

# 'Mead from Riga': The Trade and Consumption of a Hanse Cultural Good in the Late Medieval Baltic\*

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In 1495 the council of the Hanse town of Tartu, now in eastern Estonia, wrote to its counterpart in Tallinn, forwarding two items of correspondence: one from the grand prince of Moscow and the other regarding the detaining of Hanse merchants in Novgorod.<sup>1</sup> As Tartu's council explained, these valuable letters had entered their possession having been acquired by Heinrich Elferinkhausen, a citizen of Tartu recently returned from Moscow. The road to Moscow was arduous and dangerous—an embassy dispatched there from Tallinn in 1494 casually remarked that it lost a 'merchant to the ice' on the way—and Elferinkhausen had undertaken the roughly 2,000-kilometre round trip not for reasons of trade or commerce or as a diplomatic representative, but, as Tartu's council put it, 'by request of the grand prince, in order to brew mead for him' (*na vorschrijvinge des grotfarsten umme eme mede to bruvende*).<sup>2</sup> This aside in an otherwise routine missive points to the prominence of mead, the alcoholic drink brewed by fermenting honey with water, in elite diets in late medieval central Europe and the perceived skill with which Hanse citizens could produce it. More broadly, the remark alludes to the beverage's heightened political and cultural importance in the region, where mead was a vital resource in the exercise and display of power and therefore warranted the attention of rulers and civic leaders.

This article represents the first study of mead in the late medieval period, exploring how the commodity was an export in international demand across the Hanse trading zone, marking the diplomatic relationships of central European princes and influencing the government and internal workings of German-speaking civic communities. With mead usually ignored in studies on Hanse trade, aristocratic and civic culture, and gift-giving and ceremony, this close study highlights the contemporary allure surrounding an overlooked Hanse cultural good. It also offers a window onto a commodity culturally embedded in German-speaking communities across the late medieval Baltic,

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<sup>1</sup> LEK, vol. 2.1, p. 168 (no. 218).

<sup>2</sup> LEK, vol. 2.1, p. 168 (no. 218); p. 461 (no. 630). The political context surrounding the events of the mid-1490s and the embassy of summer 1494 is discussed in M. Bessudnova, 'Die Schliessung des hansischen Kontors in Novgorod im Jahre 1494 im Kontext der Beziehungen der Grossfürsten von Moskau zu Maximilian von Habsburg', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 127 (2009), pp. 69–99, at pp. 96–7.

functioning variously and simultaneously as a beverage, a currency in kind, a prestigious gift and a status symbol.<sup>3</sup> From a broader perspective, examining the trade and consumption of the beverage underlines the social and economic significance attached to bee produce in communities across the Baltic littoral, where ecology, environment and cultural practice combined to make honey and its pre-eminent product, mead, a commodity of high standing and noteworthy esteem by the later medieval period.

The trade and consumption of mead lacks any detailed study for it has fallen into gaps in two related bodies of scholarship. Despite mead being an item of international trade, with Hanse merchants transporting the beverage in significant quantities from Baltic entrepôts as far west as Newcastle upon Tyne, the commodity is undiscussed in modern works on Hanse commerce, the first of these fields of interest.<sup>4</sup> Both surveys of Baltic trade and specific studies exploring the Hanse trade in food and drink avoid mention of mead and the product generally does not feature in older works.<sup>5</sup> While the quantities of mead transported by Hanse merchants do not compare with, for example, the amount of grain or wax exported westwards, its trade still remained significant, leaving a clear imprint in administrative records and correspondence.<sup>6</sup> In 1409 and 1411 alone, for example, the poundtoll of Gdańsk recorded the export of at least 643 tuns of mead (c.86,160 litres), while the naval seizures of a Swedish lord in the north-eastern Baltic in the opening months of 1431 were said to have gained him over 18 tuns of mead.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of contemporaries further west, imports of mead were significant enough to warrant taxing. The civic authorities in Sluys, now

