the Germans. Flanders, hitherto fed by the corn supplies from Northern France and Southern Germany, was now beginning to be supplied by Baltic grain. The Germans were also able to take food to Scandinavian countries previously dependent on imports from Britain.

All this brought wealth and power to the East German towns and marked the final stage in Germany's commercial rise. Their hold over East European markets, foodstuffs, and raw materials, also made them welcome and even indispensable all over Northern Europe. They won predominant power in Scandinavia, great economic influence in the Low Countries, important privileges in England. Before long, economic power was buttressed by a political organisation, and the German towns combined into the great naval, military and political union of the Hanse.

With the formal establishment of the Hanse the eastern expansion of North European trade can be said to have been completed, and a new and a different chapter in its history began. For, paradoxically enough, the official founding of the Hanse in the sixties of the fourteenth century was not so much a further step in German expansion as a manifestation of an entirely new phase in the history of European trade and of German power. It marks the end of eastward expansion – indeed of all expansion – and a new period in the economic history of Europe.

III. THE AGE OF CONTRACTION

(1) *The depression*

1

The great commercial expansion did not continue into the late Middle Ages and was not destined to merge without a break into the ascending economic movements of the sixteenth century. In some parts of Europe it slowed down; in others it ceased altogether. Historians will therefore be justified in regarding the two closing centuries of the Middle Ages, the fourteenth and the fifteenth, and more especially the second half of the former and the first half of the latter, as a period of arrested develop-

ment, and even in speaking of a 'secular' depression succeeding the 'secular' expansion of the earlier centuries.

The contraction, like the expansion which preceded it, is easier to diagnose than to measure. Reliable figures capable of forming comprehensive statistical series are almost as rare in the records of the later Middle Ages as they are in the records of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. In England alone were national customs accounts kept in the later Middle Ages, and enough of them have survived to provide a broad statistical background to the history of English foreign trade. But even the English customs accounts are more complete and more reliable for some periods than for others. The figures for the fourteenth century are less comprehensive than those of the fifteenth and are not available in consecutive or comparable series except for wine, wool and cloth. The latter have been tabulated by Professor Gray in annual averages for two-yearly periods at intervals of about a decade. The fifteenth-century figures have been fully analysed elsewhere. The two series are shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.3:

TABLE 4.2 *Exports of wool and cloth from England in the second half of the fourteenth century (annual averages)*²³

Years	Wool (sacks)	Broadcloths‡
1353-5	—	3,040
1355-7	—	7,485
1357-60	35,840*	9,346
1366-8	26,634†	14,593
1377-80	21,627	15,449
1392-5	19,359	43,072

* 1357-9 - 2 years.

† 1367-9.

‡ The figures in this column slightly underestimate the total and slightly exaggerate the rate of increase, for they do not include worsteds and other cheap cloths of the same kind which were relatively more important in the early period.

The figures tell their own tale. The only exceptions to the record of decline were the short-lived boom in the value of miscellaneous exports and imports in the mid-thirties of the fifteenth century which probably reflected the high cost of imports during an acute economic conflict with the Hanseatic League; and above all the high level of cloth exports throughout the period. The latter were rising throughout the second half of the fourteenth century and mounted with exceptional rapidity between

²³ These figures have recently been corrected and supplemented in E. Carus Wilson, 'Trends in the Export of English Woollens in the Fourteenth Century', *Economic Hist. Rev.* iii, no. 2, 1950, but the general trend they exhibit is the same.

1380 and 1395; but from the high point they then reached they soon descended to an average of about 30,000 broadcloths, round which they fluctuated for some 25 years. In the two decades of active trade with Central and Eastern Europe following the, so-called, Vorrath treaty with the Hanse in 1437, the exports of cloth rose well above the average and exceeded 50,000 cloths, but in 1448 they fell again to their pre-1437 level and remained there until the last quarter of the century. (Table 4.3.)

TABLE 4.3 *Exports and imports of dutiable commodities in England, 1399-1482 (annual averages in 3-year periods)**

Years	Exports of wool (sacks)	Exports of broadcloth	Imports of wine (tuns)	Exports and imports of miscellaneous merchandise paying poundage (values in £)†
1399-1402	15,023	27,760	—	—
1402-5	10,864	24,502	6,237	60,887
1405-8	14,221	29,315	6,220	187,439
1408-11	14,393	30,718	13,696	150,368
1411-14	14,447	25,108	12,113	124,313
1414-17	14,131	29,488	17,063	136,683
1417-20	14,778	28,366	10,975	145,192
1420-3	13,893	36,359	5,168	135,994
1423-6	13,959	42,665	3,591	109,049
1426-9	15,437	38,417	6,821	129,420
1429-32	9,749	40,641	8,940	119,691
1432-5	8,294	39,693	9,950	146,754
1435-8	2,353	40,814	6,097	113,275
1438-41	9,101	56,097	10,509	127,221
1441-4	9,776	55,976	11,748	130,452
1444-6	9,279	52,482	12,275	106,168
1446-8	7,654	53,699	11,000	121,795
1448-50	8,412	35,078	9,432	91,456
1450-3	7,660	38,928	7,424	91,001
1453-6	9,290	37,738	6,826	82,533
1456-9	7,664	35,059	4,072	59,089
1459-62	4,976	31,933	4,190	65,503
1462-5	7,044	25,855	7,074	57,449
1465-9	9,316	39,664	5,942	93,942
1469-71	7,811	27,610	3,411	53,421
1471-6	9,091	43,129	4,729	115,475
1476-9	7,502	51,889	6,887	120,333
1479-82	9,784	62,586	6,927	179,340

* 1444-6, 1446-8, 1448-50, and 1469-71 are computed in 2-year periods; 1465-9 is a 4-year period, and 1471-6 a 5-year period.

† The figures do not include miscellaneous exports by Hansards.

For other parts of Europe there is little statistical evidence beyond a few figures of local imports and exports or occasional series of measurements reflecting the movements of the more important trades. The best

known of the former are probably the returns of the Hanseatic *Pfundzoll*, a tax on sea-borne trade levied by the principal Hanseatic towns in the second half of the fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries. Unfortunately, the returns have not survived in a series sufficiently consecutive to reveal a convincing trend; and with the exception of the Lübeck figures for 1368–9, they have not yet been presented to historians in a wholly usable form. The longest of the series so far available, that of Hamburg, suggests that the sea-borne exports and imports rose from 250,000 Lübeck marks in 1362 to 374,000 in 1371, and then dropped to 336,000 in 1400.²⁴ But the figures may well exaggerate the rise and underestimate the fall in Hamburg's trade, for the *Pfundzoll* was frequently imposed in times of strained international relations and sea war when a great deal of traffic, which would otherwise have gone through the Sound, sought the greater security of the overland route through Hamburg.

On the other hand, the evidence of individual trades covers a range of commodities and places so wide as to make up for the paucity of more general measurements. And though little of it is statistical in the narrow sense of the term it is sufficiently full and varied to reveal the main economic trend.

2

The trend and the facts from which it emerges may appear to be primarily concerned with agriculture and industrial production rather than with trade. But the distinction must not be pressed too hard. In an earlier section heavy emphasis was laid on the predominance in North European trade of products of European industry and agriculture. Where facts make it appear very probable that Europe's production declined, or at least ceased to grow, there is every justification for concluding that commercial exchanges must also have slowed down or stagnated.

Naturally enough, the evidence of agricultural production is most copious, though also most difficult to interpret. Superficial signs of agricultural crises abound in the records of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Wars were more frequent and more continuous than at any other time since the tenth century; great pestilences visited Europe in 1348–9 and at least twice again in the second half of the century. Crops, buildings, equipment, as well as the agricultural calendar, were bound to suffer, and production was bound to decline. In addition, rural economy was undergoing a process of readjustment which may, for a time, have reduced the level of both agricultural production and of trade.

Arable cultivation contracted everywhere, but on large units, and

²⁴ W. Stieda, *Revaler Zollbeichter*, lvii ff.

especially on 'demesne' farms of great estates, the contraction was most rapid. Such demesnes as still functioned in the fourteenth century in various parts of France were wound up in the course of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In England, where the demesne farming had survived to a far greater extent than anywhere else in Europe, the transformation was most radical.

The contracting acreages of the demesnes must not of course be used as an accurate index of agricultural decline. Yet even if corrected and heavily discounted, they still bear witness to a general recession. By no means all the lands lost to the demesnes were acquired by tenants; and there is every sign of poorer lands, whether on the demesnes or on lands anciently in the possession of tenants, gradually going out of cultivation. Theoretically, as areas contracted the yield per acre or per man should have risen; but even if this happened in the fifteenth century (and there is no evidence to show that it did) the total output was bound to decline.

What is more, a smaller proportion of the output was now drawn into the main stream of inter-regional trade. The dwindling of demesne farming signified also the decline of commercial production. No doubt, in this country, some large-scale units continued to be run by substantial tenant farmers, but in general peasant tenancies increased and multiplied at the expense of large units of commercialised agriculture; and peasant land-holders must have consumed a far greater proportion of their produce than the quasi-capitalist owners of the demesne farms.

Thus on the thirty-two manors of the bishopric of Winchester at the beginning of the thirteenth century some 1750 quarters of wheat were sold, nearly all outside the manors. This amounted to 48 per cent of the gross output and 82 per cent of the 'net' output (after deduction of seed). When a century later the yields, i.e. the 'net' output in relation to seed sown, became considerably higher, the proportion of sales to gross output also rose to 70 per cent. On the six Wiltshire manors of the Duchy of Lancaster at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, the 'net' output of grain of all kinds (including some 75 quarters bought but excluding some 525 quarters of seed) was about 1330 quarters, while the sales amounted to 1208 quarters: indeed the output was so large that it must have included a carry-over of old grain. On the Wiltshire estates of Lord Hungerford, on which demesnes functioned until the middle of the fifteenth century, sales of grain reached similar proportions. On the Hungerford estate of Winterbourne-Stoke in 1448, 97 quarters out of the 'net' output of 112 were sold.

No such sales could be expected from peasant units, however commercialised some of them were. A little calculation, indeed mere common sense, will show that at a time when on the holdings of the peasants of the top rank – the virgaters – the area under corn in any year averaged

about 15 acres per household (in Cambridgeshire at the time of the Hundred Rolls of 1273 the area sown annually by an average peasant above the rank of cottar was 7 acres) and when the yield of wheat, allowing for seed, was no more than eight bushels per acre, the marketable surpluses of an average peasant household were small. So even if the extent of cultivated land had remained the same, the change-over to peasant agriculture would inevitably have reduced the amount of grain available for sale, and with it the total volume of grain trade.

Hence also the reduced scale of inter-regional traffic in grain. The evidence of urban food supplies leaves the impression of a trade shrinking in volume and sometimes restricted in its range. We are told that in the late Middle Ages London was drawing its supplies from a much smaller area than earlier and had become more or less dependent upon the agricultural surpluses in the Home Counties. There is also some evidence to suggest that the grain supplies of other important English towns were becoming not only smaller (this could also result from decline in the town population), but sometimes also more local. Hence the growing pre-occupation of towns with their food supplies and with the grain stocks: a preoccupation which overshadows the urban policies of most of the greater towns on the continent.

At first sight, no such shrinkage could be observed in the grain trade of the Low Countries, where the sea-borne supplies from the distant Baltic appeared to assume an even greater importance. Yet a shrinkage there must have been. It is quite possible that Baltic imports into the Low Countries grew in importance merely because the French sources of corn supplies had been running dry. The exports from the valleys of the Somme and the lower Seine, though by no means exhausted, were not, and could not be, as abundant as they had been in the middle of the fourteenth century. Anglo-French war, the English occupation of Normandy and Picardy, the choking up of river traffic by tolls, were bound to interrupt the flow; and there were also other signs of a more general agricultural depression. It was not therefore an accident that in some years in the fifteenth century we find the Norman towns importing grain from the Baltic; and the records have preserved an accidental report of a whole Hanseatic grain fleet arriving in the estuary of the Seine in 1450.

In some of these examples Eastern Germany and the other Baltic regions figure as the only examples of unfailing bounty. Did then the grain production and the grain trade of Eastern Europe escape the depression that prevailed elsewhere? To some extent they probably did, since they still continued to yield marketable surpluses large enough to feed Holland and Norway and to keep the great east-to-west trade flowing. But even if the flow never ceased it was probably not as full as it had been in the middle of the fourteenth century. Comprehensive statistics of

the Hanseatic grain trade do not exist; such figures as we have are largely confined to the evidence of the grain deals of the Prussian Order, which are both incomplete and misleading. But all indirect evidence points to a slump in the fortunes of German agriculture throughout the greater part of the fifteenth century. An interval of at least a century separated the high-water mark of agricultural expansion in Eastern Germany in the fourteenth century from the outburst of large-scale commercial agriculture on the *Rittergüter* in the sixteenth century. During that interval, the map of Brandenburg, Pomerania, Mecklenburg and Prussia became covered with abandoned holdings, deserted households and depopulated villages, all pointing to the economic tribulations of peasant agriculture. But large-scale units of production were also going through a period of economic difficulty, for labour was getting scarce and dear, and grain was falling in price. Before the century was out landlords sought and found a remedy in *Bauernlegen* – a policy whereby peasants were deprived of land and forced to work on the estates. But the movement did not get under way until the very turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. From 1400 to 1475 – these are approximate dates – the landlords found their old prosperity going and the new prosperity not yet arrived. Would it therefore be too fanciful to conclude that if in that century Baltic supplies in the West still appeared as abundant as ever it was not because supplies had grown but merely because the demand had shrunk?

For there is little doubt that the demand for grain in the main consuming areas was shrinking. On some of the main inter-regional markets, those of the greater towns and of the principal industrial areas of Northern Europe, the numbers of inhabitants declined. The process was of course more complex in detail than it may appear on a broader view. Yet for all its complexity, it leaves little room for doubt about its effect on the grain market. The demand for grain apparently receded in the main consuming areas, and it must also have receded on the innumerable local markets throughout the length and breadth of Europe.

The importance of the local demand must not be underestimated. In chapters dealing with the earlier centuries attention was drawn to the large proportion of marketable foodstuffs which went to feed the villagers, manorial servants and artisans who did not possess enough land to cover their needs out of their own production. This class included agricultural labourers, rural artisans and smallholders of every type and size, and was always to be found in the countryside. It was, however, more numerous at some times than at others, and in most countries – certainly in Germany and England – this class contracted in the later Middle Ages. What with the steep decline of rural population and with the new opportunities for larger holdings on the lords' land and elsewhere, the numbers

of landless or all-but-landless labourers in English villages fell out of proportion to the general decline of population. And as the numbers of wage-earners and smallholders sank, sales for local consumption must have dwindled.

It is because demand declined that the reduced production and smaller sales did not result in a chronic, still less a mounting, scarcity of food. Over the later Middle Ages as a whole, bread grains appeared more abundant than ever before. They were especially plentiful in the second quarter of the fourteenth century when prices fell more than 20 per cent below their level in the first quarter. Soon afterwards came the succession of bad harvests and low yields following on the great mortality of 1348–9; but this again was followed in England and abroad by the ‘good seventies’. According to several continental chronicles, the harvest of 1375 was the best for fourteen years, and was followed by four years so good that according to an Alsatian chronicle, people were ‘fatigued by the abundance’. In 1377 the prices of bread in England touched their lowest point for thirty years, and in 1395 in Strasbourg grain became so plentiful and so cheap that bakers replaced the ‘standard’ penny loaf with a halfpenny one. Bread was never to be quite so plentiful again, but periods of relative abundance occurred in various parts of Europe throughout the fifteenth century at intervals frequent enough to justify historians in regarding the whole period as an age of low agricultural prices. Above all, the first and third quarters of the fifteenth century in Western Germany, in the Low Countries, and in some parts of France and England, were times when supplies, relative to demand, were near their peak.

The recurrent phases of plenty raise problems closely linked with those of prices and will therefore be discussed again later; but they should be mentioned here if only in order to record a warning against a possible *non sequitur*. The decline of the grain trade and of arable agriculture could be accompanied by signs of abundance and must not be judged by them. On the other hand, in other branches of agricultural production the declining or stagnating output was not always matched by the decline in demand, and signs of abundance may be absent. Thus, for reasons which have not been fully accounted for, the supplies of foodstuffs of animal origin, and especially butter, were smaller in relation to demand than were the supplies of grain; and their values fell more slowly or even rose. Therein, however, lies a tale which properly belongs to another section of this chapter.

3

The category of animal products here discussed does not of course include

Europe's most important industrial material – wool. English customs figures make it clear that international trade in wool was on the wane. The tables 4.2 and 4.3 above will show that English exports, by far the most important in Western Europe and solely responsible for high quality wool imported into Flanders, Holland and Italy, declined from about 35,000 sacks per annum in the first half of the fourteenth century to about 8000 sacks in the second half of the fifteenth century. It would of course be wrong to ascribe the entire deficiency to falling production, for it is now well understood that in the meantime England had greatly increased her own cloth industry and consumed a greater proportion of her clip. Indeed so marked was the shift from foreign users to the English cloth-makers that until recently historians have used the figures of declining wool exports as evidence of England's rising cloth production. This argument, however, no longer holds good. H. L. Gray and others have shown that, at its highest, England's cloth production could not possibly have accounted for all the difference between the high level of wool exports in the middle of the fourteenth century and their low level in the late fifteenth.

