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10. Between sea and city: portable communities in late medieval London and Bruges

Erik Spindler

This chapter is concerned with particular kinds of communities that exist in port towns and in metropolitan centres along major trade routes. These communities have distinctive characteristics: they may manifest themselves in several, distant places (mostly port towns), without necessarily dominating any one of these, and they may be quite loosely defined. The communities considered here consisted of men involved in long-distance trade in the North Sea region, as merchants or as mariners, who may not have had any long-term commitment to the host town. A highly developed sense of community, of belonging together and offering mutual support, is evident in all cases, but these communities did not typically have institutional features such as membership lists, communal buildings or institutional procedures. As a result, they may not have resembled other communities such as guilds.

Previous work on the subject of geographically mobile communities has usually dealt with narrowly defined groups, such as merchants from one town trading elsewhere, or men of different origins trading in a particular town. Among those communities not organized around a single urban centre, the Hanseatic League (constitutionally an association of towns, but in practice acting like an association of merchants) has been studied most thoroughly.¹ However, much of this existing work channels discussion in particular directions. First, the emphasis of most scholarship lies on trade, on economic relations and on those directly involved in long-distance trade. That is to say, networks of merchants are studied with relatively little consideration for how they might relate to other social groups, including the mariners on whom they depended.² Second, much traditional scholarship has a tendency to search out examples of

¹ There is an enormous bibliography on the Hanseatic League. A short recent survey is R. Hammel-Kiesow, *Die Hanse* (Munich, 2002).

² E.g., P. Stabel, 'De gewenste vreemdeling: Italiaanse kooplieden en stedelijke maatschappij in het laat-middeleeuws Brugge', *Jaarboek voor middeleeuwse geschiedenis*, iv (2001).

what might loosely be termed 'geographically far-reaching communities' in politics, without necessarily considering the impact of particular arrangements on the ground. The case study towards the end of this article attempts to reconcile political relations on a European scale with urban social realities.

In this chapter, the aim is to explore how 'portable communities' manifested themselves in port towns. By this, I mean both how these communities became visible to non-members (especially to natives) and how they affected the lives of their (potential) members. The term 'portable' encapsulates these communities' key feature: the ability of their members to carry with them their membership of the community. The communities described here as 'portable' do not easily fit into the pattern of communities constructed by Susan Reynolds in her book on the subject. She used a strictly spatial framework, focusing her attention on communities whose members shared geographical proximity, social features and/or economic interests (guilds and fraternities) and on those which consisted of many or most of the permanent residents of a particular area (a village, a town, a province or the realm).³ The 'portable communities' discussed here lacked such a strong geographical component and their members never constituted the majority in any town, but they still displayed essential features of community. Crucially, their members, even when they travelled over relatively long distances (such as between London and Bruges) remained tied to each other by bonds of sympathy, friendship or obligation.

This chapter will proceed, first, by examining the distinctive perspective of portable communities on the town which hosted them temporarily. Second, evidence of mutual support within the community will be explored. The third section will analyse networks of information in greater detail. In each section, reference will be made to a case study, which will be analysed in full in the final section. This case study concerns a Hanseatic captain in Sluis (the port suburb of Bruges) in 1402. Briefly, this captain, called Tidekin, injured a law enforcement officer and was executed. Hanseatic authorities protested against this execution, albeit only after the fact, and eventually achieved his posthumous rehabilitation and reburial. Given that the chief object of the dispute (the status of a dead man) was symbolic, this case sheds light on the nature and form of the ties that connect dead and living members of a single, 'portable' community. It provides a rare opportunity to investigate the evidence for, and impact of, portable communities in an urban setting.

³ S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1997).

Evidence is drawn from London and Bruges in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both towns were major metropolitan centres at the time. Indeed, they were (after Paris) the largest and most cosmopolitan centres in late medieval Europe north of the Alps. London's port and the port of Bruges at Sluis were two of the most important centres for maritime trade in northern Europe, and the main points of entry into England and Flanders respectively. London and Bruges were connected by means of trade networks: political circumstances permitting, wool and cloth were traded directly between them, and Bruges served as an entrepôt for Mediterranean luxury goods. Both towns accommodated disproportionately more long-distance trade, Hanseatic and Mediterranean, than most other northern European ports.

The focus will naturally be on, broadly speaking, mercantile maritime communities, made up of people whose social and professional lives were clearly oriented towards the sea, such as long-distance merchants, merchants' apprentices, captains, sailors, ship's cooks and deckhands. This socially far-reaching notion of community goes beyond most previous work on, for example, merchants of the Hanseatic League. It is true, of course, that London and Bruges hosted a variety of other short-term visitors, including pilgrims, pedlars, petitioners, merchants on overland routes, court retinues and soldiers, who may have belonged to rather different kinds of communities. Being part of a 'portable' community, then, was not merely a matter of individual mobility (indeed, most 'native' long-term residents of London and Bruges had in fact migrated to those towns in their lifetime). Moreover, not everyone whose livelihood depended on the sea travelled far: many fishermen and bargemen did not sail far from their family, never navigated on the high seas and remained at sea for hours rather than weeks or months, while even long-distance merchants might grow deep roots in the towns in which they traded and purchase property or marry locally.