<sup>3</sup> On the term and meaning of 'Hanse cultural good' (*hansisches Kulturgut*), see the title of S. Pajung, 'Cervisia etenim Danica et medo precipue habebantur: über die Verbreitung hansischen Kulturguts im dänischen Raum am Beispiel des Hopfenbiers', in D. Kraack and K. Lorenzen-Schmidt (eds), *Essen und Trinken: zur Ernährungsgeschichte Schleswig-Holsteins* (Neumünster, 2010), pp. 39–55, with discussion of the term at pp. 40–1.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of a Hanse merchant taking two lasts of mead to Newcastle in 1406, see K. Kunze (ed.), *Hanseakten aus England 1275 bis 1412* (Halle, 1891), p. 276 (no. 334). Mead was also seized in English raids on shipping from no less than four merchants from Riga sailing along the Flemish coast the year before: *ibid.*, pp. 246–7, 248, 252, 255 (no. 326). Hanse merchants also transported mead into London, although not in significant quantities: see, for example, S. Jenks, *The London Customs Accounts: 24 Henry VI (1445/46)* (Cologne, 2018), p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> C. Jahnke, 'The Baltic Trade', in D. Harreld (ed.), *A Companion to the Hanseatic League* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 194–240, at pp. 218–20; although the subheading on p. 218 is titled 'wax and honey', only wax is discussed. On studies of the trade in food and drink, see, for example, V. Henn, 'Der hansische Handel mit Nahrungsmitteln', in G. Wiegmann and R. Mohrmann (eds), *Nahrung und Tischkultur im Hanseraum* (Münster, 1996), pp. 23–48. For older scholarship where mead is not discussed, see, for example, F. Renken, *Der Handel der Königsberger Grossschäfferei des Deutschen Ordens mit Flandern um 1400* (Weimar, 1937). The prices of mead in early fifteenth-century Gdańsk earn a brief mention in T. Hirsch, *Handels- und Gewerbsgeschichte Danzigs unter der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens* (Leipzig, 1858), p. 246; and those in Lübeck in the fifteenth century in F. Bruns, *Die Lübecker Bergenfahrer und ihre Chronistik* (Berlin, 1900), pp. lv–lvi.

<sup>6</sup> On the grain trade from Prussia, see C. Link, *Der preußische Getreidehandel im 15. Jahrhundert: eine Studie zur nordeuropäischen Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Cologne, 2014), with estimates of the grain transported westwards from Gdańsk in the mid-1400s at pp. 37–9. On the wax trade in northern Europe and the quantities exported from Prussia in the later 1300s, see M. Whelan, "'On Behalf of the City': Wax and Urban Diplomacy in the Late Medieval Baltic and North Sea', *Urban History*, forthcoming (available on FirstView).

<sup>7</sup> The following figure has been gathered from collating all references to mead in S. Jenks (ed.), *Das Danziger Pfundzollbuch von 1409 und 1411* (Cologne, 2012), nos 143, 153, 159, 284, 370, 454, 456, 830, 866, 871, 1616, 2354, 2376, 2868. The quantity of mead exported in 1409 and 1411 was even higher than the figure quoted above, for the following entries in the poundtoll record the export of mead but without providing a quantity, so could not be included in the above figure: *ibid.*, nos 395, 2395, 2563, 3018. On the mead seized by the Swedish captain of Vyborg, see LEK, vol. 1.8, pp. 269–70 (no. 458).

in the southern Netherlands, regulated the taxing of 'Hanse mead' (*Oostersschen mede*) in particular from the 1380s, while Staveren, on Lake IJssel in the northern Netherlands, stipulated in 1412 that visitors from Hamburg selling beer or mead in their city's markets needed to pay an excise.<sup>8</sup> The mead trade was important enough for the Hanse negotiators to have the right to import the beverage without hindrance into the Danish realm entered into the peace treaty signed in the aftermath of the so-called Second Danish-Hanseatic War of 1361–1370.<sup>9</sup> Given mead's financial and commercial importance in the Baltic and North Sea, its lack of attention in economic histories is peculiar, but its neglect continues into scholarship more widely.

Alongside a lively commercial trade, mead was widely consumed and presented as a gift in aristocratic and elite circles in Hanse cities and other German-speaking communities—notably the leadership of the Teutonic Order in Prussia and Livonia—across the Baltic littoral, but this impression is difficult to gather from a second body of scholarship, on gift-giving and daily life and diets. The city council of Tallinn, for example, made gifts of mead to high-profile visitors, such as visiting emissaries and regional military leaders, but in Juhan Kreem's otherwise detailed assessment of the city's gift-giving in the fifteenth and sixteenth century mead is not discussed, and simply subsumed (one presumes) under the rubric of 'other gifts' (*õvriga gävor*) in a pie chart.<sup>10</sup> In terms of more quotidian consumption, Jürgen Sarnowsky's analysis of the provisioning of the Teutonic Order's houses in Prussia confirmed the important role mead played in the monastic diet alongside beer, while a study by Wiesław Długokęcki underlined the significant quantities of honey brewed into mead at the fortress of Marienburg in the early 1400s, but the broader cultural importance of the honey-based beverage was generally left untouched.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Erik Husberg's study of beekeeping in medieval and early modern Sweden examined the consumption of mead at the royal court, but only briefly and drawing only upon material from the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Although beer, wine and mead were often connected in late medieval texts and administrative material produced by communities in the Baltic and North Seas, studies on the consumption of alcohol in the region have generally focused exclusively on the production and exchange of beer and wine, either ignoring entirely or sidelining mead in their analysis.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup>HU, vol. 4, p. 409 (no. 953); vol. 5, p. 548 (no. 1056).