TABLE 4.4 *Exports of wine from Bordeaux in the fourteenth century*²⁵
(annual averages)

Years	Tuns
1305–7	95,650
1308–9	102,724
1310–11	51,351
1328–30	81,366
1335–7	45,315
1348–50	9,675
1352–8	19,681 (five years only)
1363–70	22,111 (six years only)
1372–3	14,373
1374–9	13,297
1379–81	7,842

Declining supply, as well as other difficulties of trade, also accounts for the confused and broken pattern of the wine trade. We know little about the fortunes of the wine exports of the upper Rhineland or of the Moselle, and hardly more about those of La Rochelle, but much more is known about the conditions in the southern and by far the most important wine area, that of Gascony. The region experienced not only the general economic difficulties of the age, but also the direct effects of military operations of the Anglo-French wars. At times only Bordeaux and its

²⁵ The figures of fourteenth-century wine imports have been derived from an article by Miss M. K. James, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, n.s. IV (1951).

immediate surroundings escaped wholesale devastation. The toll of ruined vineyards has found faithful reflection in the statistics of fourteenth-century exports. The decline, interrupted for a while in the last decade of the fourteenth century, was resumed in the fifteenth. During the middle decades of the century, French occupation of Gascony led to a complete interruption of trade to England and all but deprived Gascony of its most important customer; and exports to England sank from the average of about 12,000 tuns in the thirties and forties (it was more than that at the beginning of the century) to less than 7000 in the fifties and sixties. It was not before the eighties of the fifteenth century that English merchants appeared again in force on the wine-market of Bordeaux and British imports of Gascon wine reached and passed their fourteenth-century volumes.

It is of course possible that the irregular and probably dwindling supplies of wine were in some parts of Europe compensated by increasing supplies of beer; for beer made with hops was the product of the Middle Ages in decline. From the middle of the fourteenth century onwards it was brewed in ever-increasing quantities in most of the North German towns, above all in Hamburg, and also in towns of the Northern Netherlands. Historians do not, however, know enough about medieval consumption in different places and at different social levels to be able to judge to what extent wine and beer were true substitutes, and how far was beer merely ousting ales and other drinks of a humbler kind.

The light which the surviving records throw on the other branches of the victualling trade is equally uncertain and on the whole equally subdued. Enough is known about the salt trade of the Bay of Bourgneuf to suggest that here at least output and trade were growing in the fifteenth century. The documents, however, are not sufficiently continuous to report the effect of piracy and war in the forties and fifties, nor do we know enough about salt exports from other areas, e.g. Lüneburg, Zealand or South Germany, to be able to set the buoyancy of the Bay trade against the possible decline elsewhere. The evidence from the English salt areas suggests that there production was, to say the least, stagnating. The feudal farm of the main salt-making centres in Nantwich, Northwich and Middlewich, which was largely, though not wholly, made up of revenues of the salt-pans, fell from £168 in 1301 to £130 in 1347 and £90 in 1368. Indirect evidence – figures are lacking – suggests that production remained low for at least another century.²⁶

A more general, even if an indirect, indication of a probable decline in international salt industry will be found in the vicissitudes of its chief customer – the herring trade. The great fishing industry of Skania was still active in the fifteenth century and was not to enter upon its final

²⁶ H. J. Hewitt, *Medieval Cheshire*, 118–19.

decline for another century or century and a half; but it was no longer expanding and was frequently depressed by war and by bad catches. In the good years at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as much was caught and salted as ever before. In Falsterbö, where most of the Skania fishing was then concentrated, at least 100,000 tuns (about 10,000 long tons) were salted in 1537, which was only about 20,000 tuns less than may have been salted in the same place in 1368. But in some years during the intervening period the catches and the trade fell to a mere fraction of the volumes of 1368 and 1537. The recurrent wars between the Hanseatic League and the Scandinavian kings and political friction with Flanders and England repeatedly interfered with both fishing and export. Possibly the fishing grounds themselves were beginning to show signs of wear, for there were complaints of bad catches in 1411, 1412, 1416, and 1425. In the late twenties, war, in interrupting both fishing and trade, proved to be a blessing in disguise, for with the return of peace yields recovered to reach their highest levels between 1432 and the mid-forties. In the middle of the century, however, complaints of poor catches became frequent again and continued at intervals throughout the period.²⁷

This record of the fishing trade, if true, bears a striking resemblance to what was apparently happening in the great extracting industries of the time. More especially, the mining areas were now going through a phase which the old-fashioned economist would have described as one of rapidly diminishing returns. The symptoms were all local, and the complaint did not turn out to be permanent; but for the time being most branches of European mining were, so to speak, 'due' for a recession irrespective of what was happening at the same time in industry and trade in general. Sooner or later they were bound to pay the penalty for the rapid and cumulative expansion of the previous century and a half. For most of them the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were their time of reckoning. By then seams became exhausted, or else had to be worked under conditions which were raising technical problems beyond the powers of medieval technology to solve.

From this point of view the most characteristic is the history of European silver mining. Exhaustion appears to have come over all silver-mining regions, secondary as well as primary. Derbyshire and Devonshire in England, Poitou and the Massif Central in France, and probably Sardinia in Italy petered out in the later Middle Ages; but far more striking and much more important was the decline of silver mining in its main centres, in Central and South-eastern Europe. The silver mines of Hungary had been exploited since the eighth century and reached full development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The mining industry

²⁷ D. Schäfer, *Das Buch des lübeckschen Vogts auf Schonen*, xxxix ff.

of Saxony and especially that of Rammelsberg by Goslar, which since the tenth century had been the principal source of European silver and copper, passed the peak of its output and prosperity by the thirteenth century. The highly important mining industry of Freiberg had risen in the twelfth century and reached the furthest limit of its development by the beginning of the fourteenth century; the development of the silver mines at Meissen, in Tyrol, in Carinthia, and especially of the rich Transylvanian deposits and of the Bohemian mines of Iglau and Altenberg was roughly contemporary; that of Silesia and perhaps Moravia somewhat later. But by the middle of the fourteenth century in nearly all these regions the mining industry plunged into a depression from which it did not climb out until the second half of the fifteenth century. Water was the great enemy. The underground workings now reached the strata exposed to the danger of flooding, and in spite of all the experiments and abortive attempts to deal with the underground water it was not until about the late fifties that the experiments of Martin Claus of Gotha solved the problem, and Saxon mining could be resumed on a scale approaching that of the pre-crisis years.²⁸

The vicissitudes of silver mining have been well recorded and well studied. On supplies of silver the entire currency of medieval Europe depended, and with them the price level was inextricably involved. Historians therefore know more about silver than about any other branch of medieval mining. It appears, however, probable that with the exception of iron most other medieval mining and metal trades went through the same experiences as silver. Copper was mined in Saxony and Hungary as a bye-product of silver and suffered a similar fate. The copper production of Sweden, which was of more recent origin and had developed relatively slowly, may have had a more even career. On the other hand, the tin industry of England – probably the most ancient of all the mining industries of Europe – contracted in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At least once before the industry had been faced with a similar prospect. In the early thirteenth century its ancient deposits in Devonshire had been showing signs of exhaustion and the industry had to move farther west to Cornwall. In the fourteenth century it was the turn of the Cornish tin centres to suffer. The output fell from about 1328 thousand weights per annum in the thirties of the fourteenth century to under 500 thousand weights in the mid-fifties. It recovered for a while

²⁸ See J. U. Nef, 'Mining and Metallurgy in Medieval Civilisation' in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. II, p. 457; Bernhard Neumarn, *Die Metalle, Geschichte, Vorkommen, etc.* *passim*; E. Reyer, *Zinn*, 6 ff.; L. Lewis, *Stannaries*, 33 ff.; C. Neuburg, *Goslars Berghau bis 1552*, 55 ff., 78, 106; Ludwig Beck's *Geschichte des Eisens* is utterly unconcerned with quantities, but the medieval section of vol. I (pp. 643 ff.) strongly supports the impression of a general advance in the use of iron and steel in the later Middle Ages.

at the end of the century when it reached a very high peak of 1600 thousand weights per annum, but eventually it slumped again and stayed low – mostly below 900 thousand weights – for much of the fifteenth century. The output was not to reach and pass the figures of the pre-Black Death decades until well into the sixteenth century. The decline was not so clearly marked and did not appear to continue for a period equally long in the other important tin area, that of Zinnwald and Altenberg in the Bohemian mountains, but there too the rising trend was interrupted in the first half of the fifteenth century (the Hussite wars were mainly responsible), and production could not wholly recover until the seventies.²⁹

The iron industry alone appeared to have escaped the depression. For one thing, it was more dispersed and more dependent on local conditions than other branches of mining. And it is also possible that the very disorders and wars of the time, which did so much to disturb industrial development elsewhere, stimulated the making of guns, cannon and miscellaneous weapons, and created what appears to be a mild war boom in the main iron-making regions. For in at least two main European sources of high-quality iron – that of Sweden and that of Bayonne-Bilbao – output continued at a level which did not sufficiently differ from that of the previous centuries to attract the attention of contemporary commentators. In most of the other important centres of the iron industry on the continent – even on the Lorraine deposits of the low-grade ore – the industry underwent in the second half of the fifteenth century a technical development – higher and better smelting ovens, greater use of water to work bellows and hammers – which suggests that the industry was expanding. How recent and how general this expansion was and how much it owed to war demand – all these are questions still awaiting an answer.

This catalogue of industries, sinking or just afloat, cannot be concluded without some reference to the most important of the medieval industries, that of cloth. This is not of course the right place in which to unravel its involved pattern in the later Middle Ages. If Europe is viewed as a whole, the later Middle Ages will appear as the time when cloth production both rose and fell. While it declined in Flanders and probably in France, it prospered in other places. In the fourteenth century the cloth industry of Brabant drew to itself some of the prosperity which seemed to be departing from Flanders. In the middle of the fourteenth century the English cloth industry made a sudden leap forward which brought it to its peak at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; in the fifteenth century the cloth industry of Holland, especially that of

²⁹ See Nef, *op. cit.*, pp. 456–8.

Leiden, got under way. We are told that a number of smaller centres of cloth production came to the fore at that time. However, nothing less than a statistical inquiry could show whether the industrial activity in the new areas was sufficient to match the declining production of Flanders; and comprehensive figures are lacking. But judging from the falling supplies of raw materials, the cloth industry, and more especially the output of the high quality cloth for export, must also have declined. In Flanders, Brabant and Holland, by far the most important source of high quality wool was England, and English wool exports were declining.

4

The story of the cloth industry epitomises the entire history of commerce and industry in the later Middle Ages. The contemporary record of most other trades was equally broken and confused by local and contradictory movements. Regarded as a whole, European economy had its irregular rises and falls – what the economists call short-term fluctuations – which broke the continuity of the falling trends. Above all, the last quarter of the fourteenth century and the second quarter of the fifteenth were marked both in this country and abroad by signs of economic revival, however sudden and short-lived. Yet, on a broad view, European trade passed in the later Middle Ages through a trough long enough – sometimes longer than a century – to justify the diagnosis of a ‘secular’ slump.

There is now a broad agreement about the facts of the slump, but there is still much uncertainty about its explanation. Was the depression sufficiently ‘general’, i.e. common to a range of occupations sufficiently wide, to justify the assumption of a common factor? Some of the causes were undoubtedly accidental and contingent: misfortunes, local and temporary, which will be found in the record of every major industry and trade. The Hussite wars had their effect on Bohemian mines; Gascon campaigns disturbed the wine trade; Scandinavian wars interrupted the fishing and the curing of Skania herring; the Wars of the Roses may have interfered with English exports; and urban revolutions had their obvious effect on the Flemish cloth trade. All these were, so to speak, ‘events’: fortuitous happenings which sometimes coincided but were not deeply related. Some historians might therefore be forgiven for their reluctance to treat them as anything more than a series of accidents and coincidences.

Accidents and coincidences they doubtless were. Yet some of them, even if regarded in isolation, might on second thoughts appear to be not wholly fortuitous. It will not be too far-fetched to believe that the military and political conflict between the Hanse and the Danish kings

was in fact due to the remarkable expansion of the Hanseatic interests in Skania fisheries and in Scandinavia in general during the previous century, or that the social war in Flanders was prepared by the previous century of industrial growth. Even less accidental and more obviously rooted in the expansion of the previous age were the seemingly unrelated experiences of miners struggling in different parts of Europe against the difficulties of deep workings and against the mounting dangers of water. And in a field less purely economic, it is possible to interpret the gradual clogging up of important trade routes, described elsewhere, as a more or less inevitable consequence of the political regime which had gradually evolved in the later Middle Ages in the territories of France and the Holy Roman Empire: the solidifying of local custom in the former, the withering of central authority in the latter.

It is not, however, on these considerations alone that the hypothesis of a common cause rests. Much more important is the manifestation of certain deep-seated factors similar to those which were responsible for the ascending movement of the earlier centuries. In the first place, there were prices. Just as the expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was accompanied by steep price rises all over Europe, so was the decline of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries accompanied by price changes no less continuous, though possibly less spectacular. Some of these movements have already been mentioned; here they must be considered somewhat more closely. The series most easily available to the historian and most generally studied, that of grain, shows prices expressed in terms of stable exchange medium either falling or stagnating all over Europe. The 20-year means of English wheat prices collected by Lord Beveridge and his team of price historians moved in the manner shown in Table 4.5.

TABLE 4.5 *Annual wheat prices in the Low Countries*³⁰

Years	Wheat prices in shillings (per qr)	Wheat prices in grains of silver
1300-19	7.01	1734
1320-39	6.27	1547
1340-59	6.31	1372
1360-79	7.55	1508
1380-99	5.57	1113
1400-19	6.37	1188
1420-39	6.65	1107
1440-59	5.56	926
1460-79	6.02	812
1480-99	6.40	852
1500-19	6.91	920

Thus, apart from the high prices of 1360–79, which were influenced by a succession of bad harvests, the current prices sagged with a tendency to fall, while silver prices fell with hardly a break. Comparable foreign prices are not available for periods as early and in samples equally representative. The two collections most commonly used – Hanauer's for Alsace and d'Avenel's for France – do not lend themselves to close analysis and will not by themselves support any reliable historical conclusion. All that the two series can be made to yield is a vague and general impression.

Yet general impressions are not to be spurned, especially if they happen to agree with other and more reliable evidence; and the impression is that the continental prices, in terms of silver, exhibit the English trend to a greatly exaggerated degree. The exaggeration was obviously due to the currency troubles of the times, for whereas English coinage remained comparatively stable (the silver content of the shilling stood at about 246 grains troy until 1344, and was thereafter reduced by slow steps till it fell to 133.20 grains troy in 1461) that of France and of most other continental countries was greatly debased throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. So fast and so continuous was the debasement that, however much the current prices rose, they never kept pace with it. According to recent authorities the Counts of Flanders at one time purposely manipulated their currency in the hope that the cost of living and wages would lag behind international prices.

TABLE 4.6 *Annual wheat prices in the Low Countries*³⁰
(Index number: 1375–99 = 100)

Years	Current prices
1375–99	100
1400–24	104
1425–49	138
1450–74	109

Yet, however exaggerated the trend of the French and Alsatian prices, they moved in the same direction as the trends of other and more reliable series. Among the latter should perhaps be included the price series for Flanders since 1375, which has also been assembled by the International Price Committee. It shows the 'current' wheat prices fairly

³⁰ I owe the Flemish prices to Lord Beveridge's courtesy. They are derived from printed sources, mostly from H. Van Houtte's *Documents pour servir à l'Histoire des Prix*. The Königsberg prices (Table 4.7) come from an anonymous mid-nineteenth-century summary of grain prices in the records of the Prussian Order, quoted in W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*, 32–3.

stable between 1375 and 1425 and then, after a brief and sharp rise in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, falling rather steeply for another twenty-five years. By the end of the third quarter of the fifteenth century they stood barely 9 per cent above the price in 1375 and barely 5 per cent above the price in 1400. In the same period prices measured in silver declined. (Table 4.6.)

The importance of the figures in Flanders lies in their relation to the world prices. The Low Countries were heavy importers of grain which they drew from more than one distant source and commonly from the Baltic. They were thus more sensitive to the general trends in European production and commerce than were the prices of such comparatively self-sufficient countries as England. From this point of view, also worth quoting is the little evidence we possess of the movement of prices in the principal source of grain exports in the same period, i.e. in the Eastern Baltic. In an anonymous mid-nineteenth century compilation based on the Königsberg records of the Prussian order, the price of rye expressed in units of silver is shown to behave in a manner strikingly similar to that of grain prices in the west. The prices for rye in Königsberg in the fifteenth century moved as in Table 4.7:

TABLE 4.7 *Prices of rye in Königsberg*
(Index number: 1399=100)

Years	Prices (silver)
1399	100
1405	89.29
1432	85.32
1448	79.81
1494	49.84
1508	36.48

Owing to the heavy debasement of local currency in the fifteenth century 'current' prices may actually have risen, but the rise was probably gentle compared to the heavy depreciation of the mark.