Perspectives on the metropolis

The short-term visitors who made up the portable communities discussed in this chapter had a distinctive way of perceiving, imagining and navigating the metropolitan centres which they visited. From their point of view, particular geographic areas or institutions seemed more prominent than they did to locals or to people with a stronger local connection. Members of 'portable' communities may have been most likely to meet their peers in parts of these towns that perhaps seemed rather less central from the perspective of, say, an alderman or indeed a modern historian. In Bruges, clusters of merchants of the same origin

can be identified clearly.⁴ For example, Scottish and German merchants were usually based near the Carmelite house, which served as a centre for worship and administration for their respective nations.⁵ It is likely that foreign merchants typically developed a mental map of Bruges structured around the buildings and institutions (such as mendicant churches) which were of particular relevance to their nation. Sailors' temporary accommodation was usually near transport infrastructure (ports and canals): most long-distance sailors in the Bruges area probably travelled no further than Sluis, the maritime port of Bruges, about fifteen kilometres north-east, where they stayed either on board their ships or in hostels across the town. Those that came to Bruges tended to stay in hostels along the canal connecting Damme gate (and thus the Zwin waterway leading to the North Sea) with the water-hall in the centre. This distribution had an impact on trades heavily patronized by sailors: Guy Dupont has shown that those areas of Bruges where sailors were most likely to stay also had the highest concentration of brothels.⁶ The differences between sailors' mental geography of a region and that of merchants will be explored further below. In London, as in Bruges, members of 'portable' communities favoured areas close to the main commercial waterway, that is, the River Thames. As Derek Keene has shown, those sailors who stayed in London clustered in the riverside wards.⁷ Many probably also stayed in the suburbs: in Southwark and further east, along the Thames. I am not aware of evidence to show that German sailors received food or lodging in the Steelyard, the residence of Hanseatic merchants. Consequently, merchants and sailors may have used separate spaces in London, too.

These distinctive perspectives extended not just to geography but also to urban institutions. It is obvious that maritime visitors would have

⁴ Cf. V. Henn, 'Der "dudesche kopman" zu Brügge und seine Beziehungen zu den "nationes" der übrigen Fremden im späten Mittelalter', in *Kopet uns werk by tyden. Beiträge zur hansischen und preussischen Geschichte: Walter Stark zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. W. Stark and others (Schwerin, 1999), p. 133.

⁵ A. Vandewalle, 'Les nations étrangères à Bruges', in *Les marchands de la Hanse et la banque des Médicis: Bruges, marché d'échanges culturels en Europe*, ed. A. Vandewalle (Oostkamp, 2002), p. 39. W. Paravicini, 'Lübeck und Brügge: Bedeutung und erste Ergebnisse eines Kieler Forschungsprojektes', in *Die Niederlande und der europäische Nordosten: ein Jahrtausend weiträumiger Beziehungen, 700–1700*, ed. H. Menke (Neumünster, 1992), p. 109.

⁶ G. Dupont, *Maagdenverleidsters, hoeren en speculanten: prostitutie in Brugge tijdens de Bourgondische periode (1385–1515)* (Bruges, 1996), p. 147, maps pp. 152–4.

⁷ D. Keene, 'Du seuil de la cité à la formation d'une économie morale: l'environnement hanséatique à Londres entre les XII^e et XVII^e siècles', in *Les étrangers dans la ville: minorités et espace urbain du bas moyen âge à l'époque moderne*, ed. J. Bottin and D. Calabi (Paris, 1999), pp. 410–13.

encountered customs officers almost immediately upon arrival and perhaps intermittently throughout their stay, while long-term residents may never have had prolonged dealings with them (except for merchants involved in overseas trade). Conversely, transients might have taken little interest in aldermen, council meetings and proclamations (unless matters pertaining to trade or aliens were concerned). Such a distinctive perspective is to be expected, but it could lead to misunderstandings and even to serious difficulties, as illustrated by the problems faced by the Venetians in Sluis in 1390.⁸ According to the local bailiff, two sailors had got into a violent fight on board the Venetian galleys en route from Venice to Flanders. One was stabbed to death, and his corpse was still on board when the convoy arrived in Sluis.⁹ As the Venetians were unsure how to deal with the body, they asked a local barber for advice, who allegedly informed them (incorrectly) that they could bury the dead man without formalities. The bailiff imprisoned those Venetian sailors who had dug the grave as well as the captain of the galleys. The cause of the problem had been an erroneous transposition of north Italian institutional structures into a Flemish setting, since in north Italian jurisdictions, barber-surgeons habitually reported injuries to local authorities. A similar duty also existed in the northern Low Countries by the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Seeking a barber's advice would have been a reasonable reflex for a Venetian, but barbers had no formal function with respect to fatal injuries in Flanders. Although visiting a barber may have been a priority after a long sea voyage,¹¹ the fact that the Venetians sought advice there demonstrates that they were guided by an alien understanding of urban structures, institutions and authorities.

The resolution of this conflict offers another example of distinctive perspectives. The Venetians, using their excellent connections with the Burgundian court, were able to procure a pardon – one, incidentally, which the bailiff refused to recognize on a technicality, although he released the

⁸ For the following section, see Lille, Archives départementales du nord (hereafter ADN), B 6014, account of the bailiff of Sluis, Sept. 1390.

⁹ It was not entirely unusual for ships to carry corpses: for example two cases were recorded in 1380, a ship arriving from Prussia and another ship leaving for Zeeland (Brussels, Archives générales du Royaume, series chambre des comptes (hereafter AGR, CC) 1513, account of the water-bailiff at Sluis, May 1380).

¹⁰ Cf., on Groningen in the mid 16th century, F. Huisman, 'Civic roles and academic definitions: the changing relationship between surgeons and urban government in Groningen, 1550–1800', in *The Task of Healing: Medicine, Religion and Gender in England and the Netherlands, 1450–1800*, ed. H. Marland and M. Pelling (Rotterdam, 1996), p. 73. I thank Margaret Pelling for discussing these issues with me.

¹¹ In 1406, the Venetians brought a barber with them to Flanders, indicating the importance of his service (AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, May 1406).