<sup>9</sup>HU, vol. 4, p. 143 (no. 343).

<sup>10</sup>J. Kreem, 'Gäster I Reval under medeltiden: Gåvor I stadens räkenskaper', *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 83, 3 (1998), pp. 471–88, at p. 476. For examples of gifts of mead made by the city council in this period, see R. Vogelsang (ed.), *Kämmereibuch der Stadt Reval*, 2 vols (Cologne, 1976–83), vol. 1, p. 182 for representatives from Prussia; p. 199 for the Swedish captain of Vyborg.

<sup>11</sup>J. Sarnowsky, *Die Wirtschaftsführung des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen (1382–1454)* (Cologne, 1993), pp. 324–38; W. Długokęcki, 'Miód w gospodarce komturstwa malborskiego', *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski*, 31, 1 (2016), pp. 41–52, at pp. 47, 49–50.

<sup>12</sup>E. Husberg, *Honung, vax och mjöd: Biodlingen I Sverige under medeltid och 1500-tal* (Gothenburg, 1994), pp. 314–32.

<sup>13</sup>No mention of mead, for example, is made in C. von Blanckenburg, *Die Hanse und ihr Bier: Brauwesen und Bierhandel in hansischen Verkehrsgebiet* (Cologne, 2001). Mead is mentioned, but dismissed as irrelevant by the thirteenth century, in F. Irsigler, '"Ind machden alle lant beirs voll": zur Diffusion des Hopfenbierkonsums in westlichen Hanseraum', in Wiegmann and Mohrmann, *Nahrung und Tischkultur*, pp. 377–97, at p. 383, n. 23. On the consumption of wine in the Baltic, see K. Militzer, 'Der Wein des Meisters: die Weinversorgung des Hochmeisters des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen', in O. Pelc and G. Pickhan (eds), *Zwischen Lübeck und Novogorod: Wirtschaft, Politik und Kultur im Ostseeraum von frühen Mittelalter bis ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Lüneburg, 1996), pp. 144–55.

Mead features, for example, in the very title of Stefan Pajung's study on the import of 'Hanse cultural goods' into Denmark, but is not mentioned once in the main body of the text, with the focus remaining exclusively on beer.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Thomas Småberg's examination of feasting in fourteenth-century Sweden mentions mead only in passing, never assessing just why chroniclers singled out abundant quantities of mead (and wine) when emphasizing the lavishness of courtly events.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that scholars interested in gift-giving have largely ignored or not noticed mead in their own studies, instead focusing on more traditional and generic gifts, such as wine, jewelry and cash, while scholars interested in diets and food history have tended to focus on alcohol brewed with grape or grain. In general, these historiographic trends have served to relegate mead to the margins, obscuring its importance as a commodity in Hanse trade and its high status in both financial and cultural respects across the Baltic littoral. The notable exception to this trend is the research of Anu Mänd. Her exploration of feasting in late medieval Tallinn and Riga has drawn attention—albeit briefly—to the importance of mead at the banquets and celebrations hosted by civic guilds and fraternities and the heightened reputation that mead specifically from Riga enjoyed in both Livonia and Prussia.<sup>16</sup> As part of a much broader survey of civic life and revelry, Mänd's comments regarding the place of mead in Livonian urban life are understandably short, and scope exists not just to deepen exploration of the beverage and its status in Livonia, but also to assess the role the commodity played in political and commercial contexts more generally in communities across the Baltic.

Given its importance, the trade and consumption of mead among Hanse communities deserves to be better understood, and to be placed alongside the exchange of other Hanse cultural goods in the later medieval period, such as beer from Hamburg, herring from Scania and wax from Prussian and Livonian ports, products whose trade was largely dominated by Hanse merchants and which enjoyed a renown across the region and often beyond.<sup>17</sup> This article will first assess why the beverage and its key ingredient, honey, enjoyed such a high status in the late medieval Baltic region. It will then explore the drink's place in German-speaking communities from Lübeck to Tallinn, highlighting the important role that this commodity, based on bee produce, played in the self-fashioning, politics and administration of civic and aristocratic elites.

## I. Mead and Honey in the Later Medieval Baltic

That mead enjoyed a high status in Anglo-Saxon England and the West Norse world in particular is well known, but knowledge of the beverage's position elsewhere in

<sup>14</sup>Pajung, 'Cervisia etenim Danica', pp. 39–55.

<sup>15</sup>T. Småberg, 'Mead and Beer and Cherry Wine and Wine both Red and White': Feasts, Courts and Conflicts in Fourteenth-century Sweden', in W. Jezierski (ed.), *Rituals, Performatives, and Political Order in Northern Europe, c.650–1350* (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 295–320, with mentions of mead at pp. 303, 313, 316.