A movement of prices so continuous must have had an obvious effect on economic life. The falling or sagging prices for agricultural products happened to be accompanied by steeply-rising costs of labour and must therefore have depressed the profits of demesne farming and discouraged commercial production for the market everywhere. In the absence of clear statistical evidence about trade in luxuries and semi-luxuries, it is difficult to say to what extent it was affected. Did the purchasing power of the upper classes and their demand for goods decline with the falling profits of industry and agriculture?

On general grounds some such correlation could be expected, but

whether the effect of prices went further than that, i.e. whether it was also responsible for the slump in the major industries, depends on a number of other considerations. It depends, in the first place, on the extent to which price changes were general, i.e. common to the entire range of medieval commodities. It depends also on the susceptibility of medieval producers to price stimuli; above all on the susceptibility of those agricultural producers, who did not depend on 'cash' crops for their income.

On the whole the evidence on both points will not support the hypothesis of prices as the main, and still less as the sole, cause of the slump. Our knowledge of medieval prices is largely confined to grain, but in so far as other series are available they suggest that the fall in prices was highly departmentalised. Thus it does not appear that prices for cloth or those for iron, or indeed those for other commodities, fell at all or fell in the same proportion as prices for agricultural products. Heterogeneous and difficult to collate as are the figures in Thorold Rogers's great collection, they nevertheless leave a strong impression that industrial prices did not in any way synchronise with those of grain. Prices for building materials were rising till the middle of the fourteenth century, were more or less stable from 1370 to 1425, and thereafter fell at a somewhat slower pace than grain. The prices of textiles (the least reliable in the collection) appear to fall from 1375 to 1440 and to rise thereafter. Prices for iron were rising fast in the second half of the fourteenth century and falling gently in the fifteenth, finishing in 1475 about 4 per cent above their level in 1350. Expressed in bushels of wheat the index of iron prices in the second half of the century rose without a break from 100 in the first half of the century to 159 in the decade of 1351 to 1360, and to 352 in 1389 to 1400.

Thus the prices for separate commodities did not move together. Even the different agricultural products depreciated and appreciated at times and at rates somewhat different from those of wheat. As far as it is possible to judge from the variegated collection of prices for animals and animal products assembled by Thorold Rogers, the relation between their prices and those for wheat was not at all close. (Table 4.8.)

The prices are here expressed in silver, and therefore somewhat exaggerate the fall in prices, but they reveal very clearly the difference between the two series. The prices for animal products in current coinage actually rose and were considerably higher in the period of 1401 to 1425 than in that of 1351 to 1375 and were not much lower in 1451 to 1475 than they had been a century earlier. Indeed, expressed in current prices, the series after 1351 continues the rising trend of the previous two centuries for at least another 125 years. Hanauer's figures for Alsace, however exiguous, and d'Avenel's collection for France, however hetero-

geneous, are nevertheless sufficient to suggest that in other parts of Western Europe the two series were at least as divergent as in England. Taking Hanauer's silver prices for 1351 to 1375 as 100, we find that in 1400–25 the grain prices fell to 64 while the prices for animal products stood at 87. Hanauer's silver prices, but not his current ones, broke thereafter, but while the index of his silver prices for grain fell between 1351 and 1450 from 100 to 71, that of his prices for animal products stayed at 100. In the subsequent collapse of food prices, largely reflecting the debasement of French coinage, the index of grain prices sank by the end of the century to as low a level as 40, but prices for animal products still stood at some 40 per cent higher at 54 to 56.

TABLE 4.8 *English prices of animal products and wheat*
(Index number: 1351–75 = 100)

Years	Wheat	Animal products and cattle
1351–75	100	100
1376–1400	71	88
1401–25	70	99
1426–50	70	89
1451–75	55	76
1476–1500	53	68

Similar – no more reliable but equally significant – evidence about most animal products could be quoted from almost every continental country, but none of these prices are more significant or have been better studied than those of butter. Trade in butter may appear to the uninitiated too small to provide a foundation for any argument, especially one about medieval economy as a whole. Yet in spite of being cast on a small scale, it has turned out to be an important index of wider movements. For butter was a merchandise circulating over great distances and commanding an international price; and what is even more important is that it happened to be a semi-luxury entering into popular consumption. When we are told that in this period a Prussian labourer earned the equivalent of 30 kilogrammes of rye per day, it is not necessary to know what Alfred Marshall said about the elasticity of the demand for bread in order to conclude that agricultural labourers were now better able to indulge in a little butter, however expensive. The price of butter was therefore highly responsive to changes in demand and supply, and was more sensitive as a barometer of markets than prices of more indispensable foods. It is therefore very significant that the price of butter and the price of grain diverged more widely than the prices of any other commodities. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the butter prices rose very steeply, in

both current coinage and in silver, in all the main sources of supplies, with the possible exception of Holland – in Sweden, in Norway, in Western Poland. Steepest of all was the rise in Norway. There, after about seventy or eighty years of relatively stable prices, butter suddenly rose by about 10 per cent in the sixties of the fourteenth century and by about 33 per cent by 1400. In the course of the fifteenth century the prices continued to soar; and by 1457 reached a level 200 per cent above that of 1400, dropping to about 100 per cent above that of 1400 in the next decade. On the other hand, the prices for rye imported from the Baltic moved relatively little, and if anything sagged. A similar discrepancy between the prices of rye and butter developed in Sweden and in Prussia, and above all in the Polish hinterland from where Prussian seaports drew most of their butter. In Cracow the index of prices for rye between 1398 and 1450 sank from 33 to 10, but at the same time the prices of butter rose from 10 to 33 or more than threefold.³¹

From the present point of view, the precise cause underlying the behaviour of butter prices is less important than the fact that they behaved differently from grain prices, and that they bear out more fully than any other price series the danger of generalising from a price trend which was apparently confined to grain. Indeed, even in the grain trade the influence of prices is not very obviously related to changes in production and trade. While in most European countries prices expressed in silver were falling, current prices in local coinage were rising; and in regions as self-supporting as most provinces of France and Central Germany it was the current prices that mattered most, for it was in relation to current prices that the cost of living, the rate of wages, and the profits of agriculture fluctuated. In England the break in the prices in the second quarter of the fourteenth century was unmistakable, but the downward trend was neither continuous nor very marked – certainly less continuous and less marked than the earlier rise. The line representing the long-term trend of English prices and based, say, in moving 25-year averages, is all but horizontal; the prices of 1500 being actually 10 per cent higher than those of the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The lowest prices of the period – those from 1450 to 1475 – were only 20 per cent below those of 1300 to 1325. Expressed in silver, the English prices fell rather more steeply; yet even they did not fall more than about 25 per cent: from 1372 to 1107 grains of silver per quarter of wheat in the century between 1340 and 1440. And it was in that century that English agriculture contracted most and its organisation changed most profoundly.

The economic and more especially the commercial trends of the time

³¹ Julian Pelc, *Ceny w Krakowie w latach 1369–1600*, 127 ff.; for other butter prices see J. Schreiner, *Pest og Prisfall i Senmiddelalderen*, 82.

were thus out of scale with the movements of grain prices. Is that surprising? The only way in which changes in grain prices could influence production and trade was by calling forth greater or smaller supplies of marketable products. But earlier in this chapter it has already been emphasised that in agriculture prices were by no means the sole, or the main, conductor of economic stimuli. Peasant producers were far too self-sufficient to order their production and to regulate their marketable surpluses in direct response to commercial considerations; and in the later Middle Ages this element of self-sufficiency increased rather than diminished, or, what is the same thing, the proportion of agricultural producers sensitive to prices was smaller than before. There is thus even less reason for seeking in grain prices the main cause of the falling trends of the later Middle Ages than there is for seeking in them an explanation of the rising trends in the earlier centuries.

The doubts are reinforced by the uncertainty of the monetary factor. One of the reasons why prices offer such an obvious and tempting explanation is that at first sight they can easily be fitted into what is known of the contemporary changes in the supply of precious metals. The supplies of silver from the European silver mines gradually gave out, as silver mines entered upon their decline. The supplies from the Goslar region dwindled in the thirteenth century, those from the other mining areas of Central and Eastern Europe declined or ceased altogether in the fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries. There is also evidence of local scarcities of silver. Indeed, such re-minting as the English Crown undertook in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in 1344, 1346, 1351, 1412 and 1461, had for its object to bring the silver content of the English coins into line with the shorter supply and the higher price of silver.

This now appears to be the generally accepted view. Its relevance to the problem of falling prices, however, is not as clear as it might at first sight appear. In the first place, there is a purely historical difficulty of dates and places. The movements of prices cannot easily be synchronised with the dates at which the mining of silver is known to have declined, nor can they be put into geographical relation with areas in which silver was mined. Whereas the Goslar mining was already depressed in the thirteenth century, and silver mining elsewhere reached its lowest depths by the middle of the fourteenth century, the fall in prices did not begin till some time in the first half of the fourteenth century and did not become general till much later. Silver began to flow again from the Saxon mines in the fifties of the fifteenth century, yet, expressed in terms of silver, prices stayed low and, in England at least, continued to fall till 1480. Moreover, the price changes occurred no earlier and were no more spectacular in the regions nearest to the sources of new silver than they

were elsewhere; and it is difficult to read into the regional differences between the price series in Cracow, Alsace, Holland and Norway the familiar sequence of concentric ripples by which falling investment and employment in the mining areas could normally be expected to transmit the effects of a mining slump over the entire face of Europe.

There are also the more general arguments some of which have already been mentioned in the discussion of the thirteenth-century rises. To begin with, the annual increments of new silver at their highest were not as great as other changes in silver supplies could be and, in fact, were. By 1300 or 1320, the dates at which supplies of silver from continental mines began markedly to fall off, the total stock of silver in Europe, in relation to annual output, must have been truly enormous, for it had been amassed in at least two centuries, and probably three, of large and steadily mounting output. And when the total stock was thus two hundred to five hundred times that of its annual accretions, the international price of silver was influenced more by the manner in which it was employed than by the current flow from the mines. The falling investment in industry and agriculture as a result of the low level of profits, the changing financial technique, the diversion of currency into the hands of the Crown and its soldiers, the greater demand for silver for buckles and buttons: each of these phenomena could and should have had at least as great an effect on the value of silver as the changes in the supply of new bullion.

What makes the hypothesis of silver supplies all the more difficult to accept is that, even if the flow of new metal from the mines affected international supplies of silver, it did not in the same degree, or indeed in any degree, determine the supplies to individual countries. Individual countries received the bullion by means of international trade, and such was the structure of foreign trade in the later Middle Ages that while some countries earned vast balances, others did not; and that the changes in trade balances did not synchronise with the ups and downs of silver mining. On the roughest calculation, England's favourable balance on the visible trading account oscillated in the course of the fifteenth century between £50,000 and £150,000, and was on the average equal to about half the total value of English foreign trade and more than twice the value of coinage drawn in and out of the mint in the years of recoinage. And if, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries wool exports and grain exports declined, the deficiency was more than made up by the high taxes on wool, the development of English cloth exports, and the virtual cessation of Flemish cloth imports. There is thus every reason why silver should have continued to be imported, and there was nothing surprising or anachronistic in the verse of the fifteenth-century *Libel of English Policy*, in which its well-informed author describes the Prussians as

importing

plate of silver of weighes good and sure
in great plenty which they bring and buy
out of the lands of Bohemia and Hungary.

In times of reviving trade, such as the last quarter of the fourteenth century and the thirties and forties of the fifteenth, when the *Libel* was composed, the balance of trade and the imports of bullion may well have risen not only in relation to the total value of trade of those years but also in comparison with the trade balance of earlier centuries. True, that visible balance was apt to be eaten into by papal taxation and often frittered away in payments for war and garrisons abroad, but all this means is that the flow of silver in and out of this country was due to war and payments abroad, and not changes in silver output alone.³²

5

Thus price movements there were, and from most of them important consequences followed; but they could not be entirely ascribed to monetary cause, and moreover they were not general. And price changes which are not 'general' but are mainly confined to grain, point to a factor which has already been shown to have operated in the opposite direction in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, i.e. population. On broad, and largely theoretical, grounds a fall in population would be compatible with all the phenomena which our evidence exhibits, and should raise none of the objections to which other general explanations are open. When population fell, some marginal lands would in all probability be abandoned and food would be produced on better land. Relative to the amount of land and labour engaged in food production and relative to the demand for food, supplies would then be more plentiful and therefore cheaper. There would thus be every reason to expect both smaller production and lower prices accompanied by the show of abundance which is so conspicuous in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A fall in population would also have, so to speak, a selective effect on prices, in that it would tend to lower the prices of

³² The problem is further complicated by the use of gold. Most countries in Europe introduced gold coinage by the middle of the fourteenth century, and even before that happened, gold and gold coin of Italian and Byzantine origin was often used in settlement of international payments. The value of silver, or rather its local scarcities and superfluities, was therefore bound to be affected by the terms on which silver and gold coins were exchanged. And as commercial values of the two metals were often at variance with the 'official' or mint terms of exchange, flights to and from silver coinage were very frequent. When they happened they did at least as much to cause local scarcities and abundances of silver as any other changes in the supply of bullion.

agricultural products, which were previously being produced at high and ever-rising cost – or, to use the economist's terminology, under steeply diminishing returns – but would have little effect on commodities not greatly subject to diminishing returns, i.e. most industrial products. By increasing the proportions of silver per head it would counteract the effects of falling supplies from the mines, and might even counterbalance what economists would describe as 'deflationary changes in liquidity', but what historians would classify as greater tendency to hoarding. It would help to increase the 'effective demand' of large masses of population, i.e. stimulate their outlay on food and other goods, and thus lead to higher prices and greater supplies of semi-luxuries especially sensitive to fluctuations of demand.

All this is theory, and like all theories it may at first sight appear too simple to fit the infinite variety of medieval experience. But it so happens that this particular argument has emerged from evidence purely descriptive and from arguments largely empirical, and has in fact been first announced as a matter of historical fact by medievalists as innocent of population theory as only medievalists can be. To make this clear it may be worth marshalling some of the evidence even if this will mean transgressing the strict limits of this chapter's subject.

The most familiar evidence is that derived from the topographical record of depopulation, and, above all, from the evidence of vacant holdings and uncultivated fields in the later Middle Ages. In England neither the story of colonisation in the earlier centuries nor that of the depopulation in the later ones has been studied sufficiently closely to yield statistical estimates, but the historians who handled evidence abroad happened to be more quantitatively minded; and, if their results are to be trusted, the abandoned fields and holdings represented throughout the late Middle Ages a very considerable proportion of land erstwhile occupied. In South-western Germany the *Wüstungen* at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were so high as to account in some places for more than half of the holdings. Recent computation puts the proportion of vacant holdings in Scandinavian countries almost equally high.³³

Needless to say, the evidence of abandoned holdings is apt to magnify the depopulation process it reflects. But allowing for fields abandoned for reasons other than shortage of population, allowing also for subsequent re-lets and re-occupation, there still remains a large balance of lands unoccupied and depopulated through shortage of manpower. Moreover

³³ Wilhelm Abel, *Die Wüstungen des Ausgehenden Mittelalters*, 1–13, 25–30; J. Schreiner, *Pest og Prisfall i Sennmiddelalderen*, 58–63 and *passim*. For a detailed quantitative analysis of German *Wüstungen*, see Heinz Pohlendt, *Die Verbreitung der Mittelalterlichen Wüstungen in Deutschland*, ch. II and III, Göttingen, 1950.

the shortage was obviously general, i.e. not confined to agriculture alone. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the fall of population in the countryside was not the result of flight to towns, for population in towns was also dwindling. In this country the old corporate towns – Northampton, Lincoln – filled the air with protestations of poverty and with claims for reduction of royal taxes on grounds of depopulation. A German historian has computed that the population of North German cities declined in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by at least 20 per cent. No such computation has been made for the towns of England or France, but those towns where the urban evidence has been studied at all closely – Bordeaux, Rouen, Arras – bear signs of contraction at least as great. The Flemish decline has already been noted.

Depopulation, both urban and rural, was of course, a complex process, mostly discontinuous and sometimes compensated by new growth; and indeed some of the new growth was so boisterous that in the absence of quantitative data it might well give the impression of a balance successfully redressed. Thus, while the population of most English towns fell after 1350, it may have remained more or less stationary in London, Bristol and Southampton and two or three other sea ports, and may for a time have grown in the cloth-making towns and villages of East Anglia, Yorkshire and the West Country. Similarly while the population in the towns of France, Flanders, Northern and Central Germany declined, that in North Netherlands (Holland) and in Southern and South-eastern Germany may have grown in the course of the fifteenth century.

This was a redress in some measure, but the measure must not be exaggerated. Judging from the amount of cloth produced – say 50,000 cloths per annum – the numbers engaged in English cloth industry at its height could not have been greater than 25,000 persons, if as great.³⁴ Abroad the cloth industry of Holland was not yet on a scale sufficient to make up for the decline of the industry elsewhere, just as her towns could not as yet have grown sufficiently to balance the fall of urban population in Flanders and France. Similarly, the development of Augsburg and Nuremberg was also too much in its infancy to counter-balance the ebbing fortunes of Hanseatic economy.

