Culture as Colonialism: The Hanseatic League in Bergen and Turku

Visa Immonen
University of Bergen
visa.immonen@uib.no

Abstract

The Hanseatic League dominated the Baltic Sea and much of the North Sea trade in the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. The influences of the Hansa on material culture have previously been examined as expressions of commerce but also a form of Hanseatic culture. In addition to cultural force, the Hanseatic League has even been characterised as a colonial power. In this article, the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘colonialism’ are analysed using the towns of Bergen in Norway and Turku in Finland as case studies. What do the two terms mean? How does their conceptual history affect interpretations on the impact of German trade in the two Nordic towns? It is argued that even the notion of ‘Hanseatic culture’ is underpinned by modern colonialism.

Introduction

The Hanseatic League was a confederation of German towns dominating the Baltic Sea and much of the North Sea trade from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. In addition to Hanseatic Kontore or trading posts established in London, Brügge, Bergen, and Novgorod, also numerous other towns in Northern Europe received German burgher migrants. Historians have a long tradition of documenting the political and economic impacts of the Hansa. Archaeologists have similarly interpreted imported Hanseatic products as indications of financial transactions. Stoneware and pottery made mostly in the Rhein region and distributed across Europe, is an iconic example of such imports. Since the late twentieth century, however, archaeologists have presented products transported through German merchants as cultural expressions of an urban ‘Hanseatic culture’. Some scholars have developed this view by even considering Hanseatic culture as a form of colonialism. In this article, I will first discuss what culture and colonial-
ism mean, and, second, how their conceptual history affects the interpretation of the impact of German trade. Finally, I will compare Hanseatic influences in the archaeological record of Bergen in Norway and Turku in Finland (fig. 1).

The origins of the Hansa are usually traced to the rebuilding of Lübeck after it had been destroyed by fire in 1159 (Selzer 2010). This was a significant period of urbanisation in Europe, and Lübeck and other German towns grew both in size and political influence. North German burghers were able to exploit the novel wave of urbanism and expanding markets. They formed guilds, or Hanse, to further their interests, and eventually in the latter part of the thirteenth century, German towns established formal ties of defence and co-operation to control the west–east sea trade routes in Northern Europe. Lübeck was the central operator in the alliance, and from the mid-fourteenth century onwards it convened the 

Hansestag or Hanseatic Diet, bringing together 70 to 170 Hansa towns. The League engaged in the distribution of bulk goods like fish, grain, timber, and wool, but it was also involved in the trade of luxury products such as armour, silk, and works of ecclesiastical art. Hanseatic merchants were the most expansive in the South-Eastern shores of the Baltic Sea where they migrated to newly founded towns in present-day Poland and Baltic countries (Naum 2013). Although their influence and count remained more limited in the Nordic region, Hanseatic merchants had a significant presence there as well. The Hanseatic League passed its heyday by the late sixteenth century with the establishment of the transatlantic trade, emerging territorial national states, and raging internal struggles (Dollinger 1971).

Like many urban and rural places in Northern Europe, the two Nordic towns display substantial traces of German trade in their archaeological record, although they are 930 km apart. In scholarship, these similarities are described frequently using the concepts of ‘culture’ and occasionally ‘colonialism’. The former has been especially essential for interpreting material remains in archaeology at large, although both concepts are based on modern conceptions of human interaction. In fact, both in colonial and post-colonial studies, a shift from politics and economics to cultural issues has taken place, and the tendency of culturalising colonialism is more prominent the further back in time colonialism is detected (Pinney 2008: 382–383). To tease out and evaluate these underpinnings, I contextualise the two terms in broader research history. The analysis re-
veals their uneasy relationship with modern colonialism but also potential value for examining the Hanseatic League. However, I start by describing Bergen and Turku, and the traces of German influences in their archaeological record.

**The two towns and German imports**

Of the two towns, Bergen is older, founded in the earlier part of the eleventh century (Hansen 2005). It lies in the Bay of Vågen, surrounded by steep mountains, on the western coast of Norway. The site was located along the sailing route to the north, but it was also accessible by ship from the British Isles and southern coasts of the North Sea. Next to the urban area, Bergen had a cathedral and royal residence built in the mid-thirteenth century. In addition to hosting these secular and ecclesiastical centres, the town functioned as the commercial hub of Norway and had a population of c. 7000 in 1300 (Helle 1982: 489).