<sup>16</sup>A. Mänd, *Urban Carnival: Festive Culture in the Hanseatic Cities of the Eastern Baltic, 1350–1500* (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 140, 145, 176, 228 (for mead as an important element of civic feasts); and pp. 213–14 (for the popularity of mead from Riga).

<sup>17</sup>On the popularity of 'Hamburger' beer, Blanckenburg, *Die Hanse und ihr Bier*, pp. 33–7; on Scanian herring, N. Brunmayr, 'Herring Trade, Quality Controls and Diplomacy in Cologne in the Fifteenth Century', *German History*, 38, 4 (2020), pp. 527–49, at p. 529; on Baltic wax, Whelan, 'On Behalf of the City'.

medieval Europe is lacking.<sup>18</sup> Studies of the mead-hall in early medieval England and parts of Scandinavia, such as modern-day southern Sweden, have highlighted the role the beverage (and alcohol in general) played in marking communal rites and reinforcing status and identity, although the focus has generally remained more on the spaces in which mead was consumed, rather than on the beverage itself.<sup>19</sup> The lack of detailed studies focused on mead in other periods and geographical areas of medieval Europe lends the impression that the consumption of the honey beverage was restricted to the early medieval north-western Atlantic archipelago and areas of Scandinavia. This circumscription was not the case, with consumption of the beverage culturally embedded among elites in northern and central Europe by the high medieval period. This geography is underlined by a letter of 1221 in which Pope Honorius III wrote to encourage the bishop of Wrocław to hold Duke Leszek of Kraków to his crusading vow.<sup>20</sup> As Honorius explained, the Polish duke had started complaining of an illness that meant he could not drink 'wine or plain water', but instead had to subsist entirely on 'beer or mead'. Much to the pope's annoyance, the duke claimed he could therefore no longer countenance travelling to 'remote parts' such as the Holy Land, presumably because supplies of the latter could not be guaranteed there.<sup>21</sup> Mead was not just a drink of high status, but one, the letter implied, distinctive of Leszek's locale of northern and central Europe, seemingly unavailable elsewhere. Given mead's reputation, it is no surprise that Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, an epic poem focused on the Arthurian knight and composed in German in the early 1200s, has the central protagonist quaff mead and wine with his peers at the table of the Holy Grail.<sup>22</sup> In northern Europe at least, wine, long regarded by modern scholars as a drink only for the wealthy, shared its prestigious top-spot with mead.<sup>23</sup> The financial accounts of the Teutonic Order in Prussia in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries register purchases of mead under the section for 'wine', such was the high status of the honey beverage in the minds of contemporaries and its high cost in relative terms.<sup>24</sup> Mead remained a prestigious drink well into the later medieval period, with the sources left by the largely German-speaking Hanse communities and the lordships of the Teutonic Order in the Baltic offering the opportunity to examine the beverage in a regional context.

The high commercial and cultural value of mead in the later medieval Baltic reflected more broadly the environment and ecology of northern Europe, where colder

<sup>18</sup>On mead consumption in the West Norse world of the high medieval period, see J. Rodríguez, 'Old Norse Drinking Culture' (PhD Thesis, University of York, 2007), esp. chap. 3.

<sup>19</sup>For examples and references to further scholarship, see S. Pollington, 'The Mead-hall Community', *Journal of Medieval History*, 37, 1 (2011), pp. 19–33; M. Rundkvist, *Mead-halls of the Eastern Geats: Elite Settlements and Political Geography AD 375–1000 in Östergötland* (Stockholm, 2011).

<sup>20</sup>R. Philippi (ed.), *Preußisches Urkundenbuch. Politische Abteilung* (Königsberg, 1882), vol. 1, p. 26 (no. 39).

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup>W. von Eschenbach, *Parzival: Buch XII bis XVI*, ed. A. Leitzmann (Tübingen, 1960), p. 183 (book xvi, section 809, line 26).

<sup>23</sup>As an introduction to the high status of wine in medieval Germany, particularly in elite aristocratic and civic circles, see H. Müller, 'Weinbau und Weinkonsum in Westfalen', in Wiegmann and Mohrmann, *Nahrung und Tischkultur*, pp. 399–428.

<sup>24</sup>See the accounts drawn up for the grandmaster in 1406: C. Link and J. Sarnowsky (eds), *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen der Großschäffer und Lieger des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen*, vol. 3: *Großschäfferei Marienburg* (Cologne, 2008), p. 313 (nos 151–3).

climatic conditions limited bee productivity and, therefore, their capacity to make honey, heightening the status of items based on bee produce.<sup>25</sup> Honey, in fact, could be so scarce that it was usually one of the most valuable products produced on agricultural estates in Livonia and Prussia. In a legal hearing held in Riga in 1431, a certain Arnold Zacken valued the crops and livestock on his nearby estate so the judges could assess the cost of unlawful seizures made by the bishop of Ösel's bailiff.<sup>26</sup> Zacken valued a last of wheat at sixteen marks of Riga, barley at twelve, and oats at nine, before going on to value a pig at one and a half marks, four sheep at one mark, and a hundred chickens at two and a half marks.<sup>27</sup> At seventy marks a last, honey was by far the most expensive commodity to come from his estate.<sup>28</sup> The fact that the bailiff principally targeted Zacken's stocks of hay and then his beehives no doubt reflected the episcopal official's desire, after procuring fodder for his horses, to secure the most lucrative cash crop on the estate.