Further evidence of falling population will be found in the falling land values. In various parts of France payments for land continually fell, in spite of the rising wheat prices in current coinage. On the estates of St Germain-des-Prés near Paris rents fell without a break from 84*d* per *arpent* in the second half of the fourteenth century to 55*d* in the middle decades of the fifteenth century and to about 30*d* in the seventies and

³⁴ There are several ways of computing the figures. The simplest is to compute from the price on cloth and the costs of production. See M. Postan in *Economic History Review*, II (1950), 232.

eighties. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway land prices – both rents and capital values – were falling throughout the period, at a pace which appeared to outrun the fall in prices of grain.

Finally, there is the evidence of wages. For whereas prices of agricultural products fell, wages rose. Evidence of rising wages will be found all over Europe, but the most complete as well as the most reliable series of wages so far available is that of the wage rates on the manors of the bishopric of Winchester published by Lord Beveridge. That series reveals a twofold rise in real wages between 1300 and 1350: a rise strangely suggesting a scarcity of labour through falling population.

So unless and until new evidence to the contrary is produced, the commercial and industrial depression of the later Middle Ages must be accounted for by decline in numbers. There were fewer hands at work, and there were fewer mouths to feed. This need not have left individuals any worse off; indeed, there is every reason for believing that the working population of Northern Europe was now more prosperous than ever before. Yet collectively Europe became smaller and poorer, and the decline in her trade and industry was merely one manifestation of a contracting continent.

(2) *The regulated trade*

1

A long period of contracting trade left its mark on the men engaged in it. The economic status of the merchants, indeed their very behaviour, changed; and no change was more typical, more in tune with the times, than the passing of the great men. If the characteristic figure in commercial and industrial development of the early centuries was the adventurer-merchant depicted by Pirenne, the typical representative of the later Middle Ages was the sedate *bourgeois* of middle rank. Rich men were of course to be found in many large towns. Above all, the Anglo-French wars brought forth small groups of war financiers and speculators. But careers and fortunes like those of Jacques Cœur in fifteenth-century France remain isolated and shortlived; for this was no longer the time of the great speculators moving about the western world, founding cities, forcing open new trade routes, founding new commercial empires. Their race had all but died out and was not to be reborn until the very threshold of the Renaissance; the time when the Welsers and the Fuggers rose in the South of Germany, and a new generation of speculators appeared on the bourses of Antwerp and Amsterdam.

The fifteenth-century merchant new-style was a composite type made up of several elements of different antiquity. One of its components was

that of a merchant turned financier; and both the type itself and the process by which he appeared on the scene were of course much older than the later Middle Ages. Medieval merchants of all centuries were prone to retire from active trade as soon as they had made their fortunes. Having retired, the more substantial businessmen in England often abandoned their towns and their urban associations altogether and established themselves in the country as gentlemen. On the continent, they would more frequently choose to stay in the town as *rentiers*. They might participate as sleeping partners in the active trade of others; they might buy urban tenements and rents, take up municipal and other public bonds and sometimes advance private loans.

The propensity to retire into a life of *rentier* is not difficult to account for. The physical hazards of active trade abroad were not always matched by opportunities for enrichment, and the opportunity grew poorer as the foreign markets grew smaller. At the same time it is probable that capital was still sufficiently scarce to command a high rate of interest. As far as it is possible to judge (and the problem has not been investigated as fully as it deserves), the return expected on the investment of sleeping partners in fifteenth-century England was on the average well in excess of 10 per cent per annum. The later Middle Ages also offered new and ever-growing opportunities for financing needy municipalities and kings at rates nearly as high.

There is therefore nothing incomprehensible or in any way mystical about that process of financial degeneration which seems to have come over a number of wealthy cities in the Middle Ages. When we find in the middle of the thirteenth century the ruling class of Arras made up largely of financiers advancing money to towns and princes all over Northern Europe, we cannot explain this otherwise than by concluding that many of the families, which in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries had pioneered in European cloth industry and in long-distance trade, had now 'made their pile' and sought in money-lending a quieter mode of life and a less adventurous occupation. Other cities might also, like Arras, pass out of the plane of active trade into mere money-lending. It so happens that the rise of Arras to the position of a banker city to the rest of Northern Europe occurred very early (for Arras's industrial career had also begun very early) and has been well studied; but a historian with a practised eye will find no difficulty in detecting in the later Middle Ages the same process in most of the towns of Northern Europe which had gone through a period of expansion and enrichment in the previous century or century and a half. Much of the mystery of the otherwise inexplicable withering away of the active trade of Flemish merchants might be found in the growth of the *rentier* class. The men, who would in an earlier age have acted as traders to foreign lands or even as employer-

clothiers, were now tending to withdraw into quieter occupations: into brokerage and hostel-keeping in Bruges, into passive investment elsewhere.

In the later Middle Ages this process became more general, more, so to speak, disseminated, but it did not account for the entire change in mercantile society. It accounted only for one component of the new *bourgeoisie*, and there were other components as well. Above all, there were the men who looked for and found security not outside but within occupations still largely commercial. They did so by trading in a smaller way, within well-organised and protected markets.

The typical figures of Northern European commerce in most towns in the late Middle Ages were a humbler lot of men than the merchants of some other times and places. Historians have always noticed the social differences which distinguished the commerce of the great Italian cities from that of the Hanseatic towns. Whereas the bulk of Italy's foreign commerce and finance in the later Middle Ages was in the hands of great commercial and banking houses, the Frescobaldi, the Bardi, the Peruzzi, the Medici, the Datini, the trade of the Hanseatic towns was in the hands of a greater number of smaller people. The difference, however, was not so much geographical as chronological. The records of the earlier centuries, the time when the great Hanseatic cities were being founded, are filled with the acts of great families attempting great things. In a few cities like Cologne it is still possible to find in the later Middle Ages great traders and speculators, like Tidman of Limbourg who financed Edward III, or Gerard von Wesel who tried in the middle of the fifteenth century to lead Cologne's break-away from the Hanse. Elsewhere in the German North, men of this stamp were no longer to be found. It is not that the great families wholly died out, for there were still Castorps and Warendorps all over Hanseatic regions. What happened was that they no longer occupied the position in the Hanseatic trade which had been theirs when they were blazing its trails in the newly opened lands beyond the Elbe.

The bulk of the trade was now in the hands of men of middling substance. And being middling they looked for safety and found it in co-operation, in combination and, more generally, in numbers. It was for their benefit that the Hanseatic League maintained in most foreign centres within its influence their great factories or *Kontors* with large bodies of resident agents or factors. It was their cargoes that were marshalled in convoys to the Bay of Bourgneuf, to the east coast of England, to Bruges. And it was their trade that was looked after by corporate organisations within the German towns – the *Bergenfahrers* and *Schönenfahrers* of Lübeck, the *Englandfahrers* of Cologne.

The English development was even more remarkable in that the dividing line was drawn more sharply. The early years of Edward III,

coinciding as they did with the opening phases of the Hundred Years War and Edward's great fiscal operations, forced into bloom all the capitalist or quasi-capitalist elements in English life. Men like the brothers de la Pole, representing the upper rank of the English merchant classes, now rose to great wealth gained in supplying the armies, in arranging and transmitting payments abroad, in managing the king's taxes and levies on wool. Their economic power as well as their hold over the English wool trade reached their highest point in the thirties and forties when, having formed several syndicates, they were able to finance the Crown and to monopolise the entire British export trade in wool. But Edward's insolvency in the fifties brought about their collapse; and their collapse meant also the demise of a whole social order. When in the last quarter of the century the Staple of Calais finally took shape it was made up of a larger number of smaller men — men who in the fifteenth century came to be represented by the three generations of Celys: respectable, prosperous traders who, though in the highest rank of the wool trade, could not claim more than one fiftieth or even a hundredth share of England's wool exports. Needless to say, individuals of outstanding wealth did not wholly disappear from English trade and finance. The wars of Richard II called forth Brember and Lyon; the trade of Bristol could boast of Robert Cheddar and William Canning. And in fifteenth-century London, there was Dick Whittington. Yet in a curious way none of these men was as typical of the fifteenth century as the great London dynasties were of the thirteenth. They were probably not quite so rich; they were certainly less numerous. Above, all, they no longer dominated the trade of the country. The economic and financial power of the wool trade in its relations with the Crown and with the outside world now rested not on the wealth or influence of individuals but on the power of the corporate organisation — the Company of the Merchants of the Staple of Calais.

The Company of the Staple was not alone. The 'general' traders of England, who specialised in importing and exporting miscellaneous merchandise other than wool, now for the first time appeared in records as the Company of Merchant Adventurers. By then the name was out of date. The time when English general merchants adventured farthest into distant lands and seas was the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and preceded by at least two or three generations the establishment of a company claiming the title of Merchant Adventurers. It was in the fifteenth century, when the expansion of English trade both in area and in quantity was over, and when the erstwhile opportunities for commercial adventure had fallen away, that the merchants arrogated to themselves the name to which they were no longer entitled. Their company was coming into ever-greater prominence as the century

drew to its close, and made up in collective power and influence for the more modest substance of its members.

2

Corporate trade was indeed the typical feature of the later Middle Ages. Mediocre men combined to do what greater ones might have done in isolation. In later centuries, the late sixteenth and the seventeenth, corporate trade could be made to serve the ends of great speculative business. Similar corporations may also have existed in the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages. Did not the great Flemish capitalists of the thirteenth century operate in London through the Hanse of the Flemish towns, and did not the magnates of Cologne establish themselves in England at the time through a similar Hanse? In the later Middle Ages, however, corporate action and corporate support became the main-stay of mediocre firms. With their support large numbers could share in the trade of Northern Europe, and without it no merchant from Northern Europe could successfully operate. Corporations both protected and circumscribed the trade they controlled; and they did not confer collective power on their members without acquiring collective authority over them. By virtue of this authority, they were now able to regulate the scale and the methods of individual enterprise and to lay down rigid rules for prices and credit, for terms of sales, for relations with agents, and for the latters' residence and conduct.

As the scope of individual enterprises contracted and their reliance upon corporate organisation grew, so their methods and organisation changed. This is not the place to deal with all the facts of medieval business technique. One fact, however, is strictly relevant here. The modest scope of individual enterprises, as well as their large numbers, forced upon them a method of trade which in at least one respect differed from the methods of the great houses of Italy and South Germany. They were less, so to speak, self-contained. An individual English firm trading abroad, or a Hanseatic firm trading in England, or a Dutch firm trading in Antwerp and Bruges, did not as a rule trade through channels entirely and exclusively its own. Whereas a great Italian firm might be served by bodies of servants and partners, a typical Hanseatic or English firm, being too small to maintain a large body of permanent servants, would try and avail itself of the services of more or less independent agents and brokers. The difference must not of course be driven too far. Most English firms trading in Flanders sent out for shorter or longer periods representatives of their own, and there were Italian merchants in Bergen, London and elsewhere ready to act for any client in Italy. But on the whole the North European machinery of factories and corporate

companies as well as the smaller scale of individual enterprise favoured a far greater development of resident agencies and of a specialised profession of foreign factors.

The corporate tendency manifested itself, however, not only abroad and in dealings with foreign countries but also at home and in matters of local trade. The municipal governments at home began to take an ever-greater interest in the commercial activities of their burgesses, and the age was one of mounting urban regulations and of accumulating urban legislation. The right to participate in the trade of the local markets and in the staple branches of foreign trade was being defined and circumscribed, the entry into them was being limited. Monopoly was indeed the prime object and the pre-requisite condition of urban regulations and became the guiding object of town policy. It was only the power of the king, as in England and France, or the political links with other towns, as in North Germany, that prevented the whole of Europe breaking up into a loose assembly of small but economically independent territories, each dominated by a monopolistic town. And even in England and France and the Hanseatic North, the monopolistic and corporate interests came to the fore in most towns.

Urban economy was indeed beginning to approximate to the textbook fiction of a medieval town: a diminutive region forming with its rural belt a self-sufficient unit, within which trade and industry were partitioned into equal shares and regulated by law. The reason why historians have so often been led to accept this fiction as a representative sample of medieval economy is that they know much more about regulated economy of the corporate town than they do about trade in its freer and less regulated aspects. For it is in the nature of regulation and control to breed documentary evidence and thus to perpetuate itself in history out of proportion to its real importance in historical development.

The corporate and monopolistic features of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century towns have thus shielded from view the meagrely documented activities of freer trades and freer towns. There were 'open' towns, and 'open' trades within them, even in the later Middle Ages. For we know that the great fair towns of Northern Europe – Bruges, Antwerp, Bergen-op-Zoom – were free ports where strangers were allowed to enter and where trade with strangers was more or less unrestricted by any law, except perhaps the law of residence and brokerage. Greater or smaller elements of freer trade might also be found in great metropolitan centres like London, in seafaring communities like Middelburg. Yet, on the whole, it was not these towns that typified the new order, but Danzig, which ended by excluding even the other Hanseatics from its local trade; Bergen, where the German merchants who dominated it established a close and highly-regulated monopoly over its trade; Rouen and Paris,

where local companies watched and fought jealously over their fields of operations; and countless other smaller towns in France and Germany, which now sank into that well-regulated stupor from which they were not to awake until the French revolution and Napoleon's conquests.

The monopolistic and regulated economy of medieval municipalities was of course related to the political as well as to the social changes within the towns. In the political struggles, which mark the history of the North European towns in the fourteenth century, the rising parties were the craft gilds, which voiced the interests of the smaller men rooted primarily in the local markets. In many German towns, in Wismar, in Rostock, in Bremen, indeed in Lübeck itself, craft gilds rose in the second half of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth to sweep out of office the descendants of the patrician families entrenched in town government. Similar revolts took place elsewhere – the Flemish risings of the fourteenth century indeed belong to the mainstream of the politics and diplomacy of the age. Except in Flanders, most of the movements of revolt failed; in towns, in which the democratic governments established themselves, they were as a rule ousted from office after a few years and replaced again by representatives of the patrician families. Yet, even at times and in places at which the counter-revolutions succeeded what they re-established was the political ascendancy of illustrious families and not the conditions which had once upon a time helped them to acquire their lustre. As has already been said, the great families themselves were no longer the same. They were mainly landowners, *rentiers*, public servants, or else traders differing only in name and personal descent from the middling men around them. The time for capitalists was over or not yet.

(3) *The Hanse*

1

The commercial depression, which for all its local variations, affected the whole of Northern Europe, and which, for all its discontinuity, lasted for a century and more, was bound to influence the political history of European trade. More especially it was bound to influence the economic policies in regions which happened to be most exposed to the action of commercial change.

North Germany was thus exposed to an extent greater than other parts of Europe. It would be natural to expect that, at the time when both population and commerce ceased to grow, the territorial scope of German trade should have ceased to expand and its outer frontiers should have ceased to move. Danzig was the last great foundation of the German town builders. After the beginning of the fourteenth century no other towns of

importance and no new commercial positions were founded in the Slavonic East. The newest and easternmost Germanic settlements – beyond the Oder and the upper Danube – were destined to remain isolated oases amidst a culture which they failed to assimilate and within an economy which they never wholly subdued or integrated with their own.

It is therefore not as paradoxical as it may seem that the age which saw the end of German expansion should also have given birth to the most important political formation in German history of the late Middle Ages – the Hanseatic League. At first sight the League was a step so novel and so forward that it may be difficult to see in it signs of decline. Yet viewed from the point of view of economic and geographical facts, it represented in the field of transcontinental trade the all-prevailing trend towards collective protection. In the second half of the fourteenth century German commerce had all but reached the limits of its territorial expansion. From then onwards the German towns were more anxious to keep the positions they possessed than able to acquire new positions farther afield. This indeed became the purpose of the Hanseatic League, and from this point of view the League was little more than a federation which the German towns established among themselves to maintain by political action that place in European trade which they had won for themselves in the course of the economic changes of the preceding epoch.

The rise of the League was thus essentially a political event; and its early development was largely a constitutional process. Its starting points were the unions of German merchants abroad. The organisations of German merchants in Wisby and London were the earliest unions of this kind. Indeed it was in England that the very term ‘Hansa’ was used for the first time to designate the right of merchants to form trading associations. By the beginning of the thirteenth century the word ceased to be applied to the burgesses of English towns and was confined to the organisations of foreign merchants in London.³⁵ Thus a number of Flemish towns headed by Bruges formed in the thirteenth century a London ‘Hansa’, which represented them before English authorities and acted on their behalf in defence of their interests and privileges. Another such organisation was the Cologne ‘Hansa’, which was eventually to grow into the Hanse of the Steelyard comprising all, or nearly all, the German merchants trading in London.³⁶ The Great

³⁵ For a closely argued discussion of the evolution of the term, see R. Doeberd, ‘À propos du mot “hansa”’, *Review du Nord*, xxxiii, no. 129 (1951).