The first indications of German merchants visiting Bergen date to the late twelfth century, and a treaty of peace and trade between King Haakon IV Haakonsson and Lübeck was struck in 1250. The most important articles of trade were stockfish from Norwegian waters, and grain from the Baltics. The privileges of the German merchants culminated when the community was organised into a *Kontor* by the 1360s. It levied duties and had internal jurisdiction as well as administration. About a fourth of Bergen’s population consisted of German merchants and craftsmen (Helle 1982: 743). They acquired houses in the central district of the town, Bryggen, leading locals and other foreigners to move to other urban areas. In the political discourse of the Norwegian elite, the contact with the Hanseatic League became politicised, and negative sentiments were expressed when Germans threatened its interests. In contrast, however, daily interactions between the German merchants and locals seem to have been smooth and convivial (Opsahl 2013).

Since no pottery was produced in Norway during the Middle Ages, all ceramics were imported. Until the mid-thirteenth century, German stoneware dominated the ceramic profile of Bergen with a 60 percent share, while English imports represented 25 percent (Lüdtke 1989) (fig. 2). The situation was reversed from the mid-thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth century as English wares now had a 60 percent share, and the German imports constituted 15 percent of the profile (Demuth 2019). After the end of the fourteenth century, however,
German imports took an 80 percent share with Dutch wares being the second most important ceramic group (Blackmore and Vince 1994). In the sixteenth century, the relative importance of stoneware began to lessen and the amount of glazed earthenware from the Netherlands and North Germany increased. Volker Demuth (2015: 354) interprets the pottery assemblage from Bergen mostly as domestic debris left by the Hanseatic men living at Bryggen, although stoneware was part of the household inventory in other urban areas as well (Demuth 2019: 354).

Unlike Bergen, Turku was founded during the pinnacle of the Hanseatic League around 1300. The location was by the Aurajoki River on the south-western coast of Finland, at the crossroads of seafaring and inland routes. One could sail north, towards the Gulf of Bothnia, or follow the coastline to the east along the Gulf of Finland. The region became part of the Kingdom of Sweden in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. At that time, before the foundation of the town, the rural settlement in the Aurajoki River Valley was prosperous and dense (Ratlaiinen et al. 2016). After the local population became predominantly Christian in the twelfth century, there was a growing demand for fish and other bulk products shipped by Hanseatic merchants, and probably more and more Germans arrived in the area (Immonen et al. 2022).

The urban plan of Turku was that of a typical foundation town with a market square and adjacent town hall in the middle of the urban area, next to the harbour. Turku remained the largest town in Sweden’s eastern provinces, and by the sixteenth century, it had 2000–3000 inhabitants (Kallioinen 2000). Turku was not a member of the Hanseatic League, but it had a significant German minority, which did not, however, have a specific topographical concentration in the town like in Bergen.

Before the town was founded, the Turku region had trade relations mainly with Gotland, although pottery was locally produced (Pihlman 2002: 340). The oldest stoneware imports in the Aurajoki River Valley are from the pre-urban period and known from high-status sites (Pihlman et al. 2022). After the founding of Turku, in the mid-fourteenth century, when the relative amount of stoneware was at its highest, as much as 70% of the pottery was stoneware (Pihlman 1995: 66). The relative numbers of stoneware in the urban assemblage began to
decrease during the fifteenth century (fig. 3). In addition, local pottery, continuing the prehistoric tradition of manufacture without a potter’s wheel, was also used. Although the technology was prehistoric, the vessel forms were adopted from imported ceramics (Pihlman 1995: 207, 2002). Such imitations remained in use until the late fourteenth century. In Turku, fluctuations in the popularity of stoneware correlate with the occupancy of German burghers (Pihlman 1995: 213). Their number in the written record is highest during the fourteenth century, periodically over 80%, but decreased steadily after that (Kallioinen 2000). The German community was, in all, highly significant in both Turku and Bergen.

**Two towns in comparison**

When the two Nordic towns are compared, many structural similarities crop up. Although located in the western and eastern parts of the Nordic region, both Bergen and Turku became regionally important centres of trade. This was partly based on their advantageous location along sea routes. In addition to trading towns, they were ecclesiastical and secular centres of administration with a strong German community. Both towns had a concentration of craftsmen, but neither place manufactured textiles, leather, ceramics, or metal objects for exportation. In fact, the mediaeval towns in present-day Norway and Finland did not export refined products but instead functioned as hubs of trade, in which food and goods harvested from the sea and forests were exported. Considerable differences can also be detected between the two. Bergen belongs to the first wave of medieval urbanisation after the Viking Age, and it had a royal residence, becoming one of the largest towns in the Nordic countries. Turku, meanwhile, was established later, and the German merchants might have even played a role in its foundation. The town did not, however, host a Hanseatic Kontor.

Although there is at least one major difference between Turku and Bergen regarding pottery, namely that the former had local ceramic production while the latter did not, the ceramic profile of the two towns is otherwise similar. In Bergen, stoneware was present in the early phases of the town before the increasing significance of German merchants, and in Turku, stoneware imports were received in the area, even prior to the founding of the town. There is a concentration of German ceramics at Bryggen in Bergen, but stoneware is still found across the urban area of both towns. In fact, German imports seem to relate to the
presence of German burghers in Turku and Bergen.