Venetians after a money payment, justifying this with their unquestioned ability to purchase a second, valid pardon. The Venetians thus bypassed local institutions (namely, the bailiff) twice: when acting without his advice in burying their comrade and when negotiating their own release with officers at the Burgundian court. The institutions and people they chose to deal with, the barber and the court, reflected their strictly transient presence in Flanders, focusing on the necessities of everyday life (thus their contact with the barber) and on the guarantor of trading conditions (the duke of Burgundy and his court), but neglecting officers of considerable importance from a Flemish urban perspective. It shows how a 'portable community', the captain and crew of the Venetian convoy, understood local structures in a distinctive way. This incident also shows that portable communities were coherent, as well as hierarchical: both mere sailors and the captain of the galleys were arrested as belonging to the same community, which had, collectively, offended. However, the captain, in accordance with his higher social status, was accommodated in relative luxury at the bailiff's private house, while the sailors were put in prison.

This interplay between community and hierarchy can also be seen in the anti-German riot of 1436 in Sluis, during which an element of the local Flemish population brawled with Hanseatic Germans.¹² The riot began in the evening of Trinity Sunday (3 June) 1436, the feast day of the Hanseatic community in Bruges. Descriptions of the procedures followed on the annual feast day are neither contemporary nor good, as the best record is a prescriptive document from 1500.¹³ A feast meal most likely took place at the Carmelite house in Bruges.¹⁴ The near-contemporary chronicle ascribed to Pseudo-Jan van Dixmude (written between 1440 and 1452) tells of a group of Germans who were drinking in a tavern in Sluis that same evening, where they became embroiled in a dispute with a Flemish servant. This dispute developed into a nocturnal riot between Flemings and Hanseatic Germans which claimed around sixty casualties.¹⁵ If some members of the Hanseatic community participated

¹² Discussed in detail in W. Paravicini, 'Schuld und Sühne: der Hansenmord zu Sluis in Flandern, anno 1436', in *Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Mentalitäten im Mittelalter: Festschrift zum 75. Geburtstag von Rolf Sprandel*, ed. H.-P. Baum, R. Leng and J. Schneider (Stuttgart, 2006), pp. 401–51. The only other article to treat of this incident in depth is G. Juten, 'Slusana sacra: een boetekapel', *Annales de la Société d'Émulation de Bruges*, lix (1909), 201–13.

¹³ *Hansisches Urkundenbuch* (11 vols., Halle, Leipzig and Munich, 1876–1916), xi. 759–74.

¹⁴ Cf. R. Rößner, *Hansische Memoria in Flandern* (Frankfurt, 2001), pp. 205ff.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Jan van Dixmude, 'Kronyk van Vlaenderen', in *Corpus Chronicorum Flandriae*, ed. J.-J. de Smet (4 vols., Brussels, 1837–65), iii. 47ff.

in drawn-out festivities in Bruges during the day, and other members of the same community idled in a tavern in Sluis, fifteen kilometres away, in the evening, then the Hanseatic community was not monolithic and its members did not experience (or use) urban space in the same way. Indeed, Flemish sources described the victims as sailors or captains, not merchants: ‘maronniers allemans’ (‘German sailors’),¹⁶ ‘sceplieden, meesteren ende cnapen’ (‘captains, masters and servants’).¹⁷ However, in spite of social distinctions, the entire Hanseatic community joined together when they were attacked by a mob. Thus, in response to a German petition, the church council at Basel used (or repeated) a much more encompassing phrase: ‘nonnulli mercatores nacionis Germanice nec non naute, marinarii ac nauclerii, Osterlinghe de Hanza vulgariter nuncupati’.¹⁸ This was a community whose cohesion derived from a common identity (that of ‘Osterling’ or members of the Hanseatic League), a common identity which overruled the differences in occupation and status of the victims, and which was widely recognized (thus ‘vulgariter’). Such rhetoric of shared identity, even if it did not reflect the realities of everyday life, is an essential part of imagining a community, portable or otherwise.

The Venetians and the Hanseatics formed portable communities, which carried with them a sense of identity, an established hierarchy and a distinct perspective on urban institutions. Nothing could make their communal structure clearer than the fact that they engaged in that most quintessentially communal act, burying a dead comrade. The Venetians literally dug their comrade’s grave, while the Hanseatic community founded a memorial chapel after the 1436 riot, and collectively mourned their dead at other times (as seen in the case study below). This was not exceptional or a response to unusual circumstances, but a feature of portable communities. Indeed, according to the provisions made for the crusading expedition to Lisbon in 1147, which were to regulate communal life at sea, each ship had its own priest and was to ‘keep the same observances as are prescribed for parishes’.¹⁹ In other words, each crusading vessel and the community it carried were conceived of as a ‘floating parish’ of sorts. The Venetian convoy mentioned above likewise formed a similar ‘portable’, parish-like community, lacking only its own graveyard.

¹⁶ AGR, CC 13926, bailiff of Sluis, Dec. 1436.

¹⁷ *Hanserecesse von 1431–76*, ed. G. Freiherr von der Ropp (7 vols., Leipzig, 1876–92) (hereafter *Hanserecesse 1431–76*), ii. 201.

¹⁸ *Hanserecesse 1431–76*, i. 505.

¹⁹ *The Conquest of Lisbon*, ed. C. W. David (New York, 2001), pp. 56ff. I am indebted to Derek Keene for mentioning this reference to me.