³⁶ It has been suggested, but not definitely proved, that there were originally two German *Hansae*, that of Cologne and that of the Easterlings, which later fused into one: see M. Weinbaum: ‘Stalhof und Deutsche Gildhalle zu London’ in *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, Jahrgang 1928 (Lübeck, 1929).

Charter of 1303, which greatly extended the privileges of German merchants in England and which in later centuries came to be claimed by the Germans as the constitutional foundation of their privileged status in this country, dealt with the North German merchants as a single body. Since then the English merchants knew only of the *mercatores alemanniae*, and in this way the London Hanse of the Cologners became the London Hanse of the Germans. Under the Great Charter the Hanseatic merchants acquired valuable exemptions from customs, which put them in a more favourable position than other aliens, or indeed the native merchants of England. Their corporate organisation of the Steel-yard received extensive powers of self-government and jurisdiction and a share in municipal authority in London. All in all, the Hanseatic rights in England established the Germans in a position of privilege and autonomy comparable to the 'capitulations' of a later age.

England, however, was not the only place where the merchants from North Germany came to have a corporate organisation and a privileged status. There was hardly an important commercial centre in Northern Europe, in which some German towns did not at one time or another receive grants of commercial liberties and did not organise into communal bodies of very much the same type as the German Hanse in London. Of these communal organisations the most important were the German 'factories' at the two termini of the great route: in Bruges and Novgorod.

The German factory, or *Kontor*, in Bruges was not as old as their London Hanse, but in the course of time it became their chief trading station abroad. At the time when the *Kontor* was established, Bruges was about to enter upon the most illustrious stage of its history. With the rise of the *Kontor* the active commerce of the Flemings themselves gradually declined; but, strange as it may seem, the importance of Bruges grew as the active trade of its burgesses dwindled. At the height of Flemish industrial and commercial development in the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries Bruges had been one of the economic centres of Flanders, one of its four *Leden*, but unlike the other three it was from the very beginning more important commercially than industrially. Its cloth industry was far behind that of Ghent, Ypres and Douai; nor did it possess any other important industries. Even in commerce Bruges had at first fulfilled a highly specialised function. Its geographical situation was inconvenient for internal trade: off the main artery of the Scheldt and on the periphery of the main internal land routes. But it proved very convenient as a port for commercial traffic between the Low Countries and England, and its trade expanded as the cloth industry of Flanders became more and more dependent on English supplies of wool.

Apparently it was this connection with England that attracted the Germans to Bruges in the first instance. There has been a certain amount of argument among German historians on this point, but on the whole it appears that the Germans had been in the habit of going to England long before they established themselves in Flanders. It was because Bruges had been the centre of Anglo-Flemish trade that it also became the centre of German-Flemish trade. But with the Germans there it soon developed into something more than an Anglo-Flemish trade junction and before long acquired many features of an international emporium. Bruges, the sea port and the seat of a great fair where the Germans and the English had been in the habit of going, now became also the port and the fair where the Bretons, the Normans, the Spaniards and later the Italians came to do their buying and selling. And as Bruges rose in importance, the Hanseatic *Kontor* drew to itself an ever-greater proportion of German trade. In the course of time its privileges, its federal organisation and its hold over the Hanseatic trade became the standing, not to say the burning, issue of the inter-urban politics of the German Hanse.

The third important centre of German foreign trade where the merchants from northern and eastern towns enjoyed important privileges and a communal organisation was the 'Petershof' of Novgorod. Novgorod was the eastern terminus of the great route and the chief centre of German trade in Russia. In the early Middle Ages the Scandinavians, and especially the Gotlanders, who were probably the first to establish a commercial factory in Novgorod, possessed there a 'Hof', i.e. a 'yard', with hostels and warehouses. But eventually the 'Hof' passed into the hands of the Germans and became the seat of a communal organisation of German merchants trading to Novgorod protected by treaties with Russian princes and enjoying liberties roughly of the same kind as those possessed by their factories elsewhere.

In addition to the three main corporations of Bruges, London and Novgorod, the merchants of the Hanseatic towns also possessed outposts in smaller places like the English 'treaty ports' of Lynn, Boston, Hull and Bristol, or the distant factory – 'Fondacho dei Tedeschi' – in Venice, and a more permanent stake in the municipal institutions of most Norwegian and Swedish towns, and more especially of Bergen. In addition, improvised corporate organisations were sometimes set up in the towns of the Low Countries to which German traders happened to transfer their activities in times of trouble. Thus a network of commercial stations enjoying exceptional treaty rights and valuable commercial privileges and often connected by routes completely dominated by German merchants, formed a commercial system as close and, by all appearances, as tightly knit as any Europe had ever seen.

This system in its main outlines was already in existence at the begin-

ning of the fourteenth century, but at that time the system, like the 'informal' empires of a later age, owed its cohesion and unity to economic facts rather than to political ties. For, in theory, the corporate organisations in foreign places still led separate and independent existences and, so to speak, 'belonged' to the merchants trading in them. Viewed politically and juridically, the rise of the Hanseatic League in the closing decades of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries was nothing else than a gradual transformation of the informal system into a formal one, and a merger of the separate *Hansae* of German merchants into a single union of the towns themselves. How this transformation occurred is more or less clear and does not need much explaining. Equally clear is the process by which the union of the towns acquired a permanent organisation. Sporadic meetings of the 'home' towns to discuss matters raised by their merchants abroad could be, and were, held several times in the middle of the fourteenth century. All that was necessary to bring them together more or less permanently was a suitable occasion and a determined leadership. Both came in the second half of the century, at the time when trouble was brewing in Flanders and a growing tension in relations with Denmark led up to the first great Hanseatic war.

At the very outset of the conflict, in 1367, the towns met in Cologne to form a confederation which was this time to be provided with the rudiments of a permanent constitution and a common purse. The League survived the war, and the peace of Stralsund of 1370 which concluded the conflict is therefore regarded as the birthday of the Hanse. Furthermore, in both these conflicts, and particularly in the conflict with Denmark, Lübeck came forward as the leader of the towns and the spear-head of their attack. From that time onwards it came to be regarded, both within the Hanse and outside it, as the guardian of Hanseatic unity and as the sponsor of its policies.

This concludes the political and constitutional story of the rise of the Hanseatic League. But the most significant part of the story was neither political nor constitutional. It was economic, and the economic processes behind the constitutional evolution of the League were not those of rising unity and strength. On the contrary, the necessity which drove the towns to unite sprang from the recent, and on the whole dangerous, deterioration in their commercial position.

2

The changes in the internal relations of the Hanse might conveniently be considered first. No sooner had the Hanse emerged fully fledged from the war with Denmark than fundamental disunity began to reveal itself

in the affairs of the newly born League. In the past the economic basis of Hanseatic unity had been their common interests in the monopoly of the great route and in the common privileges which they had won for themselves in foreign markets. They exercised their monopoly and enjoyed their privileges as economic confederates rather than competitors, and in this non-competitive combination Lübeck was the cementing agent – a role for which it was well fitted both by its history and its geography. German urban colonisation owed much to Lübeck's enterprise, and many of the towns to the east of the Elbe had arisen more or less as Lübeck's colonies. Throughout that early period they continued to be bound to it by social and personal ties. Lübeck also exercised a strong economic influence by virtue of its peculiar position on the route from the Baltic to the North Sea. As long as navigation went along the sea coast and internal waterways, goods from and to Prussia had to be discharged for carriage by land across the Jutland Peninsula and thus had to pass through Lübeck. However rapidly the trade of the Prussian and Livonian towns grew, Lübeck stood to benefit by it; and as long as Lübeck continued to be indispensable, none of the other towns was likely to object to its exalted part in eastern trade.

This position could not last for ever. By the second half of the fourteenth century Lübeck was losing, even if it had not yet wholly lost, most of its special advantages. In the first place its social ties with the other towns grew weaker. The colonisation movement had spent itself before the end of the fourteenth century, and, after that, Lübeck all but ceased to send out settlers to the newer towns. In Prussia alone the towns continued to grow, but they appear to have drawn their population from Prussia itself. So, while Lübeck still remembered that it was the mother of the Baltic towns, the other towns were beginning to forget that they were Lübeck's daughters. In the second place, Lübeck was ceasing to be an unavoidable *entrepot* on the east-to-west route. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the men of Zuider Zee – of Campen, Deventer and Zwolle – popularised the direct sea route to the east round Jutland, the so-called *Umlandfahrt*; and their example was soon followed by the Prussians going west, and by the English and Dutch going east. Among the Prussian towns Danzig grew in the forties and fifties to become the chief city of Prussia; and the Danzigers from the very beginning preferred to trade to Flanders and to England by the direct sea route. Finally, Lübeck was losing its predominant share in the trade of Prussia and Livonia. By the second half of the fourteenth century the towns of Prussia and Livonia were not only learning to trade to the west without the assistance of Lübeck, but were also acquiring an ever-growing share in the exploitation of their own hinterlands. The time was not distant when they would begin to look upon their respective regions as fields exclusively their own. The

towns of Prussia would then begin to claim a monopoly of the trade of the Vistula as against the other members of the Hanse; Riga and Reval would lay the same claims to the trade of the Dvina.

The economic exclusiveness of the Livonian and Prussian groups of towns was a symptom of a *malaise* the effects of which were to be felt by all the Hanseatic towns and not by Lübeck alone. The local policies of separate territorial groups asserted themselves with ever-growing vigour. They were most vigorous of all in Prussia where they derived not only from the local economic interests of the towns but also from the peculiar position of the Teutonic Order. The Teutonic Knights were both the makers and the rulers of Prussia, for they had organised its conquest and ruled it as its sovereign princes. But unlike most other territorial rulers of Germany, the Order was very efficient: its administration was highly centralised and well organised, and its towns never assumed the same degree of independence as they did in other parts of Germany. So when the Hanse emerged it had to accept as a participant not only the towns of Prussia, but the whole of the Prussian state, that is to say, the Teutonic Order and its High Master.

The affiliation of the Order was undoubtedly a source of political strength to the League, for the High Master possessed a standing in international politics which was not to be trifled with, and his membership gave the Hanse a formal position in the world of territorial states. In the constitutional parlance of the time, the High Master was the *Beschermmer*, the protector, of the League; something like a prince of the Hanseatic empire. At the same time the insistent particularism of the Order was a source of weakness. And nowhere did the particularism manifest itself more clearly than in the Order's commercial enterprises. It traded on a very large scale in corn, amber and other commodities. It possessed an elaborate commercial organisation with central offices (*Schäffereien*) in Marienburg and Königsberg, with a whole fleet of commercial boats and agents in Prussia and other large centres of Europe. In all this trade the Order acted very much as a competitor of the Hanseatic towns and even of its own towns. What is more, it made use of its political power to regulate internal trade in a way most suitable for its own commercial interests.

So much for the separate attitude of Prussia. The other group with very strong separate interests was the western wing of the Hanse, especially the Rhenish towns with Cologne. The latter continued to find its chief fields of activity in the Netherlands and in England. Whenever the Hanse had to undertake any measure against England and Holland, the merchants of Cologne disobeyed and circumvented it and were ready to give up the membership of the Hanse rather than suffer a loss in any of their own trade in the west.

The only towns whose interest and policy seemed to be directed all through the fifteenth century towards the maintenance of Hanseatic unity were those of the central groups of the Hanse, and especially the so-called Wendish towns with Lübeck at their head. But even here Lübeck's particular interests asserted themselves. It was determined to maintain its position as a barrier and an indispensable intermediary on the east-to-west route, and it strove for Hanseatic unity largely because that unity was the only means to maintain the *status quo*. Hence its constant attempts to prevent the direct connections between the Eastern Baltic and the North Sea. Hence also its bellicosity in all the conflicts with Holland and later also with England, the two countries which made the widest use of the direct sea route through the Sound. In other words, what Lübeck strove to maintain was not the Hanse *per se*, but the particular version of the Hanse which pivoted upon its port: an attitude which the other towns understood very well and frequently resisted.

3

In this way the close of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries witnessed the ever-widening divergencies of policy among the main constituent groups of towns within the Hanse. The divergencies were largely due to the differences of regional interests which have already been described. But, behind the regional particularism of urban groups like the Prussian, the Livonian or the Rhenish, it is also possible to discover signs of an economic contraction and reaction – the latter in the literal sense of a recoil from a new and unfavourable situation.

Some of the symptoms of the recoil will be found in the growing urban exclusiveness. Its general spread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has already been described, but nowhere was the change-over towards local protectionism more clearly marked than in Northern Germany. In the centuries of German growth and expansion there was relatively speaking very little of what might be called a protective or exclusive tendency in municipal policy. Germans were expanding their trade with great confidence and seemed to fear no competitors. In their early treaties with Russia and England foreigners were given liberties of trade in German regions, and the Baltic was treated as an open sea. The internal government of the towns matched the liberal spirit of their trade. It was largely in the hands of patrician 'founder' families: an expansionist and adventurous race of men who cared comparatively little for the internal trade of their towns, and, as a rule, allowed foreigners to trade and to settle among them.

By the time of the Stralsund Peace of 1370 this liberal period was over.

The gilds of artisans and traders were becoming very powerful. The democratic revolts in a number of towns have already been mentioned. When the epidemic of petty-bourgeois movements subsided, the municipal governments, even where they were in the hands of the old families, found it easy to meet the wishes of the local gilds and to exclude the foreigner from the town markets and the surrounding rural regions. And some towns began applying anti-alien laws even against the Hanseatics.

The social changes in Hanseatic towns were of course a local reflection of an ageing process through which the whole of Europe was then passing. But at the same time they also reflected a change which was more economic than social, and as such peculiar to the Hanse. The reason why the towns now turned to their own regional trade and tried to protect their local markets is that their opportunities elsewhere had either dwindled or were seriously threatened. For since the middle of the fourteenth century the international position in Northern Europe had been continually changing to the detriment of German trade.

4

It has already been said that the immediate occasion for the formation of a permanent Hanseatic League was a threat to the Hanseatic interests in Scandinavia. The threat was not economic in origin. It sprang from a political movement in the Scandinavian kingdoms and did not threaten to raise up a rival economic power. Yet it was sufficiently characteristic of the difficulties which the Hanseatics were henceforth to encounter all over Northern Europe, and above all in Scandinavia, to be worth looking at more closely.

In the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries the Scandinavian countries were, so to speak, an economic vacuum. The native merchant class had either disappeared or had not yet risen, while the rulers were too anxious to attract whatever trade they could and, besides, were too weak to resist the outright exploitation of their countries by the Germans. The Hanseatics first appeared in Scandinavia quite early in the Middle Ages, and the merchants of Cologne traded there in the thirteenth and probably in the twelfth century. But it was only when the Germans began to import their corn surpluses that they were able to appropriate to themselves the entire commerce of the region and to acquire there a position of overwhelming power. Towards the middle of the fourteenth century the Germans came to dominate the economic life of the three countries, supplanted the native commerce and shipping, and, with the single exception of the English, had no rivals or competitors to fear.

In Sweden they controlled the chief source of her riches – the mines. So great was their power in that country that by the beginning of the

fifteenth century they appointed from among themselves one half of all the municipal governments. Equally deep was their penetration of Norway. The Norwegians were still actively engaged in commerce and navigation in the thirteenth century, but towards the end of the century the Germans made rapid inroads into their trade. We find them extending their hold over the towns of Oslo, Tunsberg, Trondjem, and especially Bergen. Bergen was the Norwegian staple town for the trade in the products of Iceland and other Norwegian islands and of the northern provinces, and it was from these regions that the most valuable products of Norwegian export came – stockfish and fish oil. And in Bergen, more than in any other Scandinavian town, the Germans were a kingdom within a kingdom, with their own laws and jurisdiction.

Their power in Denmark was somewhat more localised. Germans were settled in every Danish town, and German law replaced the Danish in national courts. But the chief point of their activity was the north shore of the Sound, the coastlands of Skania with its famous fishing grounds. For a time – a century and a half – Skania was a focal point of North European fish trade, and the periodic confluence of merchants at Skania made it also an important centre of exchange in other commodities. No wonder that the East Germans regarded Skania as an economic possession of great, not to say crucial, importance.

In the second half of the fourteenth century this position, so valuable, above all so powerful, suddenly deteriorated. Waldemar Atterdag, who rose to the throne of Denmark in 1340, not only set out to unify the Scandinavian kingdoms and thus to fill that political void in which the German towns had built their power, but, by his taxation, he also directly encroached on the Hanseatic privileges. The Germans were compelled to fight the immediate threat of taxation as well as the further danger of a united Scandinavia. The result of the struggle was a victory enshrined in the Peace of Stralsund of 1370, which was followed by the formal establishment of the Hanse.

