

Shetland and her German merchants, c. 1450–1710

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From around 1450 to 1712 merchants from North German towns, especially Bremen and Hamburg, took ships to the Shetland Islands. They broke the rules of the Hanse with a view to buying fish from the Shetlanders, and gave them goods in exchange that they could not otherwise acquire. They played a vital part in Shetland's economy, and their activities were regulated by local officials. From 1610, however, they received more and more attention from customs officers, who imposed heavy tolls and duties on them. Battered by those officials, and from the 1690s by privateers and the collapse of the Shetland economy, they hung on until the first decade of the new century. Disappearing, after 1707, they were replaced by enterprising Shetlanders as purchasers and exporters of the Shetlanders' fish.

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On the last day of August in 1661 the minister of the Shetland island of Unst met his congregation in their little church at Lundawick. The session clerk then wrote down a testimonial for two German merchants who worshipped there, Herman and Gert Detken.¹ It was flattering. The Detkens had been kind to the poor in Unst, and had helped the community repair its dilapidated church buildings. They had acted 'according to equitie and conscience, so that the poore doeth blesse them, and have also dealt verie honestlie in their trade of merchandise, in buying and selling with poeple of all rancks.'

A notable aspect of the Detkens' career, according to the Unst folk, was the long period during which they and their predecessors had been coming to Shetland. They 'have beine merchands and traders to this countrie,' they said, 'and in special [in particular] here amongst us, the space of ane hundredth yeers or thereby, whereofe their umquhill [deceased] father continued as merchand here the space of fiftie tuo yeeres, and themselves the space of fourtie tuo yeeres.' And just as the minister and his flock marvelled at that lengthy connection between the Germans and Shetland – they actually underestimated it – the Detken family felt committed to the islands for the foreseeable future.² Three years later one of them bought a

scrap of land and beach at Haroldswick in Unst, so that he could build a booth and establish a fish-drying beach there. He specified in his title deed that the new property should pass 'to his airis mail to the third generatioun succeeding him that shall happen to travel to this country as merchandis'.³ The Shetlanders and the Detkens thought that there would always be German merchants in Shetland. This paper explains why they assumed that, and shows why they turned out to be wrong.⁴

The heyday of German merchants and skippers faring to Shetland lasted for a long time; but it had a beginning and end. In the High Middle Ages Shetlanders had taken their fish to Bergen, conforming with the rules of the Hanse,⁵ and there were no doubt prominent merchants in the islands at that stage, although we know nothing about them. In the early fifteenth century, following plagues and depressions, a new arrangement developed. Enterprising merchants from the North German towns began to ignore the letter of the Hanseatic statutes, prohibiting direct trade with the localities, and sail to Shetland to bargain for fish there. At first they seem to have set out from Bergen.⁶ The first German we know about who operated in Shetland was Henrik Soost, who bought a morsel of land in the island of Papa Stour in 1450, no doubt

so that he could establish a booth there, just as Detken would do in Unst.⁷ Soost had connexions with Bergen,⁸ and may have plied his Shetland trade from there. In due course, however, the Germans began to sail direct from their home towns to the islands, sometimes organised in brotherhoods or companies called 'maschops', with crews of about eight to fifteen, in relatively small ships. They set out for Shetland in May or June, and remained there until the end of the summer, trading with the inhabitants and curing fish that they received from them. Very soon they established an intimate relationship with the local community, which comprised about 10,000 inhabitants.

At first sight that relationship was simple and equal. John Brand, writing in the very last days of it, gives the classic account. '[I]n several places', he says, they 'set up Booths or Shops, where they sell Liquours, as Beer, Brandie &c., and wheat-Bread, as that which they call Cringel Bread, and the like; they also sell several sorts of Creme-Ware, as Linen, Muslin &c. And these Merchants seek nothing better in Exchange for their Commodities, then to truck with the Countrey for their Fishes, which when the Fishers engage to, the Merchants will give them either Money or Ware, which they please; and so the Fishers going to Sea, what they take, they bring once in the Week or oftener, as they have occasion, and layes them down at their Booth Door, or in any other place where the Merchant appoints them to be laid, and they being there numbered, the Merchants account for them accordingly; these Fishes which are ordinarily great white Fishes as Killen, Ling, and the like, the Merchants or their Servants having dried they take them Aboard of their Ships.'⁹