Community behaviour

In this section, the focus will be on two aspects of communities: the mutual support shared by its members and the perception of these communities among locals. Crew mates and captains normally supported sailors in trouble, particularly vis-à-vis local authorities. Given the number of sailors who got into difficulties, principally for customs offences and for acts of drunken violence, such support was frequent and visible. The accounts of the bailiff of Sluis contain regular references to Germans who paid reduced fines because of community support. One of the most effective and routine ways of offering such support was to refuse to give evidence against one another to law enforcement authorities: as the bailiff of Sluis put it in 1402, Germans ‘ne sont point accoustumé de pourtraire ne de accouser l’un l’autre’ (‘do not normally accuse or give evidence against one another’). In the absence of other witnesses, this prevented disputes from coming to court.²⁰ Such support does seem to have derived from membership of the same community, rather than from personal relationships, since loose terms such as ‘compaignon’ appear more regularly than ‘ami’ (in Flemish legal sources, the latter term describes a close, legally significant relationship). The case study below offers further evidence in support of this view that mutual support was based on belonging, rather than on sympathy.

If such support was a feature of portable communities, it was not, of course, selfless. For example, a Spanish mariner was imprisoned by the bailiff of Sluis in 1436, for carrying foreign currency. After merchants interceded, he was released ‘pour ce qu’il estoit tailliez de demourer derriere et perdre sa reyse par ce que la flote d’Espagne se partissoit de l’Escluse’ (‘because he was likely to remain behind and to miss his voyage, as the Spanish fleet was about to leave Sluis’).²¹ While the sailor was saved from having to wait for perhaps several months, until the next convoy left for Spain, the merchants pleading with the bailiff for his release were not necessarily moved by sympathy, but sought to prevent delaying the departure of their ships, with resulting expenses and loss of income. One of the causes of mutual support, then, was the mutual dependence of members of portable communities.

Having shed some light on the operation of portable communities, we turn to their perception by outsiders. Urban populations were aware of these portable communities temporarily present in their town. This is clearly demonstrated by the issue of Venetian sailors’ debts in London: before the Venetian convoy left, captains habitually visited local taverns and paid off their sailors’ debts. Although a comparatively sophisticated mechanism

²⁰ AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, Jan. 1402.

²¹ AGR, CC 13926, bailiff of Sluis, Jan. 1436.

existed by which captains paid tavern debts by giving advances on the sailors' wages for the return trip, the Venetian senate feared that the debts might delay the galleys or increase the cost of the convoy, and repeatedly discussed the issue.²² For present purposes, this situation is interesting not for its dysfunctional impact on trade, but for the evidence it offers of smooth interactions between a portable community and London tavern-keepers, perhaps the only native point of contact for Venetian sailors in London. The problem of debts only developed because oarsmen of the galleys were able to receive credit in London taverns during their stay of (usually) fifty days, by stark contrast with almost any other newcomer or short-term visitor. The most convincing explanation for this exceptional ability to receive credit is that the keepers of the London taverns patronized by Venetians recognized the sailors as belonging to a functioning community and therefore expected (correctly) to be able to claim payment from the head of that community, the captain of the galleys. The Venetian community may have been unique in this respect, since those belonging to it could easily be identified: they differed from Londoners, from other Englishmen and from other aliens in language, dress and physical appearance, as most of the men involved probably came from the Adriatic, often Albania or Greece. In addition to recognizing members of that community, tavern-keepers had enough faith in its communal support structures to trust that debts would be repaid before the debtors left London for Venice, the longest sea journey in Christendom.

As we have seen, Germans, Spaniards and Venetians routinely and frequently supported each other in situations of difficulty. This is evidence of, in Robert Putnam's terms, 'bonding social capital'.²³ Moreover, they were perceived as a community not just by distant or casual observers who may have had little direct interaction with them, or by broadly hostile officers, but (for example) by tavern-keepers serving Venetian sailors regularly for several weeks, that is to say by the Londoners who had most opportunity to observe these communities in action. At the same time, these aliens engaged minimally with the host population and other local groups (except in so far as was required by trade, law or necessity). They thus showed low levels of 'bridging' social capital. With the exception of Venetians who travelled

²² On London and Bruges/Sluis, 1408, see *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts, Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, 1202–1509* (1864), pp. 44ff.

²³ R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000), pp. 22–4 and *passim*. Cf. also T. Schuller, S. Baron and J. Field, 'Social capital: a review and critique', in *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*, ed. S. Baron, J. Field and T. Schuller (Oxford, 2000), p. 10.

in an annual convoy, individual members of these communities travelled along European trade routes in different directions and at different speeds, so that alien communities in any given town changed continuously. These were truly 'portable' communities, whose members were connected to each other by social capital rather than by personal ties of affection.

Access to information

Communities, as Benedict Anderson sees them, rely heavily on their members sharing access to a pool of information.²⁴ While Anderson focused on printed newspapers, these late medieval portable communities drew chiefly on face-to-face contacts. As Kowaleski has shown, this was a most effective system, particularly in the region of the Channel and the southern North Sea.²⁵ Such information as was shared among these communities might reach quite far into the past. For example, a German sailor, Bernard Hemeleic, was imprisoned in Sluis in 1396.²⁶ When he made enquiries about Bernard's past, the local Flemish bailiff discovered that Bernard had killed a man in Scania (on the southern tip of Sweden) sixteen years earlier. It is a remarkable feat to discover evidence of any crime, even manslaughter, across a distance of sixteen years and 800 kilometres as the crow flies. Since Scania and Sluis were connected by the northern European herring trade routes, the bailiff's knowledge of this incident derived from his ability to draw on maritime networks and to access the information circulating within them. The chief weakness of these networks was relatively slow movement: it took the bailiff a month to find out about the crime. In the case study below, a similar delay may have caused Tidekin to be executed before any support could be given to him.

There is thus evidence for the movement of information within portable communities and for outsiders' (occasional) ability to access it. This movement was not random, but a systemic feature of any community. The bailiff could evidently find the right person or persons to ask about Bernard's violent past. Likewise, individuals who did not want information about them to be known could find ways of avoiding this. One possibility was to outrun rumours (or accurate information), a solution which required mobility and a good understanding of relevant networks. This strategy can be studied with reference to fraudsters, who naturally depended on victims' ignorance of their deceit.