The debut of the League was thus very successful. As a political weapon it proved itself equally successful in the struggles which it was to wage in the subsequent hundred or hundred and fifty years. The Treaty of Utrecht of 1474, which concluded a somewhat similar conflict with England a century later, still found the League in full possession of its foreign privileges and as triumphant over its enemies as it had been in 1370. Yet, successful as the League was in direct political action, it failed, as it was bound to fail, in its attempt to arrest the march of economic and political forces which continued to shape the evolution of trade in Northern Europe. It was unable to defend its position in Novgorod in the face of the rising power of the Tsars; unable to maintain its old position in Flanders in opposition to the new centres of

northern trade which were rising under different auspices in Brabant and Holland; unable to maintain its monopoly of eastern routes; in fact unable to maintain the route itself, which came in the end to be rivalled and replaced by other routes crossing the continent farther south. Above all it was incapable of preventing the rise of the two great rivals who were destined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to supplant the Hanse in the economic leadership of Northern Europe – England and Holland.

(4) *The English challenge*

1

The expansion of the Western Powers into regions hitherto monopolised by the Germans began to make headway in the second half of the fourteenth century. At first it was with the English threat that the Hanseatics appeared to be concerned most. English commercial activity in the north had been gathering strength all through the fourteenth century, and came to a head in its closing years. Yet what requires an explanation is not that that challenge should have come so early but that it should not have come earlier still. For throughout the Middle Ages England formed an essential part of the north-western trading area, and throughout the Middle Ages English merchants were themselves active on the trade routes to and from their country.

England's economic geography fitted her well to play an important part in the trade of North-western Europe. The shores of England were easily accessible across the narrow seas, and it will be recalled that in the Middle Ages as in the modern era sea routes were on the whole more efficient and cheaper than land routes. What is more, the English coast was not only easy to reach but was also worth reaching. Throughout the greater part of the Middle Ages England supplied the more highly specialised regions of Europe with the food and raw materials which some of them lacked. In this sense England's economy in the Middle Ages could be represented, as it often has been, as 'colonial'.

Like colonial countries of more recent times England may in some respects have lagged behind the neighbouring continental countries, but what justifies the appellation most is that the goods she exported were of the kind that would now be described as 'primary produce'. Some manufactured commodities were of course made in England and sold to foreigners throughout English history, and in the later Middle Ages wholly or partly manufactured cloth was to become the mainstay of English trade. But until the second half of the fourteenth century it was minerals, wool and foodstuffs that sustained England's trade and made the

English connection so indispensable in the economic life of Europe. At the very dawn of European history England supplied the rest of Europe with rare minerals, mostly tin. There is also every reason for believing that until the very end of the thirteenth century England was an important source of foodstuffs, grain and animal products which made her valuable to the Low Countries and indispensable to Scandinavia. Above all, it was the wool of her grasslands that made it possible for the highly specialised cloth-producing economies of the Low Countries and Italy to develop. Not until the late fourteenth century did England's part in European trade cease to be mainly that of a supplier of raw materials. But as long as she played that part she was bound to attract foreign trade and foreign investment in a larger measure than many other regions of Europe and to figure prominently in the commercial fortunes of the Western world.

It is thus not surprising that the history of commercial voyages to and from England should have reached to the very dawn of history. Phoenicians may or may not have paid regular visits to the West Country in search of tin, but it seems highly probable that in the Bronze Age bronze articles, manufactured from indigenous metals in Ireland and England, were exported or perhaps re-exported to the continent.³⁷ Even before they occupied the country the Romans may have imported minerals mined in Britain: Strabo mentions gold, silver and iron. There is also a strong presumption that Southern England became a source of grain supplies to neighbouring provinces of Gaul. Strabo mentions wheat exported from Britain in pre-Roman times, and centuries later Roman writers speak of wheat shipped from Britain to Rhineland. And although one writer, Ammianus Marcellinus, describes the shipments as a wheat tax (*annona*), the probability is that England had a large exportable wheat surplus.³⁸

What happened during the long interruption of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, indeed how long it lasted and how complete it was, we do not know. But no sooner does the darkness lift and the documentary evidence become available than references to England's commercial relations with the continent reappear. Miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon sources bear testimony to the wide range of Anglo-Saxon imports and exports and so do other surviving facts of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. King Æthelred's enactment about the tolls of London reveals that at the time of the tenth and eleventh centuries London was frequented by merchants of Flanders, Normandy and North Europe in general; men from Francia

³⁷ S. Pigott, 'The Early Bronze Age in Wessex', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* (1938).

³⁸ In the view of R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlement* (Oxford, 1937), 243, the exports were *annona* on a large scale; but was large *annona* exported from provinces not normally producing exportable surpluses?

and the German Empire are explicitly mentioned.³⁹ England was then obviously within the trading area of Central and Northern Europe. From Britain came foodstuffs, raw materials, and, for a time, slaves, and the famous letter of Charlemagne to King Offa complaining of the deterioration in the quality of English cloths bears witness to the existence of a well-established cloth trade. Some historians have gone so far as to suggest that the so-called Frisian cloth, to which there are numerous references in continental sources, was nothing else than Anglo-Saxon cloth distributed by Frisian merchants.⁴⁰

Whether this particular hypothesis is right or wrong there is no doubt that the Frisians played an important part in Anglo-Saxon trade of the time. Bede mentions Frisian merchants settled in York and London, and there are other, less indirect, indications of Frisian participation. But the Frisians were not alone. In the first place there were also the Scandinavians. In English political history contacts with the Norsemen were mostly those of war, migration and conquest. There is, however, little doubt that both before and during the age of the Danish invasion Scandinavians were in the habit of trading to the British Isles, and the Norsemen continued to trade even after they had established their reputation as marauders and invaders. We find Danes settled in London, in York and Exeter, and there is widely scattered evidence of Scandinavians trading with Anglo-Saxon England not only from Scandinavia proper but also from Scandinavian settlements in Ireland and Iceland.⁴¹

The Norman conquest did not break the commercial ties with Europe, but, if anything, added to them. The trade to Norway apparently continued uninterrupted and was very active in the twelfth century. In the Sverrir's Saga, King Sverrir is shown commanding in a speech the trade of the English who brought wheat and honey, fine flour and cloth. The date of the speech in the Saga is 1186, but its sentiments might with equal justice have applied to the English trade a hundred years earlier or a hundred years later. There are continuous references throughout the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries to commercial shipments from Norway to the harbours of East Anglia, mostly to Lynn and the ports of the Humber,⁴² laden with typical products of the North: timber, fish and fish-oil. But in addition connections with Flanders were now develop-

³⁹ Brit. Mus., Cotton, Titus A, fo. 140, cited here from text in *Hans. Urkundenbuch*, I, no. 2.

⁴⁰ C. J. Klumker, 'Der frisische Tuchhandel zur Zeit Karls des Grossen u. sein Verhältnis zur Weberei jener Zeit', *Jahrbuch d. Gesellschaft f. bildene Kunst etc. zu Emden*, XIII, 1899.

⁴¹ A. Bugge, *Die Wikinger*, 130-1. Cf. also idem, *Den Norske Traelasthandels Historie* (1925), 47-8.

⁴² *The Great Red Book of Lynn*, *passim*; *Diplomatarium Norwegicum*, IX, nos. 102, 159, 201, etc.; cf. A. Bugge, *Den Norske Traelasthandels Historie*, 138-186.

ing very fast and the economic partnership between this country and the Low Countries, so characteristic of the European economy in the Middle Ages, was taking shape.⁴³

That partnership was founded upon wool. English pastures with their persistent moisture and permanent grass, with their chalk subsoil or their salt-laden air, were ideally suited to the pastoral economy and more especially to the grazing of sheep. Pastoral pursuits therefore dominated the life on this island throughout the Celtic and the early Saxon ages. Livestock was then the mainstay of agricultural wealth, the standard unit of value and form of capital. Throughout the Middle Ages pasture continued to play an indispensable part in the processes of internal colonisation as well as in the routine of settled agriculture. England's marginal lands were mainly used for grazing, and even in the boulder clay valleys, mostly heavily wooded, herds of swine were pastured. As population grew in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and more land was put under plough, some of England's natural pastures, such as the uplands in the Cotswolds, the high grounds of the South Downs, the Lincolnshire wolds, or the marshes of Somerset, might be put under plough and made to yield grain, mostly oats. But no sooner did population recede than the marginal arable was again turned into pasture whenever suitable. And there were also areas, such as the downlands of Hampshire and Wiltshire, the uplands of Yorkshire and Lancashire, the wet grasslands of Cheshire, the Welsh borders in Shropshire and Herefordshire, where pasture remained inviolate through the Middle Ages and where flocks and herds suffered little from expanding settlement. Cattle and more especially sheep were also to be found in the purely champion parts of England, where they played an essential part in the prevailing economy of mixed farming. They manured the soil and they supplemented the income from arable farming; indeed, the entire routine of the common field system was adjusted to suit the needs of village herds and flocks.

It is therefore natural that in spite of the inroads which the plough occasionally made into grassland, English wool production should have been growing throughout the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages. How much this growth owed to large-scale commercial investment and how much its quality improved by selective breeding, we do not know for certain. There is clear evidence that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Flemish and Italian financiers (and they were the only ones who happen to have left behind them written records) made long-term loans

⁴³ For a view that commercial connections between England and Flanders in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods were negligible, see P. Grierson, 'The Relations between England and Flanders before the Norman Conquest', *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.* 4th ser., xxiii (1941).

to wool-growers. But by then English wool production was already at a very high level and its pre-eminence in Europe was already well established. As for breeding, there is every evidence to show that sheep-farmers in the Middle Ages understood the hereditary factor. They took care to mate the better animals *pro stauro meliorando*; they imported rams of good breeds, such as the Lindsey.⁴⁴ Whether as a result of breeding the quality of English wool as a whole was improving throughout the early Middle Ages is more difficult to tell. By the beginning of the fourteenth century wools of certain areas established their reputation for quality. The highest prices were paid for the fine and short wool of the scanty pastures on the Welsh marches, the home of the Ryeland sheep; and for the fine long wools of the Cotswolds, and of the wold and marsh-land of Lindsey and of Kesteven in Lincolnshire, the home of the 'old Lincolns'.

Wool exports grew with wool production. Wool merchants from abroad figure in almost every early document in which commercial dealings are mentioned. At the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries we find Flemings buying wool in large quantities and involved on that account in complicated transactions with kings and landlords. One of them, William Cade, a Fleming active in the middle of the twelfth century, left a brief but very illuminating record of his commercial and financial transactions; but he was obviously not alone. It has already been mentioned that by the beginning of the thirteenth century the merchants of the Flemish towns formed in London something in the nature of a corporate organisation, the Flemish Hanse, which represented the Flemish merchants and presumably provided them with a common residence and essential commercial services. Some of the greater Flemish merchants of that age, Boinebroke, or Pied d'Argent, left almost as clear a mark in the English records as they did on the history of their native towns. They were capitalists of the purest water, speculators on a large scale, employers of large numbers of their countrymen, lenders of large sums to English monasteries and magnates, traders in cloth.⁴⁵

Important as the Flemings were, they were not alone, and in the end they were not even the most important, among the foreign merchants drawn to England by her wool. In the second half of the thirteenth century the German merchants – the Cologners at first and later the Hanseatics – became active among the foreigners trading to England and exporting English wool, but the lion's share of the trade was eventually acquired by the Italians. How and why the Italian merchants first came

⁴⁴ H. Hall (ed.), *The Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester* (1903), 8, 40, 76.

⁴⁵ H. Pirenne, 'La Hanse Flamande de Londres', *Bulletins de l'Académie royale... de Belgique* (1899); Georges Espinas, *Sire Jehan Boinebroke* (Lille, 1933); G. Dept, 'Les Marchands flamand et le roi d'Angleterre, 1147–1216', *Revue de Nord*, XII (1926).

to England is a somewhat controversial question. As the twelfth century was advancing to its close Italians appeared all over Western Europe, in France as well as in England, and there is no telling why individual adventurers from Lombardy and Central Italy should have decided to try their luck in England. But there is little doubt that some of them were drawn to England and above all to English wool by the financial business with which they happened to be charged. Many of the Italian merchants from Central Italy, who came to this country in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were active in the first instance primarily as collectors of papal taxation, not as traders or as money-lenders. In the financial dealings between individuals and in the loans to the Crown, it was still the Jews and not the Italians who were most active (indeed finance was the only occupation of English Jews at that time). Such were, however, the economics of papal taxation that the Italian tax collectors were bound to be drawn into wool trade and into private and royal finance. The proceeds of taxes had to be remitted, and wool was the most obvious form which the remittance could take. Some of the ecclesiastical taxpayers would indeed pay their tax in kind even though the transaction might be clothed in monetary form. And in the process of their wool business the Italian merchant bankers were bound to come very close – as it proved, too close – to the royal exchequer. Export licences, exemptions from duties and miscellaneous royal favours had to be negotiated and paid for. Above all, the sums of money and of goods which passed through the hands of the Italian bankers and tax-collectors were so large as to attract the greedy eye of the needy kings. Some of the papal taxes in Henry III's reign were in fact levied for the benefit of the English Crown and found their way into the royal coffer not as loans but as outright gifts.⁴⁶

In this way wool trade and royal finance became inextricably mixed, and the mixture proved sufficiently potent to raise the Italians at the end of the thirteenth century to a dominant position in the English wool trade. At the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the great Italian houses of the Ricardi, the Frescobaldi, the Bardi and the Peruzzi, dominated the English wool exports and in some years exercised a total monopoly of exports and entire control of the royal customs.

From this position the Italians were eventually ousted by syndicates of native merchants and finally by the English Company of the Staple. In the last century of English trade in the Middle Ages English merchants

⁴⁶ W. E. Rhodes, 'The Italian Bankers in England and their loans to Edward I and Edward II'. *Historical Essays of Owens College Manchester*, ed. T. F. Tout and J. Tait (Manchester, 1907). C. Johnson, 'An Italian Financial House in the XIV Century', *Trans. St Albans and Hertfordshire Archt. and Archaeolog. Soc.* n.s. 1 (St Albans, 1903). A. Saporì, 'La Compagnia dei Frescobaldi en Inghilterra', *Studi di Storia Economica Medievale* (Florence, 1949).

controlled the bulk of the wool trade as well as a large share of other exports and imports. To a historian anxious to record the evolution of national power this *dénouement* might indeed appear as an act of fulfilment, and it was represented as such by Archdeacon Cunningham and other writers of the same generation. They saw the English merchants slowly and continually graduating to a position of pre-eminence in English trade. The early initiative and leadership belonged to foreign merchants, to Flemings, Hanseatics and Italians, but the English were good, if slow, learners, and by the middle of the fourteenth century they had acquired all the arts of commerce. Now at last, the moor who had done his duty could be dismissed – it was Edward III who did the dismissing – and English merchants were at last able to establish and enjoy the leadership for which they were now fully qualified.

This story, however, no longer appears as credible as it did once upon a time. The very notion of trade as a social art acquired by men at the end of their progressive ascent through history may have come natural to a generation which not only believed in continuous progress, but valued the commerce of their own day as the highest manifestation and fulfilment of their culture. Present-day historians, rubbing shoulders as they do with anthropologists and sociologists, find it more difficult to treat trade as a characteristic attribute of a sophisticated civilisation. The processes of trade itself were sufficiently simple to be practised by medieval man at all stages of medieval development. What determined the exact place which trade was to occupy in their daily lives and in their development was the historical setting taken as a whole – their laws and customs, their distribution of wealth, their access to circulating capital, as well as the political circumstances of the time. And it so happened that neither the institutions nor the provision of capital in medieval England were so deficient as to prevent English merchants from taking an active part in English trade.

The first references to English or Anglo-Saxon merchants are probably as old as references to any merchants in England. We heard about Saxon, which is commonly taken to mean Anglo-Saxon, merchants visiting the Merovingian fair of Saint-Denis, the fairs of Rouen and Troyes in Charlemagne's time, and resident in Marseilles early in the eighth century. In his letter to King Offa, Charlemagne promises protection to English merchants 'in accordance with ancient customs of trade'.⁴⁷ It is possible that the Saxons among the foreign merchants resident in Rome in the ninth century were also Anglo-Saxon, but, in general, references to English trade and English merchants in the ninth century are few,

⁴⁷ Haddon and Stubbs, *Councils*, III, 496. Cf. also G. Jacobs, *Der nordisch-baltische Handel der Araber* (1887), 112; A. Dopsch, *Die Wirtschafts-Entwicklung der Karolingerzeit*, Part II, 194–5.

for this was a disturbed period both in England and on the continent. References to Englishmen abroad become more frequent in the tenth and the eleventh centuries, and one of them suggests that in 1050 Englishmen sailed to the Baltic. The evidence of Anglo-Saxon towns reveals the existence of native merchants throughout the last two or three centuries of the Anglo-Saxon era.