We really need to know little more about the mechanics of the trade than that. Brand's account is amplified by a document of 1653, where a Shetland landowner lists fish, mainly ling, 'given in' to a merchant called Otto Meyer, and manifold goods taken out of Otto's booth by the fishermen:¹⁰ meal, tobacco, pepper, ginger, fishing lines and the like. The transactions are conducted in Shetland gulden, a local currency based on the German coin of that name, whose use everywhere in the islands shows how fundamental the German trade was there.¹¹ But there is more to a trading relationship, especially one like this, than buying and selling. The German merchants who came to Shetland used what the Polish historian Marian Małowist called, ominously, 'a certain trade technique' in their dealings with the Shetlanders.¹² They supplied goods to them on condition that they gave them fish in exchange the following year, thus enmeshing them in

debt. It was perhaps a useful system for poor islanders, who would not be able to get such goods otherwise; but it had the effect of postponing local enterprise, as it did in communities elsewhere. As a result, there was no local merchant class in Shetland for hundreds of years. As Małowist has said,¹³ such an arrangement does not look unfair, much of the time, to either party; and it requires both sides to fulfil their part of the bargain. By coming back to Shetland year after year, as the Detken family pre-eminently did, the German merchants fulfilled theirs.

In any case, the Shetlanders had a line of defence against sharp practice by the Germans. During the period up to 1610 or so Shetland had a lively local government, and officials who were determined to keep strangers, as they were often called, in check. That involved close scrutiny and control of the prices the merchants could charge for the goods they bartered in the islands, and rules about where they could set up shop. As some Shetlanders insisted in 1577, 'it was and is the use, affair that ony schip be tholit, the cowp and pryce of thair merchand wairis and geir is and aucht to be sett be the fowde [governor], and certane honest discreit men of the cuntrie, quha knawis the lawis, consuetudis and pryces, bayth of the cuntremenis wairis and merchandis strangearis resort and thair,...'¹⁴

No nonsense about market forces was entertained in this community; prices were regarded as the business of the local governors, and the Shetlanders took a dim view of any attempt by merchants to inflate them. In the same way, they carefully scrutinised the Germans' weights and measures instruments, and issued edicts at their head court to control them.¹⁵ Local officials also regulated whereabouts the merchants were allowed to trade in the islands. In 1562, for instance, a German skipper and a merchant asked the governor of Shetland for permission to set up their operation in Baltasound in Unst. 'In my answer', he said, 'I told them that they had a choice of the following harbours for trading purposes: firstly Schalewage harbour; then Lassevorde harbour; the harbour in Brussunt; the harbour in Quallsunt; the harbour in Drostenes; the harbour of Sunte Mangens Eilandt; the harbour in Wallosunt; and the harbour in Papposunt; these being the main harbours of the whole country, where all other strangers and foreigners normally trade and do business.'¹⁶ The Germans persisted; but the governor stood firm. 'I ... took counsel with the ordinary folk of the [Shetland] Mainland,' he said, 'and our conclusion was that the aforesaid skipper and merchant had been unfair and unreasonable in demanding to trade

and do commerce in that part of the region which is so far from the main land that the nobility and commons could derive no benefit from their goods and commerce.’ The North Isles of Shetland, he explained, were over-provided with Germans; the applicants could take the alternative ports, or leave them.

With these restrictions, the relationship between the strangers and the Shetlanders flourished. Gradually the visitors became respectable. In 1577 one of them actually sat on the assize in a Shetland trial.¹⁷ They routinely signed documents as witnesses,¹⁸ and their premises were commonly used as appropriate places where such authentications took place.¹⁹ No doubt some of them felt that they were integral parts of the community, despite the fact that they only spent a quarter of each year in Shetland. We have seen that the Detken family helped to maintain public buildings in Unst. In the late seventeenth century Adolf Westermann, a Hamburg merchant based in Hillswick in Shetland, gave a large bell and a copper basin to the kirk in Papa Stour; the congregation still remembered his gift with gratitude fifty years later.²⁰