²⁴ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1993).

²⁵ M. Kowaleski, "'Alien' encounters in the maritime world of medieval England', *Medieval Encounters*, xiii (2007), 98.

²⁶ ADN, B 6031, bailiff of Sluis, May 1396.

In the maritime milieu, one of the most common forms of fraud was playing with false dice. The tension between a highly mobile culture (transient individuals exploiting equally transient sailors), on the one hand, and a distinctly sedentary legal system, on the other, can be drawn out clearly in a case of false dice tried in Sluis in 1400. The statutory penalty, according to local by-laws, was banishment for three or six years, a sentence that left the accused, Hanskin, distinctly unimpressed ('dudit ban il ne faisoit conte'): he made it clear to the aldermen that he had no intention of staying in Sluis or of returning within that time period. The aldermen instead imposed a monetary payment, the 'composition' (Hanskin paid £72 *parisis*).²⁷ As Hanskin was able to pay this considerable sum, his activity had been profitable, and its profitability had depended on his not being recognized as a player of false dice, either by locals or by the transients whom he tried to cheat. He used at least two techniques to avoid being recognized, changing his name (the record states he was known as both Hanskin le Costere and Hanskin van den Velde) and being highly mobile (he had already come to Sluis from Utrecht, and intended to travel elsewhere). As playing dice was a popular pastime, false dice were probably used everywhere along maritime routes. For example, the Museum of London has false dice on display (some weighted with mercury so as always to fall on high or low numbers, some showing only high or low numbers, including dice with two sixes like the ones Hanskin used).²⁸ These dice date from the late fifteenth century, a few decades after Hanskin was active, and were found in the river, in the area where portable communities clustered (All Hallows Stairs, near the Steelyard). Anywhere in northern European port towns, members of maritime communities might while away long hours on land by playing dice and 'invest' some of the wages they received upon arrival; and in any port town they might also encounter fraudsters trying to cheat them.

Case study: the rehabilitation of Tidekin

Having explored some of the salient features of portable communities, the following case study will serve to demonstrate that the notion of 'portable community' can contribute to explaining urban relationships and conflicts. The case is easily outlined: a Hanseatic captain, Tidekin van der Heyde, injured a law enforcement officer in Sluis in January 1406 (new style), whereupon he was condemned to death and executed by authority

²⁷ AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, Jan. 1401. On the composition system, see J. van Rompaey, 'Het compositierecht in Vlaanderen van de veertiende tot de achttiende eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor rechtsgeschiedenis*, xxix (1961), 43–79.

²⁸ Museum of London, accession number 84.136. On display in case 16.1 (10 March 2008).

of the sovereign bailiff of Flanders. Soon afterwards, representatives of the Hanseatic League objected and engaged in protracted negotiations with Flemish authorities. In order to resolve this conflict, Tidekin was exhumed and reburied (a most unusual procedure), and there were public acts of remembrance.

This case has previously only been studied through the lens of Flemish politics,²⁹ in the context of the confrontation between Ghent and the sovereign bailiff of Flanders in 1400–2.³⁰ Blockmans treated it as a twofold dispute, between the Flemish towns and the duke of Burgundy (opposing good relations with the Hanse, on the one hand, and the sovereign bailiff's prerogatives, on the other), and between the towns and the Hanseatic League (with conflicting views on the right of a Flemish comital officer to execute a German). According to this interpretation, Tidekin was but a pawn in power struggles which he may not have understood. This interpretation is convincing in so far as the lengthy negotiations (February to November 1406) are indicative of complex political and economic interests. However, the emphasis on power struggles fails to explain how this particular conflict arose, and fails also to account for the resolution of this conflict, centred as it was on communal acts of remembrance. The notion of portable communities, and Tidekin's Hanseatic status, do explain these features.

Tidekin's Hanseatic identity (and the applicability of Hanseatic privileges to him) was not contested. Flemish sources variously described him, unambiguously, as 'een van der [H]Anse'³¹ or, synonymously, 'oosterlinc'.³² Known biographical details about him include his occupation and his place of origin: he had been the captain ('scipheer') of a Hanseatic ship,³³ and he had been born in 'le Holle en Zweden',³⁴ that is Höllviken bay in Scania,³⁵ an important centre of the herring trade. He clearly belonged to

²⁹ W. P. Blockmans, 'Konfliktregelung der Hanse in Flandern, 1393–1451', in Menke, *Die Niederlande und der europäische Nordosten*, p. 217.

³⁰ For a concise summary, see M. Boone, 'Particularisme gantois, centralisme bourguignon et diplomatie française: documents inédits autour d'un conflit entre Philippe le Hardi, duc de Bourgogne, et Gand en 1401', *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, clii (1986), 52–4.

³¹ *Handelingen van de Leden en van de Staten van Vlaanderen, 1405–1419: excerpten uit de rekeningen der steden, kasselrijen en vorstelijke ambtenaren*, ed. A. Zoete (2 vols., Brussels, 1981) (hereafter *Handelingen*), i. 97.

³² *Handelingen*, i. 101, 104, 107 and others.

³³ *Handelingen*, i. 180.

³⁴ ADN, B 5648, account of the sovereign bailiff of Flanders, May 1406.