The situation was similar in other regions of the Baltic. Honey stocks fell victim to robbers in Prussia and central Poland too, for the value of the bee product there was similarly high.<sup>29</sup> The honey harvest was of interest to contemporary observers who understood its importance to Prussian estates.<sup>30</sup> The anonymous continuator of a chronicle focused on Prussia, originally began by Johann von Posilge, the latter a parish priest probably from a village near Marienburg, bemoaned how 'little honey' (*wenyny honyges*) there was in the difficult year of 1419, after a less than ideal harvest the year before, where there 'was honey enough' (*wart honyges gnuk*).<sup>31</sup> The financial records of the Teutonic Order in Prussia compiled in the later 1400s to record the payment of debts owed to mercenaries show not just the elevated price of honey in comparison to other agricultural goods, but also its value as a resource to rulers in general.<sup>32</sup> Illustrative

<sup>25</sup>The ecology of northern Europe and its impact on beekeeping is discussed in detail in L. Sales i Favà, A. Sapoznik and M. Whelan, 'Beekeeping in Late Medieval Europe: A Survey of its Ecological Settings and Social Impacts', *Anales de la Universidad de Alicante. Historia Medieval*, 22 (2021), pp. 275–96, at pp. 282–3.

<sup>26</sup>LEK, vol. 1.8, pp. 257–8 (no. 440).

<sup>27</sup>LEK, vol. 1.8, p. 258 (no. 440).

<sup>28</sup>The financial value of honey with examples from Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire is discussed further in H. Jäger, 'Pflanzliche Ressourcen in mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Kulturlandschaften', in R. Rolle and F. Andraschko (eds), *Frühe Nutzung pflanzlicher Ressourcen: internationales Symposium Duderstadt*, 12.–15.5.1994 (Hamburg, 1999), pp. 88–99, at pp. 90–1.

<sup>29</sup>For honey thefts in Prussia, see C. Franke, '“by vor lust ires halsis”: soziale Aspekte in den Aufzeichnungen des Pflegeamtes Seehesten und der Vogtei zu Leipe des Deutschen Ordens um 1450', in G. Gleba and N. Petersen (eds), *Wirtschafts- und Rechnungsbücher des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit: Formen und Methoden der Rechnungslegung. Städte, Klöster, Kaufleute* (Göttingen, 2015), pp. 119–36, at pp. 130–1, 134–5; in Mazovia, north-central Poland, see A. Borkiewicz-Celińska, 'Kamieńcowska księga sądów bartnych 1501–1517 (fragmenty)', *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, 22, 2 (1974), pp. 255–82, at p. 261 (nos 1–4). I am grateful to Tomasz Związek for providing me with a copy of this article.

<sup>30</sup>See the references to honey collected in M. Heckmann, 'Zwischen Weichseldelta, großer Wildnis und Rigaischen Meerbusen: ökologische Voraussetzungen für die Landnahme im spätmittelalterlichen Baltikum', in M. Heckmann and J. Röhrkasten (eds), *Von Nowgorod bis London: Studien zu Handel, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im mittelalterlichen Europa. Festschrift für Stuart Jenks zum 60. Geburtstag* (Göttingen, 2008), pp. 255–95, at pp. 283, 287–8.

<sup>31</sup>E. Strehlke (ed.), 'Johann von Posilge, nebst Fortsetzung', in T. Hirsch, M. Töppen and E. Strehlke (eds), *Die Geschichtsquellen der preussischen Vorzeit bis zum Untergange der Ordensherrschaft*, 6 vols (Leipzig, 1861–1968), vol. 3, pp. 79–388, at pp. 378, 387.

<sup>32</sup>J. Laczny, *Schuldenverwaltung und Tilgung der Forderungen der Söldner des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen nach dem Zweiten Thorner Frieden: Ordensfoliant 259 und 261, Zusatzmaterial* (Göttingen, 2019), pp. 137–9.



of its nascent worth, the Teutonic Order's leadership often settled cash debts in kind with honey, with a single tun valued anywhere between twelve and fifteen Prussian marks in the 1480s and early 1490s.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, a last (equivalent to twelve tuns) of rye was generally valued at twelve marks and a last of wheat around fifteen in the same period.<sup>34</sup> In lamenting a poor honey harvest, then, the anonymous continuator of Posilge's chronicle was not indulging in some literary device, but highlighting the loss of an important resource whose consequences would have resonated with contemporaries.