As we might have expected, clouds began to form over the reciprocal relationship after 1610. The context in which we should see the now-deteriorating situation is the one described by Geoffrey Parker (2013) in his great work *Global Crisis*. Parker develops work commenced in the 1950s and 1960s by historians about cataclysms of the seventeenth century in climate, economy and society.²¹ The first signs of problems for the German merchants came from outwith Shetland, and were about the tolls they had to pay to crown representatives there. In 1613 the senate of Bremen complained to James VI about a change in the situation. ‘[T]ill now’, they said, ‘from time immemorial, in recognition of the grace, freedom and royal protection granted to them, individual skippers calling [at Shetland] have paid no more than six gold coins called angel nobles, and one rix-dollar, to your majesty’s officials.’²² Now, however, the burgomasters said, ‘they are compelled to add to the said tribute four tuns of ale, two of meal, and two hams, one for the ship, and one for the booth built on the sea-shore, which they have for their use there, as well as 15 ells of best linen cloth – besides a gilded long-gun, finely ornamented with engraving.’ There is evidence that James mitigated the new payments, to a small extent; but from now on the Germans were under attrition in Shetland. We are lucky to have a Shetland toll-register from 1639, which sets out in great detail the situation by then. By far the greatest number of entries in it are about

Germans, and show that at that date their control of Shetland trade was still nearly complete. The tolls were heavy. Here is a typical entry, from 3 July 1640, which shows how the Germans went about paying their dues: ‘Resavit fra Michell Meer and Yan Lovist, Hamburgers at Valey, in part of payment of 34 dollours for thair custome and toll of thair ship: j dollour, 54s. With 5 barells salt to Patrik Umphray of Sand for 9 dollours, payit thairfoir 8 August 24 li., with ane obligatioun Mr Patrik Cheyne and Patrik Umphray, cautioners, for 24 dollours.’²³ As in this case, they had to sign bonds with Shetland and Orkney businessmen, so that they could afford the imposts. The record is full of references to such obligations. And once again there is a remarkable concentration on the guns proffered, whose ornamentation and value were lovingly described: Yan Detken provided one with ‘scroll, measure, calmes, worme and key’, for instance. Michell Meer and Yan Lovist had omitted to take their obligatory gun in 1640; but the volume specifies that they ‘sould give a gun the nixt yeir’, when it would be worth £91 10s.

The Germans may have been under pressure, but they still came to Shetland. Sentiment and affection – and Shetland’s vast stock of fish – seem to have preserved their link with the islands. As we shall see, they went on coming until the last moment. They were not entirely helpless in the new circumstances. The Shetlanders needed them as much as they needed the Shetlanders, and officials could not control them as much as they would have liked. In August 1640 Andro Smyth, a sub-lessee of the crown estates in Shetland, wrote a plaintive letter to his brother about the situation: ‘This is lyk to prove a hard yeir, for ... the Dutches brought very litle money to the countrey. Many of them hes not [money] to pay thair customes – and I know not how to behave my self towardis thame.’²⁴ Smyth was indeed at a loss. He could not wield a big stick too forcefully, or the Germans would stop coming; and he would then be deprived not only of their tolls, and their gilt guns, but of indispensable exporters of the butter and oil that he collected from the crown tax-payers and tenants.

And as the seventeenth century proceeded, the situation got worse for everyone in Shetland, as everywhere else in the world. By 1680 there were serious problems in the Shetland-German trade. In documents relating to it from that period the word ‘decay’ occurs again and again. Sending accounts of Shetland parishes to Sir Robert Sibbald, in 1684, Shetland clergymen routinely referred to this or that German merchant based at this or that port; but one of them, writ-

ing a general account of islands, said: 'In old time there was a considerable trade kept here, but now is greatly decayed; which is imputed both to the scarcity of the Commodities themselves, & to the Publicans' exorbitant Exactions. At this day only a few Hamburgers & Bremers use a small Trafficking in it.'²⁵ In the same year Shetland landowners and tenants petitioned the Scottish Privy Council about the dire circumstances in the islands, 'ther povertie', as they said, 'being occasioned partly thorrow the decay of ther tread both with Hamburgers and Hollanders'. And a few years later a Shetland landlord referred to 'the decay of tread with the Hamburg and Breamer merchants and uther strangers, which was the great mean of ther subsistance in that poor iyland, a thing verie notar [famous] to all who frequent that place.'²⁶

At the beginning of the 1690s another local petitioner went into more detail: 'the faeling of trade formerly used by foraigners to this place ... who wer ordinary merchants from Hamburgh and Bream, being brockin in their stockes [damaged in their goods] thorrow the great decay of fishing and the exterordinary exactiones of customes from them by former tacksmen.'²⁷ The 'moast pairt' of the Germans, he wrote, 'hath allready deserted the trade, and now in respect of the warr ther is noe expectatione of any of them, for some of thos who wer heir last year wer plundered by French pirrats comeing in to the harbours whear they did ly.' Adolf Westermann, whom we have met, was a victim of one such attack.²⁸