That the native merchants were not all hucksters serving the local market is perhaps indicated by the accidental survival of the life story of a merchant whose career bestrides the end of the Anglo-Saxon and the beginning of the Norman period, St Godric of Fincham, whose *vita* has been so tellingly exploited by Pirenne. The English merchants who visited Utrecht at the end of the twelfth century were probably wool traders. The Anglo-Norman documents repeatedly mention English wool merchants, and their numbers increase as the records of English trade accumulate. In 1273 the hostilities with Flanders led to a royal embargo on wool exports, and that in its turn led to the institution of licences for export; the surviving collection of licences reveals the existence of a very large body of native merchants engaged in wool trade.⁴⁸

In general, the surviving evidence of English trade and finance of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries abounds with names of great merchants who were either English born or permanently settled in England and who played a great part in every branch of English trade: acted as king's merchants, or on occasions helped to finance the king and to serve him in various financial and commercial capacities, administered his war chests, organised the remittance of funds abroad, purveyed goods for his household and armed forces, or merely supplied him with large quantities of imported commodities. In the twelfth century and the thirteenth there were de Waleys, de Haverhills, Finks, Fitz Alans, de Cornhills, Basings, Blands, Buckerels, de Rokesleys, Aswyks, de Ludlows: a small but powerful class which was fast acquiring the character of a hereditary caste dominating the civic councils of London, active in every important branch of English trade, and holding large investments in landed property and mortgages (Gregory de Rokesley at one time held a mortgage over the lands of no less a person than the Bishop of Ely). The class merges imperceptibly into the financial oligarchy of the mid-fourteenth century – the de la Poles and their associates.

True enough, it was not until the middle of the fourteenth century that English merchants succeeded in establishing themselves in full control of the wool trade and in a position of predominance in English trade as a whole. This development, however, did not come about by a gradual process of apprenticeship and graduation, but through a series of

⁴⁸ A. Schaube, 'Die Wollausfuhr Englands vom Jahre 1273', *Viertelj. f. Sozial u. Wirtschaftsg.* vi (1908).

political and economic events of a kind that would have given English merchants an equivalent position at any time in English history. The effective cause was the financial crisis in the affairs of the Crown in the early phases of the Hundred Years War.

That wool trade and wool traders should have become enmeshed in the tangled skein of fourteenth-century finance is not at all surprising. The annual wool crops may not have represented half of the nation's wealth as a petition in Parliament would have it; but they undoubtedly represented a very large proportion of the nation's marketable produce or of what now would be described as the country's main 'cash crop'. The wool trade therefore had an obvious attraction for kings on the look out for money or for goods capable of yielding quick cash. Wool was bound to become an obvious object of royal finance. Taxes on wool grew throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition to the 'old Custom' of 7*s* 6*d* per sack fixed in 1275, 'new custom' of 3*s* 4*d* was levied on foreigners since 1303. In the course of the fourteenth century the king repeatedly tried to force out of the reluctant Parliaments grants of high subsidies on wool. By the end of the century grants of wool subsidies became regular, and, with this addition total taxation on wool rose to 40*s* per sack exported by Englishmen and 53*s* 4*d* per sack exported by foreigners. This new tax was not, however, established without a previous deal with the Commons over the control and the management of the wool trade.⁴⁹

The wool trade was also involved with royal debt. The wealth represented by the annual wool crop was frequently raided by the Crown for short-term loans. Richard I's ransom had been paid out of a loan raised by the proceeds of English wool sales abroad, and loans raised in such fashion became common at the end of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries. In 1297 Edward I financed his Flemish expedition by pre-empting in England and then selling abroad 8000 sacks of wool. This device was later employed by Edward III on a much larger scale and with less regard for the interests of wool traders and wool growers.

In this way the wool trade was inevitably drawn into the machinations which mark the history of Edward III's war finance. With each successive crisis the conduct of the wool trade had to be reorganised, and each reorganisation brought it a step nearer to the monopoly of the Staple. The first and most important crisis led to the destruction of the Italian interests. The Italian commitments in the wool trade and in royal finance reached the highest point under Edward III. For the first thirteen or fifteen years of his reign, and more especially in the years of hectic war finance between 1337 and 1340, the Florentine house of the Bardi

⁴⁹ E. Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History* (Oxford, 1941), pp. 63–103.

and from 1336 onwards also the great Florentine house of Peruzzi lent the king vast sums generally on the security of taxes, mostly the wool customs. In the end, however, their operations in England and elsewhere overstrained their resources. As long as they were still able to add loan to loan they remained in possession of their privileges in English wool trade. But as soon as their liquid resources began to give out, as they did in 1343, the king inevitably defaulted. By 1346, the whole of the English business of the two houses was reduced to a vanishing point, and for a time the Florentine bankers had to withdraw not only from the English wool trade but from the English scene altogether.

The place of the Italians was at first taken by a consortium of the wealthier English wool traders and financiers. The consortia, made up of more or less the same group of commercial magnates and as a rule led by William de la Pole and his associates, were formed or re-formed on three or four occasions after 1345. They helped to finance the siege of Calais and the Crécy campaign by a series of large loans (up to £100,000) on the security of the wool customs. In return they received the virtual monopoly of the English wool exports. On several occasions all exports of wool were prohibited except under licence, and only the members of the consortia were allowed to export.

By 1349 the syndicates suffered the same fate as the Bardi and the Peruzzi, and the royal default led not only to the temporary eclipse of de la Pole's circle but also to a change of system. The king had now to turn to a larger body of wool merchants, and to do this at a time when he badly needed parliamentary consent for higher subsidies on wool. In the end he was able to obtain both the subsidies and the loans in exchange for important concessions. The parliament of 1351 granted the wool subsidies for three years in exchange for abolition of all monopolies, but in the end monopolies were not so much abolished as widened by being vested in the English Company of the Staple. That Company became the main source of regular loans on the security of wool and wool customs.

The device of the Staple was by no means new. A staple of sorts was already in existence in the last quarter of the thirteenth century when, in order to operate his forced loan on wool of 1294–97, Edward I directed his own wool and that of the wool merchants at first to Dordrecht and then to Antwerp: both towns situated near the places where he needed funds for his war. But this was not yet a full-fledged staple. It was permissive and not compulsory and it did not create a monopolistic Company of the Staple. An attempt to make it compulsory was made in 1313 when it was fixed at St Omer, but even then the system was as yet very fluid and experimental. Between 1316 and 1326 the Staple was moved from one foreign town to another; between 1326 and 1337 it twice

crossed the Channel to selected English ports, and for a brief interval the trade was altogether free. But after 1337 and more especially after 1350 the organisation of the trade rapidly moved towards the monopoly of the English Company of the Staple.

The process began with a full swing away from monopolies of any kind. It has already been shown that in 1351 Parliament stipulated, as a *quid pro quo* for the grant of wool subsidies, that all monopolies should be abolished. In accordance with this stipulation the Ordinances of the Staple enacted in 1353 left the aliens free to buy and export wool as much as they liked, and no Englishman was allowed to engage in exports. This arrangement could not last. It was profitable to wool growers entrenched in Parliament, but too unfavourable to the English merchants and consequently also to their ability to lend money. The system began to break down in 1357. By 1361 the English Company of the Staple was in possession of a virtual monopoly of wool exports to Northern Europe; by 1399 it was safely and permanently launched in Calais. Even then Italians were able to export some wool under royal licence on condition that they took it to Italy and did not sell it in competition with the staplers on the wool markets of the Low Countries. But on the latter the English monopoly was now unchallenged.

The monopoly suited the bulk of the English wool merchants who now formed the Company of the Staple; it suited the rising interest of the clothmakers for it created wide discrepancies between wool prices at home and abroad. Above all, it suited the king. The custom and subsidy on the export of wool was the best possible security which he could offer, and a chartered company enjoying the monopoly of the trade was a much safer source of loans than the series of firms and syndicates which had, one by one, gone bankrupt in the early years of the Hundred Years War. The link with the Crown was further reinforced by the Act of Retainer of 1446, by which the Company farmed the whole of the custom and the subsidy on wool, and undertook in return to pay the wages of the garrison at Calais and certain other fixed charges, repay itself for its past loans and deliver any surplus over and above a fixed sum into the Exchequer. The only interest which suffered was that of the wool growers; and this may have been one of the reasons why the production of wool declined.

The English predominance in the wool trade was thus a product of political and fiscal causes. It was not a manifestation of English trade 'come of age', still less a stage in the economic growth of English trade and economy. It was brought about by successive acts of royal policy and as a result of a bargain between the king and merchants. Moreover it did not result in any increase in the volume of the wool trade handled by English merchants. If we are to trust the figures of the royal export

licences of 1273 which have already been mentioned,⁵⁰ the English share in the wool exports of the time, though not more than one-third of the total, represented some 11,500 sacks, shared by some 280 exporters. By the middle of the fifteenth century about the same number of staplers exported eight to ten thousand sacks. The English predominance had grown, while the wool trade had shrunk.

2

More relevant to the story of English economic growth was the development of the cloth trade and the wine trade. English wine trade was in some respects one of the oldest branches of English commerce, and also one in which English merchants were predominant from the outset. Evidence of English imports of foreign wine – mostly French – go back to the early years of the Norman rule and beyond. Under the Angevins England found itself politically linked to Gascony, the main wine-producing area of Europe, and the connection thus established stimulated Gascon viticulture and also opened before English merchants a great and ever-expanding field of enterprise. Large, and for a time growing, quantities of wine were imported from Gascony, and most of the imports came to be handled by English merchants, mainly those of Bristol. In return Gascony had to be supplied with foodstuffs, cloth and other miscellaneous goods, which came from England or via England, and were mostly brought by English merchants and on English ships. The trade reached its highest point at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when in some years as much as 90,000 tuns of wine were imported into England.

The most spectacular event in the history of English trade in the late Middle Ages – an event which did more than anything else to conjure up the spectre of the English challenge in the Baltic – came as a result of English cloth exports. Manufacture of marketable cloth was indigenous in this country, and some cloth was always exported. Exports of cloth to France in the seventh and eighth centuries have already been mentioned. A Norwegian saga mentions English cloth among imports to Iceland at the end of the tenth century.⁵¹ English cloths of various kinds, sometimes described by the parts of England from which they came, continue to be mentioned in the records of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But although active, the trade was rather small: very much smaller than the Flemish cloth trade and the wool and wine trades of England. In the second half of the fourteenth century, however, the industry suddenly grew to rival and finally to overshadow all other branches of English industry and trade.

⁵⁰ See above, p. 208.

⁵¹ A. Bugge, *Die Wikinger* (Halle, 1906), p. 132.

The factors behind the growth have been described elsewhere. Cloth manufacture was establishing itself outside the bounds of corporate towns and was thus better able to keep its labour costs low and to employ mechanical devices, mostly water power. The disorder in Flanders and emigration of artisans from there brought an addition of skilled labour to the English industry. Some protection to more expensive brands of cloth resulted from the prohibition of Flemish imports. But from the point of view of this essay most significant of all is the connection which undoubtedly existed between the growth of the cloth industry and the financial vicissitudes of the wool trade. Continuous interruptions and disorganisation of wool exports hit the rival cloth industries. Above all an export tax of some £2 10s per sack greatly lowered the costs of production at home by comparison with foreign cloth, and it is also possible that English wool monopoly also helped to raise the price of wool to the foreign clothmakers. Thus assisted, the English cloth manufacture forged ahead until by the 1490s the English exports at times exceeded the high figure of 50,000 cloths or an equivalent of some 10,000 to 12,000 sacks of wool and about twice that in value.

With English cloth exports so great, the whole character of English foreign trade and the behaviour of English foreign traders were bound to be transformed. As long as English exports consisted mainly of wool, there was no need for English merchants to go far afield in search for markets and customers. Wool was a raw material of industry; its customers were foreign cloth manufacturers; and the only important cloth manufacturing centres were not only highly localised but also situated near at hand, mainly in the Low Countries. On the other hand, finished cloth had to be sold to potential consumers and in the main centres of potential consumption, or in other words, to men and women all over continental Europe and beyond. It is therefore no wonder that whereas the wool staplers were able to transact their business in Calais and had no need to venture beyond Bruges, English cloth exporters had to push out in every direction, and, in the first place, into East European markets where Flemish cloth had previously been sold. We find fleeting references to Englishmen in Stralsund and Danzig in the eighties of the fourteenth century. In Danzig they were well established by the nineties and possessed a settlement and a factory by the end of the first quarter of the fifteenth century. By that time there was also an English company in the Norwegian trading port of Bergen, where, in exchange for English cloth and other miscellaneous goods, goods of Norwegian and Icelandic origin, mostly fish, could be bought. It is quite possible that there was also an English component in the international mart at the fishing centres of Skania.⁵²

⁵² For these and most of the subsequent facts of Anglo-Hanseatic relations, see

3

The English appearance in the Baltic brought home to the Hanseatics the dangers of the English challenge. Unfortunately for Anglo-Hanseatic relations and for peace in the Baltic, the English penetration into the northern markets began in earnest at a time when conditions for it were least propitious. English merchants began to frequent the east-to-west route at the very moment when foreign competition appeared to threaten the foundations of Hanseatic prosperity and unity. They tried to establish themselves in Danzig at the very time when the protection of the local market and regional monopoly was becoming the fundamental purpose of municipal policy. Their appearance in the Hanseatic system would have produced a considerable conflict in any case but, in the conditions of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, it was bound to result in a bitter and desperate struggle.

To begin with, the struggle was developing in English favour: mainly because for the time being the English drive was well backed at home, whereas the German opposition was not. In the English towns the relatively small and specialised groups of men trading to the Baltic found support from the main body of urban opinion which was strongly anti-Hanseatic. Left to themselves the towns could always be relied upon to act against all foreigners, the Venetians, the Genoese, the Flemings as well as the Hanseatics; but the Hanseatics offered the best and the easiest targets. Their exceptional fiscal privileges and their proud position in the city of London – a city within a city – were bound to draw on them the greater share of urban xenophobia. The anti-Hanseatic movement combined the demands of merchants threatened with exclusion from the trade of Prussian towns with the appetites of merchants anxious to exclude the Hanseatics from the trade of English towns. The common enemy produced a sense of common interest and ranged the mass of English urban classes behind the agitation.

At first this movement also enjoyed the full support of the government. In the conditions of the early fifteenth century the government, and more especially the Commons, found it very easy to respond to the pressure of anti-Hanseatic interests and to understand their motives and their language. The temper of the age, fed by accidents of the Hundred Years War, was charged with nationalist pride; the social changes of the times were helping to draw together the official class in English government and the upper ranks of the merchant class. In addi-

M. Postan, 'The Economic and Political Relations of England and the Hanse', E. Power and M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1933), reprinted as chapter 5 below.

tion the City of London had evolved in the fifteenth century an efficient 'lobby' in Parliament, and even the provincial towns sometimes elected special deputations 'to make suit in Parliament against Hanseatic privileges'. No wonder the Hanseatics came to regard Parliament as their chief adversary and never expected from it any favour or concession.

The policy of the Lords and of the King's Council was somewhat less definite, for individual lords and prelates sometimes shielded the merchants of the Hanse from enmity and vindictiveness of the Commons and were often referred to in Hanseatic correspondence as their only friends in England. Yet as long as the Council was capable of comprehending and obeying the *raison d'Etat*, the underlying assumptions of its policy towards the Hanse was little different from those of the merchant classes. On those occasions when personal and party interests of magnates were not much involved, and when conciliatory attitudes to the Hanse were not dictated by the military and political events in Flanders and France, the Council did its best to back the native merchants over their demands in the Baltic.

Thus backed (and as long as it was thus backed) the English mercantile offensive appeared to be very formidable and was indeed scoring success after success. A conflict in the eighties of the fourteenth century ended somewhat to the advantage of the English merchants, and the treaty of 1388 which wound it up recognised for the English their 'old rights' and their freedom to come to the lands of the Hanse and Prussia and to settle there and to traffic freely and undisturbed. A similar conflict in the first decade of the fifteenth century ended by another treaty, in which the English were confirmed in their right to come to Prussia and there *mercari, ibidemque morari et exiende ad lares et domicilia propria redire*. Under the cover of this treaty the English merchants established a flourishing factory in Danzig with a communal organisation, a communal house and a governor with disciplinary powers over its members. When difficulties again arose in the thirties, mostly over the position and privileges of the English company in Danzig, the treaty of 1437 conceded to the English merchants not only their old rights of entry, trade and residence, but also fiscal exemptions as exceptional as those the Hanseatics possessed in England. The English traders were to be free of all taxes imposed in the course of the previous hundred years or more.

On each of these occasions the English merchants benefited from the fundamental disunity in the ranks of the Hanseatic towns. Even though the Danzigers were bitterly opposed to the English merchants in their midst, the Prussian Order and even some interests within Danzig itself set great store by their trade to England and were among the first to seek an end to the successive conflicts. Similarly, the western wing of the Hanse, especially Cologne, had no part in the quarrel of the English

position in the Baltic and was always willing to compromise. Even the position of Lübeck was not as yet very consistent and she could be found on occasions counselling moderation and concession to the English claims.

Thus aided, the English prospects appeared very bright indeed. To some Hanseatics the English danger appeared in a light curiously prophetic. Viewed in this light the English threat appeared greater than it actually was, more urgent and more threatening than that of the Dutch. This alone would be sufficient to explain why the strength of Hanseatic opposition stiffened in the middle of the century and why Lübeck swung in support of the anti-English policy. It was badly hit by English piracy, it had grown to fear the effect of great maritime links between Prussia and the west, and in general it was now adopting a belligerent attitude in defence of the Hanseatic hold of the great route. At the same time the English pressure was weakening. This was not altogether due to factors purely or mainly economic. The export of English cloth declined in the middle decades, but the decline was in itself due to failure of the English commercial offensive. The reason why the latter failed is more likely to be found in the political disorders of the middle decades of the century.