³⁵ *Die Reccesse und andere Akten der Hansetage von 1256–1430* (7 vols., Leipzig, 1870–93) (hereafter *Hansereccesse 1256–1430*), v, index of place names, s.v. 'Höl, Höllviken, Bucht in Schonen: der Holl, das Hul'.

the Hanseatic portable community, but (as far as I am aware) nothing more can be gleaned about him from any other source.³⁶

The conflict started when Tidekin was executed by Flemish authorities, an unusual event in itself, since confrontations between officers and drunken Germans were common in Sluis and rarely led to punishments other than monetary fines. No other Germans appear to have interceded on his behalf, stopping judicial proceedings and securing his release. The severity of the punishment is even more remarkable, given that Tidekin's victim appears to have survived the altercation. However, the execution can be explained by the fact that the injured man, Floreins de Brugdam, was a sergeant in Sluis and had been hurt while exercising his office. Given the close involvement of the sovereign bailiff throughout proceedings, Floreins had most likely served that officer.³⁷ In the case of attacks on officers, local law enforcement systems displayed an enthusiasm that was both predictable and atypical in bringing the perpetrators to justice. For example, when another sergeant, Henry Valmeesten, was injured on Monday 21 November 1429, the accusation was brought in Ghent three days later (Thursday 24 November), the court heard the case nine days later (Wednesday 30 November) and the verdict was given on Wednesday 7 December, less than three weeks after the confrontation, despite the necessity of travelling three times between Sluis and Ghent (about 40 kilometres each way).³⁸ Moreover, once Tidekin had been tried and found guilty (by his confession and 'evidence', that is, probably the statements of reliable witnesses),³⁹ there was limited scope for appeal; the sovereign bailiff of Flanders had been involved at all stages,⁴⁰ and an appeal to that officer might otherwise have been the most obvious route to escape execution.

Tidekin was beheaded in Sluis on 18 January 1406.⁴¹ This date suggests a possible explanation for the failure of the Hanseatic community to secure

³⁶ Neither 'Tidekin van der Heyde' nor variants (e.g., Dietrich) appear in *Hanserecesse 1256-1430*, v, *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, v, or in any of the five volumes of the series *Hansekaufleute in Brügge* (Frankfurt, 1992–2001). The last name van der Heyde (and similar) does appear occasionally, e.g., Clais van der Heyde, from Lübeck, was in Sluis in the summer of 1401 (AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, Sept. 1401).

³⁷ On the sovereign bailiff, see Boone, 'Particularisme', p. 52.

³⁸ AGR, CC 13926, bailiff of Sluis, Jan. 1430.

³⁹ 'pour ce qu'il confessa devant les hommes de monseigneur et avec ce fu trouvé par informacion faite par lesdiz hommes et les eschevins dicelle ville, lesquelz eschevins se ostrent de cognoistre dudit fait et le baillient aux diz hommes que par nuyt il avoit navré' (ADN, B 5648, sovereign bailiff, May 1406). On proofs in Flemish law, see R. C. van Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het strafprocesrecht in Vlaanderen van de XI^e tot de XIV^e eeuw* (Brussels, 1956), pp. 200–4.

⁴⁰ Cf. 'les hommes de monseigneur' (the Duke's men) in previous note.

⁴¹ On this punishment, see R. C. van Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het strafrecht in Vlaanderen van de XI^e tot de XIV^e eeuw* (Brussels, 1954), p. 160.

his release. Assuming relatively fast operation of local courts, an execution in mid January indicates that the fight took place in December 1405 (none of the sources dates the incident). This was an unusual time for a German to be in Sluis, since long-distance maritime travel in the North Sea region virtually ceased in winter. Any German in Sluis in early January probably spent the entire winter there, whether out of choice or because of unforeseen circumstances. Stuart Jenks has shown that the Hanseatic League regularly imposed bans on sailing in winter, in addition to the impediment caused by adverse weather conditions.⁴² Tidekin's execution accordingly took place at a time when the Hanseatic presence in Flanders was weak in numbers and unable to act effectively or rapidly (even during the sailing season, return travel between Bruges and Hamburg took at least seven weeks).⁴³ In other words, Tidekin may have been executed because the mechanisms of information flow and support associated with portable communities did not function effectively in winter.

However, a closer look at this incident and its aftermath reveals how important such communities could be even after death, and conversely, how important a death could be for the community of the living. Tidekin's execution led to prolonged negotiations between the relevant parties, that is to say the Bruges *Kontor* or Hanseatic representation, on the one hand, and the Four Members of Flanders, on the other, the Four Members being an informal forum in which the country's three main cities (Ghent, Bruges and Ypres) and the *Franc* or *Vrije* of Bruges (that is, the independent hinterland) co-ordinated their policies. The dispute centred on the right of comital officers to execute someone protected by Hanseatic privileges, an eventuality not covered by existing regulations. The most recent set of privileges for the Hanse in Bruges, which dated from 1360,⁴⁴ provided for Germans as victims of violent crime, and dealt with them as perpetrators on the principle of an eye for an eye ('li dit malfaiteur soient puni vie pour vie et membre pour membre').⁴⁵ Tidekin, however, had injured rather than killed the sergeant.

Negotiations began a month after the execution, in mid February 1406, and ran until late November. After several meetings,⁴⁶ the aldermen of the

⁴² S. Jenks, *England, die Hanse und Preussen: Handel und Diplomatie, 1377–1474* (Cologne, 1992), pp. 306–11.

⁴³ G. Hoffmann and U. Schnall, *Die Kogge: Sternstunde der deutschen Schiffsarchäologie* (Hamburg, 2003), p. 171.

⁴⁴ *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, iii. 250–67. Cf. Rößner, *Hansische Memoria*, p. 115.

⁴⁵ This provision is only included in the French text, not the Dutch one (*Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, iii. 258ff.).

⁴⁶ *Handelingen*, i. 97, 101, 103ff.