## II. The Production, Exchange and Trade of Mead

As one would expect, the high value of honey was reflected in both the price of and the taxes levied on mead, with the honey-based beverage generally more expensive than all but the most prestigious of beers. The high sale price of mead also helps explain why meadbrewing was a trade worth keeping out of the hands of non-Germans. In 1399 an officer of the Teutonic Order outfitted a ship to sail from Marienburg to Visby, in Gotland, purchasing for the journey ninety-six tuns of weaker 'table beer', twenty tuns of stronger 'good beer', and four tuns of mead. At 0.75 Prussian marks a tun, mead cost significantly more than the 0.2 marks a tun spent on table beer and 0.42 marks a tun spent on good beer.<sup>35</sup> The situation was similar further west in Rostock, whose town council in 1418 purchased mead at four Lübeck marks a tun to provision a mercenary contingent and their vessel, compared to the 1.66 marks a tun spent on 'ship beer' and the one mark per tun for 'good beer'.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that civic communities and lords in the Baltic region generally levied the heaviest or joint-heaviest excise on mead underlined its value in comparison to other similar commodities. Civic authorities in Bergen, for example, taxed mead at twelve Forngilde per tun in the later 1370s, compared to only eight for a tun of beer, while in 1456 the city council of Gdańsk imposed a tax of three Scotter per tun on the sale of all locally brewed mead, and four Scotter per tun on any 'foreign mead' sold within the city.<sup>37</sup> Hamburg beer, the most expensive and desired beer in the region, was taxed by Gdańsk's authorities at four Scotter, highlighting how imported mead ranked alongside the highest status imported beer in the region.<sup>38</sup> In Königsberg in 1506, the grand-master of the Teutonic Order stipulated that brewers of wheat beer should pay five shillings in tax for every tun they sold, while 'all meadbrewers' were to pay no less than

<sup>33</sup>For examples where honey was used to settle debts in a different context, namely the early 1400s in Marienburg, see Długokęcki, 'Miód w gospodarce', p. 47.

<sup>34</sup>Laczny, *Schuldenverwaltung*, pp. 136, 138.

<sup>35</sup>Link and Sarnowsky, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen*, vol. 3, p. 39 (no. 2).

<sup>36</sup>Verein für Hansische Geschichte (ed.), *Die Recesse und andere Akten der Hansetage von 1256–1430*, 9 vols (Leipzig, 1870–1913), vol. 6, pp. 591–2 (no. 598).

<sup>37</sup>G. I. Pettersen, *Priser og verdiforhold i Norge ca. 1280–1500* (Oslo, 2013), p. 300; M. Töppen (ed.), *Akten der Ständetage Preussens unter der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens*, 5 vols (Leipzig, 1878–86), vol. 2, p. 448 (no. 298). A Scot (pl. Scotter) was worth 1/24 of a mark. On Prussian currency and coinage, see the helpful glossary in O. Volckart, *Die Münzpolitik im Ordensland und Herzogtum Preußen von 1370 bis 1550* (Wiesbaden, 1996), pp. 456–8.

<sup>38</sup>Hamburger beer and mead often commanded the same retail prices as well: C. Franzke and J. Sarnowsky (eds), *Amtsbücher des Deutschen Ordens um 1450: Pfliegeramt zu Seehesten und Vogtei zu Leipe* (Göttingen, 2015), p. 348. On Hamburger beer in general, Blanckenburg, *Die Hanse und ihr Bier*, pp. 33–7.

twenty shillings per tun.<sup>39</sup> Organizers of feasts in Hanse cities could be wary of buying too much mead, given its high cost, with some regulations forbidding the purchase of mead at all. Ordinances for an annual feast from c.1415 in Tallinn, for example, stipulated that the guest of honour, the so-called ‘May Count’, ‘must not be given wine or mead’, to prevent the banquet from running up ‘great costs’.<sup>40</sup>

Mead’s financial value also meant it was worth stealing. A Swedish captain described his attacks on seaborne raiders in the eastern Baltic in 1466 to Lübeck’s city council, reporting that in one raid that he captured ‘six or eight tuns of mead and other minor plunder’ (*6 edder 8 tunnen medes und andere kleyne plunderie*).<sup>41</sup> It is no surprise that as they did with honey, the Teutonic Order’s officers also settled debts with payments in mead. John Tiergarten’s wife in Gdańsk, for example, was owed thirty-seven marks by the Teutonic Order in 1404, and was given mead to the value of twelve marks in part payment of the debt.<sup>42</sup> Mead was an expensive, luxury item, bearing sufficient nascent value even to act as payment in kind.