With the War of the Roses approaching, the Council became a mere instrument of the rival baronial parties and was no longer able to give support to the English claims against the Hanseatics. It is not that the economic policy of the late Lancastrian and the early Yorkist governments was inspired by any new and different principles. Its worst failing was that it ceased to be inspired by any principles whatsoever. The private interest of ruling magnates in and out of King's Council was allowed free licence, and matters of state policy were made to serve the predatory aims of powerful men. Not only were the merchants unable to rely on the latent power of English arms, but that power itself became a mere instrument of predatory sea-war and piracy. There were easy and substantial gains to be derived from attacks on Hanseatic shipping, and the Council not only did nothing to stop piracy on the high seas but itself directly and indirectly contributed to its extension. It was largely under the auspices of influential members of the Council that the first great attack on Hanseatic shipping in the Bay took place in 1449, and the second great attack in 1458 was led by no other person than Warwick. The outburst of piracy helped to consolidate Lübeck's anti-English policy and to cement the unity of the Hanseatic League and led to a naval war which threw the entire trade and navigation on the North Sea into chaos. At the same time, in spite of the raging naval war, the parties in the Council were not averse from making use of the Hanseatic assistance in their domestic struggles.

In the end a private deal between Edward IV and the Hanseatic

League put an end to all English chances in the conflict with the Hanse. Under that deal the Hanseatics helped Edward to equip the expedition which brought him back to England, and in exchange they received back, in 1474, unaltered and unimpinged, their old privileges without having to concede any rights to the Englishmen in the Baltic towns. They immediately stepped into the place they had occupied in English economic life in the first half of the century, and this place they were to preserve until well into the Tudor era. Their share in English foreign trade soon passed the highest point it had reached before. While they exported on the average about 6000 cloths annually between 1406 and 1427, and about 10,000 annually between 1438 and 1459, their exports rose to well above 13,500 between 1479 and 1482.

The English merchants derived whatever profit and comfort there was to be derived from the restoration of peace and the resumption of Hanseatic trade. But their attempts at direct relations with the markets of Central and Eastern Europe suffered a set-back from which they were not to recover until the age of Elizabeth. Their chances of establishing themselves there were further reduced by political changes in Prussia. Danzig, now under the sovereignty of Polish kings, enjoyed almost a complete *Landeshoheit*, involving full autonomy in matters of government and economic policy. In confirming the treaty with England it postulated that the English were to be treated as all other foreigners. The English merchants themselves ceased to press for parity in the old and full sense of the term, since by now the Baltic trade was no longer vitally important to them. Whether as a result of the continued friction with Denmark and consequent closing of the Sund, or as a result of the war-time rearrangements in the organisation of English trade, the direct trade of English merchants to Danzig was dwindling very fast. Whereas on several occasions in the first half of the century there were over thirty English boats anchored in the port of Danzig, only twelve boats arrived from England during the three years following the cessation of hostilities, and in 1497, when the registers of the Sund tolls begin, not a single English boat passed the Sund. As late as 1503 there were only twenty-one English boats passing the Sund and it was not until 1547 that the English shipping to the Baltic could again stand comparison with that of the Dutch.

4

The effects of the English defeat reached further than the mere failure to establish a factory in Danzig. Its net result was to interrupt for nearly two generations the expansion of English trade into the outlying European markets and to canalise all English commerce into the single

current which led to the Low Countries. The traffic in Baltic goods was taken out of English hands; some of it proceeded indirectly by way of Brabantine fairs, some of it was carried on by the Dutch and the Hanseatics. And with the end of the Baltic trade there also came the end of the Baltic trader. Not until the rebirth of direct Baltic connections in the middle of the sixteenth century and the rise of the Eastland Company did the Baltic 'interest' establish itself again among English merchants.

The loss of the Prussian connection happened to coincide with the lopping off of most other outlying branches of the English trade. In Norway the Hanseatics had since the beginning of the fifteenth century tightened their hold over the trade of Bergen and defeated all the attempts of the English merchants to restore that position. The cessation of the Bergen trade at first sent the English merchants directly to Iceland, but this new enterprise, however important in itself, only completed the ruin of the English trade in Scandinavia. It plunged England into a state of chronic conflict with Denmark, and in the second half of the century it finally shut the Dano-Norwegian waters to English trade and navigation. Even more damaging, though less enduring, was the interruption of English trade to Gascony. This connection, so old and so important in the economic life of the country, was to be disturbed and finally broken during the concluding phases of the Hundred Years War. The French reoccupation of Gascony put an end to the flourishing English exports of cloth and all but interrupted English imports of wine. For a time even the clarets of Gascony were not obtainable except through neutral markets in the Low Countries.

Thus, having lost the more distant markets on the periphery of their trading area, the English merchants were compelled to restrict their maritime and commercial ventures in Northern Europe to the Low Countries; and the 'Merchant Adventurers', a corporation of merchants trading to Flanders and Holland, absorbed the bulk of English trade and the mass of English traders.

The effects of this concentration reached even further than commerce. The historians of the English cloth industry may also find a connection between concentration of English trade to the Netherlands and concentration of English production on undyed and unfinished cloth. There is no doubt that the bulk of English cloth exports in the late fourteenth century and beginning of the fifteenth century consisted of fully dyed and fully finished cloth. But, when with the falling off of the outlying markets the English exporters lost direct contact with the main body of consumers, they had to adjust themselves to a trade on a market still largely dominated by local cloth industries. A *modus vivendi* was found in increasing the exports of undyed and unfinished cloth and selling it to

the dyers and finishers from Flanders and Holland. These were essentially the terms on which the great expansion of English cloth exports under the Tudors was made possible, and the old symbiosis in England and the Low Countries was re-established.

(5) *The rise of Holland*

1

Compared with the English challenge that of the Dutch matured relatively late, but its late inconspicuous beginnings turned out, from the Dutch point of view, to be a blessing in disguise. It was very largely because the English attack opened rapidly and successfully that the Hanseatics, and especially the Prussians, read into it the dangers which it did not in fact spell. It had received strong backing from the English government in the first half of the fifteenth century, and thus added further weight to the German alarm. For, after all, at the beginning of the fifteenth century England was a first-class military power with a long record of successful aggression, and in the estimation of the Prussians it had already revealed some of its congenital propensities for empire-building. Did not the Danzigers argue in 1410 that if the English were allowed to settle and to trade in Prussia they would soon annex the country as they had annexed Bordeaux and Gascony? It was because the English danger loomed so large that the Prussians at first and the whole of the Hanse in the end opposed it with remarkable vigour.

The strength of the Dutch position was that their rise owed little to political action and that it was purely economic throughout its early history. They had insinuated themselves into the Baltic trade before the Hanse as a whole woke up to their menace; and so firmly was their power grounded in economic and geographical facts – and eventually in naval prowess – that it could not easily be countered by the political and naval measures at the disposal of the Hanse. Hence the paradox of their challenge: it turned out to be so strong in the end because it appeared so weak at the beginning.

One of the reasons why the so-called commercial rise of Holland in the later Middle Ages was so inconspicuous is that it was a product of local rather than of national development. The country which we know as the Netherlands consisted of at least four geographical regions, each with an economic history of its own: Zealand, Friesland, South Holland and North Holland. In the so-called Dark Ages the delta of the Rhine was the centre of northern commerce. Later, during the Middle Ages, the region of the delta, with Utrecht at its head, was still important as a centre of trade in corn, fish and wine. At the end of the same period,

South Holland with Dordrecht was also showing signs of considerable commercial activity, and so did also the northernmost end of the Netherlands: Campen, Deventer, Zwolle, Gröningen. These towns stood in a loose connection with the Hanse which seems to have paid them very well. But in the fourteenth century important centres of commerce began to appear in parts of the Netherlands hitherto relatively backward, i.e. in Zealand and in North Holland. It is this development of North Holland that is usually meant when the rise of the Dutch is discussed, and it was this development that hit the Hanseatic trade most.

The exact circumstances of the development are somewhat obscure. Dutch historians sometimes connect the rise of Amsterdam, and with it of the rest of North Holland, with the German transit trade through the waterways of Holland *en route* to Flanders and England. According to this view the new dykes obstructed the northern entrance into the Dutch system of rivers and made it necessary to transfer the goods into smaller boats. Amsterdam sprang up at the northern entrance to the dyke system, and Rotterdam at the southern, but other Dutch towns also began to take a hand in this traffic, and by the end of the fourteenth century Holland could already stand on her own feet and was able to enter into a competition with the Hanse. On a somewhat broader view the trade of North Holland grew partly out of the internal trade of the country and partly out of the sea-borne trade between some of its towns and other countries. Like the rest of the Netherlands, North Holland and South Zealand possessed ships and engaged in trade from time immemorial. They were forced to it both by the abundance of their waterways and by the one-sided economic development of the surrounding regions which necessitated a constant movement of foodstuffs. But, whereas in the earlier centuries the distant journeys of Hollanders were probably confined to England and Flanders, in the late fourteenth century they turned to the Baltic. One of the reasons why Hollanders went eastwards was probably the introduction of the *Umlandfahrt* round Jutland. But the chief cause was that the Dutch economy was expanding at the time when opportunities for sea-borne trade in other directions were limited.

Their economic expansion, though two or three centuries old, was gathering speed in the fifteenth century. The thirteenth century saw the Dutch completing the dyking system which protected them from the invasion of the sea. The following century saw a great development of agriculture and cattle-breeding and industry, and the fifteenth was marked by a sudden efflorescence of the old cloth industry. When at the close of the fourteenth century Flanders succumbed to a deep depression, Holland, together with England, rose to the leadership of the continental cloth production. By the middle of the fifteenth century Leiden became one of the foremost cloth centres in the world. Simultaneously

with the cloth manufacture there developed also other industries, and especially beer brewing and fishing. In the course of the fifteenth century Holland was also becoming an important source of herring for Western Europe, and its salted fish was carried as far south as Bâle. In addition, both the industry and the trade benefited by the unification of the Netherlands in the fifteenth century by Philip of Burgundy and by the long spell of peace under his rule.

It was largely because their economy grew so gradually that their appearance in the Baltic passed almost unnoticed by their contemporaries. Apparently they entered the Hanseatics' preserves chiefly as carriers, and until the very end of the Middle Ages they were active in the Baltic as sailors at least as much as traders. On some routes they carried Hanseatic goods and were therefore very useful to those towns which had large quantities of bulky goods to carry, such as Riga, Reval or Danzig. By the same token they were most unwelcome to Lübeck. Lübeck was consequently the first to rise in opposition to the Dutch, and throughout the fifteenth century Lübeck was at the back of all the anti-Dutch activities of the Hanse. And for exactly the same reasons Prussia was unwilling to quarrel with the Dutch and on several occasions did its best to thwart Lübeck's plans against Holland.

The story of the Dutch penetration and of their successful combat with the Hanse cannot be told here with all the detail it deserves. By the end of the second decade of the fifteenth century, Dutch progress in the east had grown far enough to have drawn to itself the alarmed attention of the Hanseatic politicians and to have produced the first serious conflict. The issue was raised in 1417 by Lübeck and the other Wendish towns which managed to get through a Hanseatic diet some limitations of the Dutch trade, but were unable to carry with them the Prussian towns in further attempts to close the Baltic to the Dutch altogether. This, however, was only the first of the many Dutch-Wendish clashes to come. By degrees friction became chronic and, for many years, peace was with difficulty maintained by temporary truces. In 1437 the truce was not renewed and a formal state of war lasted from 1438 to 1441. It was during that war that the Dutch revealed to the outside world how much their economic power had grown in the preceding fifty years. In the end the Hanse had to give way in spite of a whole succession of what seemed to have been political triumphs and to conclude the peace treaty of 1441 recognising the freedom of the Dutch trade in the Baltic.

The strength of the Dutch resistance during the war was something of a revelation to the German towns. But the defeat of the Hanse was clinched not so much by the power of Holland as by that conflict of interests within the Hanse, which appeared every time the Wendish towns tried to do anything against the Dutch. Prussia would not support Lübeck

against Holland, and in addition the western wing of the Hanse, and especially the towns of the Zuider Zee, Campen, Zwolle and Deventer, vacillated between their loyalty to the Hanse and their commercial interests in Holland. In the end, some of them concluded separate agreements with the Dutch and thus broke the ring of the Hanseatic blockade. With slight variations the same story repeated itself each time the Wendish towns proposed action against Holland, and all the active measures of the Hanse against the Dutch remained ineffective.

2

What made the Dutch especially difficult to combat was that very often the Hanse could not help handicapping itself by the aggressive policy it adopted towards other foreign powers. In their endeavours to arrest the course of economic change the Hanseatics repeatedly took measures which, whatever their avowed object, in the end merely contributed to the increase of Dutch trade. There were several such measures in the fifteenth century. In the fifties the Dutch trade received a great stimulus from a Hanseatic blockade of Flanders, when a great deal of Hanseatic trade passed to the South Germans and the Dutch. In the sixties and the seventies the blundering Hanseatic politicians offered the Dutch the greatest of all their opportunities by their short-sighted and aggressive defence of their Bruges 'staple'. The circumstances of this staple policy are indeed sufficiently interesting in themselves to be worth describing in greater detail.

As a result of the process already explained, Bruges had become by the first half of the fifteenth century the most valuable of Hanseatic markets abroad. It was the centre of German cloth trade and the terminus of the great Hanseatic east-to-west route – the point where this route tapped the channels that led to the French, the Italian and the Iberian South. But in the course of the fifteenth century Bruges began to lose its advantageous position. There were political complications in Flanders itself and there were also economic causes. In the first instance the Zwin, the waterway connecting Bruges with the sea, was silting up and no amount of dredging and dyking could stop the process. Secondly, in the course of the fifteenth century the Flemish industries migrated in directions unfavourable to Bruges. Partly as a result of Brabantine policy, but partly as a result of decline of South-west Flanders, economic leadership passed to the regions in the north-east, especially to Brabant. And, according as the trade and industry of Brabant grew, the old ports of Brabant, Antwerp, with its satellite market of Bergen-op-Zoom, began to rival Bruges as centres of cloth and wool trade. Before long they also began to rival it in other fields. In the same way as Bruges had grown to become the all-important

western terminus of the great Hanseatic route to the Baltic, Antwerp now grew to become the terminus of more recent and rival routes: one to the south via Lorraine and one to Eastern Europe via the Rhine valley, Frankfurt-am-Main, and Frankfurt-am-Oder. The alternative routes appeared in response to a number of incentives, but they probably owed much of their prosperity to the initiative of the Dutch and of the merchants of the South German towns seeking a way round the Hanseatic monopoly. And the tighter the Hanseatic hold over the northern trade, the more determined became the endeavours of the outsiders to develop alternative routes.

To Lübeck the old route was of greater significance than to anybody else. Lübeck was the town of the Hanse most interested in maintaining the old Hanseatic lines of communication, and in addition it was also the town most closely linked with the Bruges *Kontor* by a network of interests woven together in the course of a hundred years. But the measures it adopted in defence of Bruges were doomed to failure. They were not supported by other parts of the Hanse and, what is more, they still further undermined the economic position of Bruges. This is especially true of the so-called 'staple' rules. In order to restore Bruges to its old position in the Hanseatic trade, the Hanse laid down in the middle of the fifteenth century a series of rules by which costly goods and goods which constituted the monopoly of the Hanse, i.e. wax, furs, metals, Skania herring, had to be imported to Bruges before they could be sold elsewhere in Flanders or the Low Countries. In addition, all cloth, whether it was produced in Flanders or in Holland, had to be brought to Bruges before it could be exported to the east. At one time an attempt was even made to exclude Dutch cloth altogether, and to force every German boat carrying staple goods to call at Bruges even if the goods were directed to England or to the towns of the western Hanse. Needless to say this staple policy defeated its own ends. Hanseatic trade could not at one and the same time maintain its volume and be tied down to a decaying place. What happened was that the rules of the staple were evaded in spite of their energetic enforcement; and that in so far as they were obeyed they depressed the Hanseatic trade and stimulated the trade of the South German and the Dutch towns. The Hanseatics themselves began to call in ever-increasing numbers at Antwerp and the towns of Holland – Amsterdam, Middelburg, Haarlem, Delft and Vere – and to stay away from Bruges. Even the Flemings began to send their cloth to Bergen-op-Zoom and Antwerp, from whence the Dutch carried it to Amsterdam, which was now a very important centre of cloth trade.

In 1477 the Hanseatic Diet revoked the staple rules, but it was already too late, for they had done all the harm they could. By the end of the century Bruges was beginning to take on the aspect of 'Bruges le mort',

Antwerp with Bergen became the chief mart of Northern Europe, and the Dutch were in an impregnable position. They now traded as far east as Breslau and Cracow, and the towns of Prussia themselves began to look with dismay at the Dutch entering Poland. For 1495 we possess the earliest returns of the toll-stations at the Sound, the famous *Sundtolls*, and in that year the Dutch vessels formed the bulk of all the shipping bound for the Baltic.

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