Officials were at a loss what to do. In 1682 the crown lessee wrote some instructions to his depute in Shetland. 'You ar imediatli', he said, 'after the Dutch merchands ther aryvall, to call for the chalmerland, and take him along with you amongst them, and use all possible means to cause them take of the keengs butter in ther severall presincts. Be perempter with them in getting up ther entries of import, quhairanent, if you find your self slighted, to threaten them with sending waiters [customs officers] aboard – but by all means to deall civellie with them.'²⁹ What was needed, according to this gentleman, was both force and kindness, a feature of the German Shetland trade since its outset – but in the 1680s it was taking an extreme and confusing form. We can exaggerate the rate of decay of the trade, and I expect that is what the petitioners did. Robert Jolly calculated that there were still eighteen 'booths, ports and strands' operated by Germans in Shetland right up to the end,³⁰ and Kathrin Zickermann has shown that they continued to come to Shetland, in force, until 1708.³¹ Adolf Westermann might

have fallen foul of French pirates; but Johann Otto Bossau, another Hamburg merchant, was waiting to take his place. He entered into a contract with a Shetland landlord in 1698 to use Westermann's booth at Hillswick, and henceforth paid £130 Scots, and (inevitably) 'ane sufficient gun' every year for the privilege. In return the landlord undertook to give him butter and oil, and to pay him 200 rixdollars annually if he defaulted.³² It was the old reciprocal Shetland relationship, still in its original form. But time was running out for Johann Otto. He and his colleagues in Shetland were facing more and more problems: there were setbacks in the international field, as Zickermann has shown,³³ and smallpox in the islands in 1700, the 'mortal pox' as it was called, weakened the fishing population badly.³⁴ There has been controversy about what finally put paid to the trade, but the entrepreneur Robert Jolly, writing in Lerwick in 1709, had no doubt what it was. As a result of 'severall acts of parliament', he said, 'made anent [about] the importation of forreigne salt upon forreigne ships or bottoms to any place of south or north Brittain ... the Hamburger and Bremer merchants formerly trading to this country, and also all other foreigners, are precludit from any further trading to this place after the former maner.'³⁵ And Jolly now entered into a contract with two Shetland landowners to take the Germans' place, and to arrange a brand new fishery. In his chamber in Hamburg in October 1712 Johann Otto Bossau wrote a sentimental letter to the Earl of Morton, the superior of the islands, who was now taking an interest in the fisheries. '[S]ince I have been dealing tue that contrie [Shetland]', he said, 'this 15 ore 16 years, and niver haed less then thrie ore fouer schips lodnings frome thence – and now ame torned owt – have heerby taken the boldnies in desiyring your honnorable person (for I noe het lyes only by you) to let mee have the fredome to traed ther againe, & caes the Zitlandt merchants, whue have taken my ports, restoer them againe to mee.'³⁶ His mind turned to the old reciprocal relationship, and to the benign indebtedness that he and his predecessors had brought to Shetland. 'I have niver', he said, 'been ther but haes trosted above 6000 punds Scots over jeare to the people, as alsoe have left them of mehl and other provisions over jear, that almost cold help them when I came againe; I paid all ther dueties for them, and if the[y] cold pay me het was well, if not I trosted the sayme, witsch perhaeps others wont due.'³⁷ But he need not have worried. It had taken a long time – several centuries – but by 1712 a local merchant class had started to form in Shetland. During the first decade

of the eighteenth century some Shetlanders combined with the Earl of Morton as exporters of fish; when that enterprise failed they started their own businesses.³⁸ They were landlords as well, and to secure the fish they made it a condition of their tenants' arrangements to fish for them, and to buy goods at their shops. Credit was not just available, a welcome help: it became compulsory.³⁹ The result of the end of the German merchants' trade in Shetland was upheaval not just in the organization of commercial activity, but also, especially, in social relationships in the islands.