Honey was the key ingredient of mead, along with water, and the high value of the raw material was reflected not just in its saleable (and taxable) value, but also in the status attached to its production. The unusually detailed accounts of the Teutonic Order’s house at Seehesten, in eastern Prussia (now Szeszno in Poland), survive for the years 1450 to 1452, and suggest that one tun of honey could be brewed into between five and six tuns of mead, although regulations promulgated in Hanse cities and monastic records in Prussia suggest that honey was not the sole ingredient in the brewing process, as hops and spices were also used, to impart flavour to the beverage.<sup>43</sup> Not all mead would have been drunk. Late medieval German medical texts recommended its use for crafting salves and plasters, and mead was a base ingredient for many culinary recipes.<sup>44</sup> A cookbook written in Low German from the late fifteenth century, probably from a monastery in northern Germany, used mead in dishes as varied as mousses of apple, walnut and comfrey, a cherry drink and a dessert pastry flavoured with rosehip.<sup>45</sup>

As a lucrative trade dealing in a high-status product, brewing mead for commercial sale was restricted in Hanse and German-speaking communities across the Baltic to at least German-speakers, but more often to the wealthier citizens and property owners within the German-speaking community. In Marienburg, the settlement attached to

<sup>39</sup> *Akten der Ständetage*, vol. 5, p. 491 (no. 174).

<sup>40</sup> The regulations are discussed and translated in Mänd, *Urban Carnival*, p. 145. The regulations are printed in P. Johansen and H. von zur Mühlen, *Deutsch und Undeutsch im mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Reval* (Cologne, 1973), p. 442.

<sup>41</sup> HU, vol. 9, p. 150 (no. 254).

<sup>42</sup> Link and Sarnowsky, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen*, vol. 3, p. 65 (no. 165).

<sup>43</sup> Franzke and Sarnowsky, *Amtsbücher*, pp. 160, 217, 285. Similar impressions are gained from the accounts at Marienburg, where in one year twenty-eight tuns of honey made 190 tuns of mead: Długokęcki, ‘Miód w gospodarcze’, p. 49. On regulations and expenses in relation to meadbrewing, see LEK, vol. 1.6, p. 414 (no. 3023); Sarnowsky, *Wirtschaftsführung*, p. 329.

<sup>44</sup> A. Lehmann and D. Lehmann, *Zwei wundärztliche Rezeptbücher des 15. Jahrhunderts vom Oberrhein*, 2 vols (Hanover, 1985–6), vol. 1, p. 109 (no. A 3096) (for a green salve), p. 117 (no. A 3347) (for a plaster). The medicinal uses of mead are explored further in A. Kuropatnicki, M. Klósek and M. Kucharzewski, ‘Honey as Medicine: Historical Perspectives’, *Journal of Apicultural Research*, 57, 1 (2018), pp. 113–18, at p. 115.

<sup>45</sup> H. Wiswe, ‘Ein mittelniederdeutsches Kochbuch des 15. Jahrhunderts’, *Braunschweigisches Jahrbuch*, 37 (1956), pp. 19–56, at pp. 30–1 (nos 3, 5), 32 (no. 12), 39 (no. 47), 45 (no. 85).



the Teutonic Order's primary fortress and administrative centre in Prussia, the grand-master stated in 1365 that 'no meadbrewer should brew more honey than twenty tuns a year, be they a citizen or property owner (*her sy burger adier budener*)', with the first clause perhaps aimed at ensuring that no one brewer would dominate the market.<sup>46</sup> Tallinn's city council made matters clearer in their ordinances of c.1450, first stating that only citizens could brew mead, before clarifying that no 'non-German' (*undutssche*) could brew mead, firmly restricting this trade, like any other skilled and profitable profession in the city, to ethnic Germans.<sup>47</sup> Riga's regulations of 1502/03 similarly forbade any non-Germans from brewing within the city, going on to bar even German-speakers of servile status from brewing mead and beer.<sup>48</sup> Although they might be allowed to make a living transporting alcohol, non-Germans, Russians and 'cabin holders' (*katensassen*), meaning low-status renters, often native Livs and Latvians from the countryside, were shut out from the upper echelons of the brewery trade, both to deny them the ability to rise in status through a lucrative profession and to preserve economic opportunities for German-speakers.<sup>49</sup>