Hanse remained, in the words of the council of Flanders, ‘most obstinate’.⁴⁷ Prompted by a letter from Duke John the Fearless, the Four Members met at Bruges on Sunday 25 April, where the Hanse continued to be ‘rude and stubborn’.⁴⁸ A largely symbolic resolution attempt was made at this point, discussed below, but the issue was still being debated at the end of June, when the aldermen of the Hanse continued to seek redress and justice (‘beteringhe ende recht daer up’). The Members were unsure how to proceed,⁴⁹ and the matter was only finally resolved on 26 November 1406, over ten months after the original incident, in negotiations between the Four Members, the council and the Hanse. The record is frustratingly anticlimactic: ‘after much debate, an agreement was reached’.⁵⁰ The lengthy, meandering negotiations testify to the complexity of the matter at hand, since debate ranged across not only Tidekin’s execution but the wider situation of Hanseatic trade in Flanders.

The main element in the resolution of the dispute was an unusual ceremony, the exhumation of Tidekin’s body, followed by reburial in consecrated ground, and a funeral mass in St. Mary’s church. This ceremonial resolution was agreed on 25 April 1406 and carried out three days later, on the morning of Wednesday 28 April. Although negotiations continued after this date, the ceremony is important since there is no historical record of the final settlement, if there even was a formal one. Moreover, the ceremony was built around the symbolic undoing of Tidekin’s execution, and provided a stage on which the various communities involved, including the Hanseatic portable community, could present themselves and their relations with each other. The ceremony is recorded in some detail in the bailiff’s expenses.⁵¹ Two men exhumed Tidekin’s body, three months and ten days after the execution. They put the corpse in a coffin and carried it to the churchyard (‘en lieu saint’) for a new burial. In the church, the curate, chaplains and clerks sang mass, apparently over an empty, substitute coffin. There can be no doubt that reburial in consecrated ground was felt to be important by contemporaries convinced that ‘proper’ burial had a real impact on the afterlife.⁵² The Burgundian exchequer paid £22 *parisis* for Tidekin’s funeral (in addition to the expenses for his initial execution and the protracted

⁴⁷ ‘estoient tres fort obstinez en leur rigueur’ (*Handelingen*, i. 108ff.).

⁴⁸ ‘mids dat zij up hare ruuthede ende harthede bleven’ (*Handelingen*, i. 115).

⁴⁹ *Handelingen*, i. 142.

⁵⁰ ‘naer vele handelighen der of ghehouden, appointment ghemaect ende ghesloten was’ (*Handelingen*, i. 180).

⁵¹ AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, Jan. 1407 (*Handelingen*, i. 118ff.). All information about the reburial is taken from here (unless indicated otherwise).

⁵² E.g., the family of another executed man, Jehan filz Boudins, buried him illegally and secretly (ADN, B 5627, no. 148 357, sovereign bailiff, Sept. 1386).

negotiations),⁵³ considerably more than for other funerals in the same period.⁵⁴ The interim agreement reached at this point was thus based around a highly symbolic act (a Christian reburial) and a deeply communal event (a grand funeral service). As part of the funeral service, three parties offered small candles: the deputies of the Four Members, the aldermen of the Hanse and 'other Germans, both captains and others' ('et plusieurs autres notables personnes allemans, maistres de neifs et aultres'). The last group is particularly interesting. These were Tidekin's peers; they were described in precisely the same way as Tidekin himself, as Germans (or 'osterling') and as captains. Origin and occupation thus defined a community whose members attended each other's funerals, but who may have had few connections with Sluis or with Flanders. Furthermore, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that any of the Hanseatic officers negotiating the settlement or any of the 'other Germans' attending the funeral had been personal acquaintances of Tidekin, and the Hanseatic *Kontor* routinely expected all Hanseatic Germans to attend Hanseatic funerals while they were in Bruges.⁵⁵ Here, members of a 'portable community' formed a community of mourners, playing the roles that might, in sedentary society, be filled by families, associates, friends, guild members and co-parishioners.

The centrality of death in late medieval thought and society need hardly be emphasized.⁵⁶ Perhaps death was especially meaningful for men who spent their lives engaging in inherently dangerous activities (such as long-distance sailing) and who might expect to die far from loved ones and trusted friends.⁵⁷ Death could even be the foundation on which a mobile society was built: Engseng Ho, describing a maritime community in a different part of the world (the Indian Ocean), wrote the evocative sentence: 'in a society of migrants, what is important is not where you were born, but where you died'.⁵⁸ That statement is too strong to be

⁵³ Exhumation £6 *parisis*, *huche* 18s, large candles £7 4s, small candles £2 8s, bells £1 4s, *louenge* 14s, mass £3 12s.

⁵⁴ The funeral of Jehan Brand, curate of St. Mary's church in nearby Damme, cost £11 12s: *escrin* £1 10s *parisis*, two candles 6s, clothes to dress the corpse £1 16s, grave £1 4s, vigil £1 4s, 'pout tout le chiere de la suppelture' £5, 'pour lui vestir et aparelgier' 12s (AGR, CC 13891, bailiff of Damme, Sept. 1390).

⁵⁵ *Hanserecesse 1256-1430*, ii. 111ff.

⁵⁶ Cf. M. Aston, 'Death', in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes*, ed. R. Horrox (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 202-28.

⁵⁷ Several of the Castilian wills studied by Phillips contain alternative provisions, depending on the place of death (W. D. Phillips, Jr., 'Local integration and long-distance ties: the Castilian community in 16th-century Bruges', *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, xvii (1986), 43, n. 30).