Endnotes

- ¹ StAB, 2-R.11.kk
² According to the tombstone of Segebad Detken, the patriarch of the family, in the graveyard at Lunda Wick in Unst, '[h]e carried on his business in this country for 52 years' (RCAHMS 1946, 128).
³ NRS, RS44/4 ff. 127–128.
⁴ For previous treatments of the subject see Friedland 1973 and 1983 and Smith 1984, and, recently, Rössner 2008 and Zickermann 2013.
⁵ Friedland 1983, 87.
⁶ *Ibid.*, 87 f.
⁷ *Shetland Documents 1195–1579*, no. 22.
⁸ DN X, no. 181.
⁹ Brand 1701, 131–132.
¹⁰ SA, D12/110/9.
¹¹ Smith 2000, xvi–xvii. For a similar situation in the Faroes see Zachariassen 1961, 392–396.
¹² Małowist 1960.
¹³ Małowist 1981, 671: 'This system worked efficiently from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries which shows that for a long time it was a necessity for both sides'.
¹⁴ *Shetland Documents 1195–1579*, no. 237. 'It was and is the custom, before any ship is tolled, that the bargain and price of their merchant wares and gear is and ought to be set by the governor, and by certain honest, discreet men of the country, who know the laws, customs and prices of both the natives' wares and those of the stranger merchants resorting there.'
¹⁵ *Court Book*, 44–45, 74.
¹⁶ *Shetland Documents 1195–1579*, no. 140.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 250.
¹⁸ E.g. NRS, RD1/298, f. 51.
¹⁹ E.g. SA, D10/17/8.
²⁰ Tait 1957, 71n.
²¹ Aston 1965; Parker 2013.
²² NLS, Adv. MS 33.1.12, vol. 29, no. 26.
²³ NRS, GD190/3/243. 'Received from Michell Meer and Yan Lovist, from Hamburg, at Vaila, in part payment of 34 dollars as customs and tolls of their ship: 1 dollar 54s. With 5 barrels of salt to Patrick Umphray of Sand for 9 dollars, paid as £24 Scots on 8 August, and an obligation by Mr Patrik Cheyne and Patrick Umphray, their guarantors, for 24 dollars.'

- ²⁴ NRS, GD190/3/234. 'This is likely to prove a hard year, for ... the Germans brought very little money to the country. Many of them have not [money] to pay their customs - and I know not how to behave myself towards them.'
²⁵ Bruce 1908, 10.
²⁶ GH, 947. 'The decay of trade with the Hamburg and Bremen merchants and other strangers, which was the great means of their subsistence in that poor island, a thing very famous to all who frequent that place.'
²⁷ GH, 1181.
²⁸ RPC 3rd series, 15, 38–39.
²⁹ GH, 797. 'After the arrival of the German merchants, you must immediately call for the chamberlain, and take him with you amongst them, and use all possible means to cause them take the king's butter, in their several precincts. Be peremptory with them in recording their entry of imported goods, and if you find yourself slighted, threaten them with sending customs officers aboard - but by all means deal with them civilly.'
³⁰ SA, SC12/53/1, p. 339.
³¹ Zickermann 2013, 93.
³² SA, SC12/53/1, p. 177.
³³ Zickermann 2013, 92–94.
³⁴ Smith 1998.
³⁵ SA, SC12/53/1, p. 339.
³⁶ OA, D38/2544/21. 'Since I have been trading to that country these 15 or 16 years, and never had less than three or four ship-loads from thence, and now am turned out, I have hereby been bold enough to desire your honourable person (for I know it is your hands alone) to let me have freedom to trade there again, and cause the Shetland merchants, who have taken my ports, to restore them again to me.'
³⁷ OA, D38/2544/21. 'I have never been there but have trusted above £6000 Scots per year to the people, and I have left them meal and other provisions during the year, to help them until I came again; I paid all their duties for them, and if they could pay me it was well, if not I trusted them, which perhaps others won't.'
³⁸ Morton papers in National Records of Scotland (GD150) and Orkney Archives (D38).
³⁹ Smith 2000, 70–73.

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(see also list of abbreviations)

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 National Library of Scotland (NLS), Edinburgh
 Adv. MS Advocates' manuscripts
 GD190 Papers of Smyth of Merthven
 National Records of Scotland (NRS), Edinburgh
 RS44 Particular register of sasines for Orkney and Shetland
 RD1 Register of deeds
 Orkney Archives (OA), Kirkwall
 D38 Earl of Morton papers

Shetland Archives (SA), Lerwick

D10 Cheyne of Vaila papers

D12 Neven of Windhouse papers

SC12 Lerwick Sheriff Court documents

Staatsarchiv Bremen (*StAB*), Bremen

StAB, 2-R.11.kk Artificial collection of papers concerning Shetland

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