The types of stoneware found in Bergen and Turku are mostly tableware designed for drinking beer and perhaps wine. The vessels were used at special occasions at the table, intended to be seen and enhance social interaction. In addition to rye and other grain, beer was frequently imported to Bergen from Hanseatic towns (Demuth 2019: 124). Lower Saxon stoneware in Bergen might thus correlate with consuming German beer, as pottery acted as a visible sign that the liquid consumed was genuine, indicating ‘Hanseatic drinking culture’ (Demuth 2015: 355). This leads to the concept of ‘culture’, and its relationship with the Hanseatic League.

**The colonialism and culture of the Hanseatic League**

The chronology of the Hanseatic League along with its financial and political activities are relatively well documented, but discussions on the cultural and social significance of the alliance have waged among historians as well as experts in other disciplines such as art history and archaeology. Since the 1930s, in contrast to the previous political emphasis in the research on the Hanseatic League, a new generation of historians, like Fritz Rörig (1964), focused on the development of the Hansa as an economic institution. Importantly, they construed the German expansion almost like the success of nineteenth-century European colonialism. These historians were met with a reaction from Nordic scholars after the Second World War. The key assertion was the relative independence of Nordic towns from German influences, or even their overt rejection (Sidén 2008).

Besides analysing the Hanse as a political and economic force, in the late twentieth century, art historian Nikolaus Zaske (1975), historian Johannes Schilddhauer (1985) and archaeologist David Gaimster (1999) began to sketch out the cultural significance of the Hanseatic League. German influences in urban planning, architecture, and trade goods were not just a symptom of economic transactions. These interregional affinities in material culture were a medium for cultural and social ties, contributing to the creation of a Hanseatic identity. This entity became called ‘Hanseatic culture’. During the last two decades, however, archaeologists like Natascha Mehler (2009; Mehler and Gardinger 2013), Ulrich Müller (2013, 2014) and Visa Immonen (2007), have called for more detailed and theoretically informed approaches. Hanseatic culture is not a matter of at-
tribution, but refers to a multitude of things, such as the sources of production, channels of distribution, emulated features, certain forms of practice, and even the social standing and identity of users.

Some of the characteristics of the Hanseatic League, including its control over trade and urban politics, and strong role in production and consumption, recall colonial practices. This leads Gaimster (1999: 67) to use the term ‘proto-colonial’ to describe the dominance of German trade in the urban setting. The prefix *proto* indicates the potential problem of imposing the idea of colonialism on premodern communities. In its broadest sense, the concept of ‘colonialism’ refers to a practice of socio-economic domination where one group of people is subordinating another, and this involves the migration of the dominating party to the subjected territory (Kohn and Reddy 2022). If the concept is understood in this manner, Hanseatic culture might be described as colonial because some German merchants settled in foreign towns to further their own economic interests, which also affected other aspects of life. There was even a flux of German colonists to the southern and eastern shores of the Baltic Sea in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, in much of the scholarship on colonialism, the concept denotes more narrowly the European project, aiming at a direct state-sanctioned dominance of geographically distant places in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries (Ashcroft et al. 2013: 61). Accordingly, colonialism, globalisation, and modernity are fundamentally intertwined (Pinney 2008: 382). This definition of colonialism, then, does no longer apply to the Hanseatic League as it operated in a premodern world without national states, racial theories, or the modern technologies of governance.

The concept of colonialism could simply be discarded as an anachronism when interpreting the relationship between the Hanseatic League and material culture. However, if the scholarly criticism of colonialism is followed, the situation is more complicated. Nicholas B. Dirks (1992) argues that the very notion of ‘culture’, introduced in anthropology in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was constructed as part of the colonial drive to understand and control non-Western communities. In this view, culture is a durable and localised set of shared symbols which allow members of that community to make sense of the world and interact with each other. Culture informs actions, and through culture, those actions can be explained. Dirks concludes that “[i]f colonialism can be seen
as a cultural formation, so also culture is a colonial formation” (Dirks 1992: 3).

The anthropological concept of culture was adopted into archaeology where it denotes a bounded entity of humans with a shared repertoire of habits, skills, and styles. It is operationalised in the production and use of material culture. Archaeologists can detect such relatively stable units based on material traits recurring in objects and structures, and subsequently the notion of culture informs the interpretation of material culture as an arena of social interaction and change. However, the post-colonial criticism of anthropology can also be directed at the concept of ‘culture’ in the cultural-historical framework of archaeological interpretation (Müller 2013, 2014). This notion of culture still carries colonial undertones in how it models social practices as bounded and homogenous (Carstens 2006; Stig Sørensen 2014). In effect, regardless of whether the appellation colonial or proto-colonial is rejected, ‘Hanseatic culture’ remains underpinned by modern colonialism, shaping our understanding of premodern material exchanges. Therefore, the analysis of colonialism, both in the past and in modern thinking, should not be severed from the idea of Hanseatic culture.