⁵⁸ E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), p. 3.

transferred to this situation: we are dealing not with migrants but with transients; place of birth still mattered (it is the only detail of Tidekin's life before his execution mentioned in the sources), and the place of death was considered less important in the medieval North Sea region than in the Hadrami society as studied by Ho. Nonetheless, death was central to the notion of a community, and the memory of death was important to the late medieval communities discussed here. In the Hanseatic community in Bruges, the memory of the dead was usually perpetuated by individual provisions, as studied by Renée Rößner,⁵⁹ and in Tidekin's case, several remarkable measures were taken to ensure that the events were remembered and publicized, beyond those groups involved in the negotiations or present at the reburial service. Unlike many of the bequests studied by Rößner, these acts of remembrance were not primarily geared towards the salvation of Tidekin's soul, but aimed to reach an audience of the living. The reburial itself was publicized across Sluis by three long peals rung at the time of the service. More significantly, the Burgundian exchequer paid for a regular memorial mass. For a year from 5 December 1406, the chaplain of St. Mary's said a daily requiem 'pour l'ame de feu Tidekin de le Heyde, de le Hanse d'Allemagne'. Thrice a week, the requiem was followed by prayers at Tidekin's grave.⁶⁰ Every Sunday, Monday and Friday those walking past St. Mary's churchyard would thus see a party saying prayers at the graveside, in an act of remembrance purposely visible to passers-by. This regular ceremony amounted to an enactment of the relevant communities in the area and their relationships, allowing Flemish authorities and the Hanseatic community to commemorate their conflict and the latter to commemorate their dead. Both the days chosen for the ceremony and the location contribute to the sense of the audience's importance in remembrance. Graveside prayers were said on days which were also favoured for civic events attracting large numbers of spectators or participants. Thus, the approximately biannual assembly of Sluis householders known as *franches vérités* often took place on Sundays or Mondays,⁶¹ and executions were often scheduled on Fridays.⁶² St. Mary's church, Tidekin's resting place, was one of two parish churches

⁵⁹ Rößner, *Hansische Memoria*, pp. 223–4.

⁶⁰ AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, May 1407.

⁶¹ On the *franches vérités* in general, see Van Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het strafprocesrecht*, pp. 35–47. Of the 75 assemblies in the period 1387–1441, 64 are dated: Sundays 21 (33 per cent), Mondays 15 (23 per cent), Tuesdays 14 (22 per cent), Thursdays 6 (9 per cent), Wednesdays 5 (8 per cent), Saturdays 3 (5 per cent), Fridays none (ADN, B 6006–41, bailiff of Sluis, 1387–99; AGR, CC 13925–6, bailiff of Sluis, 1400–11 and 1421–41).

⁶² Three out of 10 dated executions in the period 1387–1441 (16 Sept. 1401, 16 June 1402, 29 Aug. 1410). Tidekin's execution had been on a Monday (AGR, CC 13925, bailiff of Sluis, 1400–11).

in Sluis (the other being St. John the Baptist); it was near the town hall and market squares, and even a casual visitor to Sluis might pass it. More than thirty years later, the memorial chapel for the 1436 riot was established in that same church, confirming its use as a site of remembrance by Hanseatic Germans.⁶³

It is perhaps significant that the requiems began only on 5 December 1406, months after the reburial in April (perhaps on the anniversary of the altercation between Tidekin and the sergeant?). By then, negotiations between the Hanse and Flanders had concluded, and while the final agreement is not known, this act of remembrance may have been instituted by it. One may suppose that the institution of a memorial mass was particularly important to Hanseatic plenipotentiaries, and remained significant after the funeral mass, since they were concerned not just with the salvation of Tidekin's soul (which required a Christian burial) and with legal arrangements (namely the right, or otherwise, of Flemish authorities to execute a Hanseatic German), but with the reaction of the living. Publicly visible remembrance was addressed to locals and to transients, particularly to members of the Hanseatic community passing through Sluis. The measures chosen, in particular the thrice weekly commemoration in 1406–7, were appropriate for a portable community, since every Hanseatic mariner, merchant or captain coming to Sluis, even for the first time, would have become aware of Tidekin's story. Indeed, if the flow of information within maritime communities functioned as well as has been supposed above, many would already have heard of Tidekin's execution and its political aftermath before reaching Flanders, and many that never sailed in Flemish waters might have heard of their community's efforts to care for its members, on every shore of the North Sea and, as the phrase goes, on another shore and in a greater light.

Conclusion

Metropolitan populations consisted not only of natives and newcomers, but of a patchwork of overlapping, rival or ill-defined groups, sharing a variety of interests, a particular status or particular privileges and displaying varying degrees of homogeneity. The phrase 'portable communities' draws attention to the fact that for many travellers, their identity and their most important connections were not necessarily associated with the town in which they traded or through which they travelled, but that these travellers might be part of other, mobile communities, in keeping with their transient lifestyle. These communities, identities and connections were no less important for their lack of a geographical anchor point.

⁶³ Paravicini, 'Schuld und Sühne', p. 425.

Portable communities can be shown to have had their own mental frameworks, which shaped their distinctive perception of foreign towns, institutions and space. At the same time, they shared certain features with other, more sedentary communities elsewhere: their members buried their dead and remembered them, they supported each other in difficulty, they could be recognized by those not belonging to the community, and they shared information with each other. These communal structures were predictable, to the point that those wishing to exploit them (for example in order to try to cheat community members), could do so.

This survey highlights the need to think about how transient populations might relate to the geographical, social and legal landscape of the towns in which they appear in the historical record. The notion of portable communities is, then, a useful tool with which to study groups that became manifest in towns but were only very loosely associated with those towns. This notion enables us to study how portable communities and their members interacted with each other and with urban society, whether in formal, economic or political relations, by purchasing food and drink, renting short-term accommodation, spending money on games or prostitution, or by hurling abuse at locals. Portable and local communities, in an urban setting, interacted in various ways and negotiated dynamic relationships with each other, both formally, in response to a specific dispute, and informally, as part of everyday life in the metropolis.