**Material culture, and colonialism**

To define a set of traits associated with German burghers as culture seems to imply coherence among a group of humans, their thinking and behaviour, and thereby also material objects. As an entity, this set can be transported from one place to another – like Hanseatic merchants did. Müller (2013: 136) argues, however, that the idea of Hanseatic culture as a package of attributes does not do justice to the present-day archaeological scholarship on material interactions, and he suggests replacing it with social practice, and processes of ‘cultural’ transfer. Nonetheless, the term ‘culture’ with its colonial groundwork seems to persist.

In modern thinking, culture forges a connection with colonialism. Although the Hanseatic League was a premodern phenomenon, it had characteristics which can be seen as colonial. German burghers had political and financial means to create commercially exploitative circumstances, including the migration of merchants and craftsmen to non-German regions. The wave of colonists was substantial in the Baltic countries, where the social distinction between locals and Germans was also very strict. The migrants brought along ideals of urban life, including forms of social interaction such as gathering to drink and dine. None-
theless, in Bergen and Turku, it is difficult to expose the consumption of German goods and their imitations as explicitly supporting or implementing the Hanseatic League’s values and policies, as has also been pointed out in connection with modern colonialism and its social mechanisms (Pinney 2008: 388).

The success of the League stemmed from its organisational efficiency and skill in advancing monetisation. German merchants also benefited from developed financial instruments, like credit and insurances, which reduced and alleviated financial risks. The same commercial competency was crucial for modern colonialism as well. Although the Hanseatic League focused on trade and commerce, it also affected production. In the north, its grip impeded the development of urban craft production on refined goods, leading to an emphasis on exporting bulk goods in towns like Bergen and Turku (Gundersen 2015). On the other hand, since there was no systematic expansion of German settlements in the Nordic countries, the impact of the Hanseatic League on urban life recalls modern imperialism rather than colonialism (Gilmartin 2009).

The extent of Hanseatic influences in ceramics, town plan, brick architecture, and works of ecclesiastical art, are apparent in Nordic towns, as well as in Bergen and Turku. German imports were used by locals and foreigners alike, and based on product imitations, such as locally made pottery in Turku, they were considered worthwhile to copy. Nonetheless, the German influences were not encountered in a uniform fashion. While the Hanseatic League was met with hostility in the Scandinavian political discourse, evidence of everyday interactions between Germans and locals does not show similar adversity. In addition to similarities, based on the differences in Bergen and Turku – one with a German Kontor, the one without – Hanseatic culture appears less permanent and more pliable than what the designation of ‘culture’ credits. It seems that Hanseatic culture was embedded and constituted in socio-economic practice rather than imposed on local communities.

In anthropology and archaeology, culture is a troubled concept with ties to colonialism. Yet even if it is replaced with alternatives, modern colonialism remains a backdrop for analysing Hanseatic influences, lifeways, or whatever term is chosen to interpret these traits in material culture. This colonial baggage does require a constant re-evaluation, but rejecting the notions of colonialism
and culture entirely can easily obscure their connections and hide the ways in which they still affect our views of the premodern past. The idea of culture – and consequently Hanseatic culture – should perhaps be accompanied by an ongoing inquiry into the multitemporal culture–colonialism relation.

Culture and colonialism can be useful points of departure if modern and premodern tensions are brought forth and made part of the interpretative process. Here, post-colonial theory can offer a language to deal with simplifying dualisms, like the coloniser and colonised, intentional and unintentional, or original and imitation (Silliman 2020: 43–46), as well as other categorisations used in connection with the Hanseatic culture. Conversely, addressing the issue of colonialism in connection with German influences in Bergen and Turku helps in the re-evaluation of the meaning of ‘culture’. Consequently, the two concepts demand decolonisation, which should be part of the research process, by challenging and rearranging their effects and the associated scholarly traditions.

References


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Fig. 1. Bergen and Turku are on the western coasts of their respective countries and roughly at the same latitude.
Fig. 2. Two fragments from a Siegburg stoneware vessel found at Bryggen in Bergen (BRM0.026673.001) (photo by the University Museum of Bergen, Archaeology, CC BY 4.0).

Fig. 3. Fragment of a 15th-century stoneware vessel found in archaeological excavations near Turku Cathedral in 2005–2006 (Turku Museum Centre, inv. no. 22367:KE1720:002). (photo by Immu Heikkilä / Turku Museum Centre, CC BY 4.0).