Broadening one's focus to examine the activities of Hanse merchants elsewhere in the region highlights the commercial and symbolic importance of meadbrewing with more clarity, underlining how the production of the honeyed beverage had become culturally embedded in German-speaking communities by the later medieval period and a recurring political issue laden with tension. The grand duke of Lithuania and future king of Poland Casimir Jagiellon confirmed the privileges of merchants from Prussian cities in Vilnius in 1441, including their ability to brew beer, but forbade them in particular from brewing mead (*keyn med doch brewen*), presumably because the production of mead was a lucrative trade and needed to be kept out of their hands.<sup>50</sup> There were perhaps deeper considerations at play here, with rulers denying German-speakers rights that they coveted to disrupt their communities or keep in reserve bargaining chips that could be deployed in political negotiations and discussions at a later date. It may also have been a case of simply doing to your neighbour what your neighbour did to you. After all, the Teutonic Order exploited the honey and mead supply for their own political ends, so it would be reasonable to suppose that their peers likewise exploited issues surrounding the sale of and brewing of mead in retaliation. In 1409, to take one example, the Teutonic Order's commander in Samogitia wrote to Witold, one of Casimir's predecessors as grand duke of Lithuania, stating that he had forbidden the export of honey from his territory because 'we also require honey and do not willingly want to drink water', preserving in one stroke his supply of mead and hindering the latter's access to a valuable natural resource.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup>J. Voigt, *Geschichte Marienburgs, der Stadt und des Haupthauses des deutschen Ritter-Ordens in Preußen* (Königsberg, 1824), p. 530 (no. 6); further discussion in Długokęcki, 'Miód w gospodarche', p. 47.

<sup>47</sup>LEK, vol. 1.11, p. 60 (no. 75).

<sup>48</sup>LEK, vol. 2.2, pp. 303–4 (no. 81). On citizen status and the right to brew in Tallinn, see Johansen and zur Mühlen, *Deutsch und Undeutsch*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>49</sup>On ethnicity and legal status in Livonian cities, see the recent survey and discussion offered in G. Strenga, 'Turning Transport Workers into Latvians? Ethnicity and Transport Workers' Guilds in Riga before and after the Reformation', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 52, 1 (2021), pp. 61–82, esp. pp. 61–3.

<sup>50</sup>HU, vol. 7, p. 326 (no. 649).

<sup>51</sup>A. Prochaska (ed.), *Codex Epistolaris Vitoldi magni ducis Lithuanie 1376–1430* (Kraków, 1882), p. 165 (no. 389). I am grateful to Grzegorz Chochorowski for this reference.

To judge from the complaints made by associations of German merchants in late medieval Lithuania, their lacking the right to brew the honey-based beverage clearly chafed and, on occasion, their refusal to follow the rules was utilized as a political weapon.<sup>52</sup> A tart letter written by the city council of Kaunas in 1476 emphasizes the cultural significance of mead among the Hanse merchants resident within Lithuania. After receiving complaints from Gdańsk about their treatment of German merchants, Kaunas retorted that the community of German merchants resident within their walls broke the rules agreed in their privileges every day, pointing out in particular that ‘they buy honey and brew mead, which they give to each other secretly’ (*sie koweffen honigk unde brouwen methen, den sie under sich heymelichen schengken*).<sup>53</sup> The production and exchange of mead was clearly so important to the German-speaking merchants resident in an alien town that they were willing to undertake it illicitly and knowingly against the rules regulating their lives within the settlement. Meadbrewing was a practice that could be found across the Baltic and Central Europe, with native Livs and Latvians brewing honey-based beverages before German-speakers colonized the region. By the later medieval period, however, Hanse communities had a particular reputation and predilection for both its production and its consumption in the Baltic region.<sup>54</sup>

### III. ‘Rigish’ Mead and its Cultural and Economic Significance

Mänd has convincingly argued that the choosing of certain foodstuffs and beverages by guild stewards in Riga and Tallinn to eat and drink at communal feasts signalled the consumers’ status and socio-cultural identity.<sup>55</sup> Pajung has similarly underlined how the choice by Danes to purchase and drink hopped beer imported by Hanse merchants at important events, such as weddings and feasts, aimed to emphasize the status of the consumer and their ability to purchase premium goods that stemmed from the ‘Hanse cultural circle’.<sup>56</sup> Although financial materials are sparser from neighbouring Sweden, a similar trend can be observed there too, with the editors of a fourteenth-century account noting that purchases of ‘more exclusive wares’ (*mer exklusiva varor*), such as German hopped beer, mead and wheat flour, were restricted to marking the visit of the king or high-profile aristocrats.<sup>57</sup> It stands to reason that choosing to purchase, gift or consume mead carried similar overtones, not just in Livonia, the province upon which Mänd focused her study, but throughout the Baltic region. Mead was, after all, not just

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, HU, vol. 10, p. 501 (no. 791).

<sup>53</sup> HU, vol. 10, p. 312 (no. 486).

<sup>54</sup> On the consumption of fermented honey beverages in societies native to the Baltic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see K. Klaviņš, ‘Reorganising the Livonian Landscape: Some Issues and Research Perspectives’, in A. Pluskowski (ed.), *Ecologies of Crusading, Colonization, and Religious Conversion in the Medieval Baltic* (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 197–208, at p. 204.

<sup>55</sup> Mänd, *Urban Carnival*, p. 228.

<sup>56</sup> Pajung, ‘Cervisia etenim Danica’, pp. 40–1, 54 (quote from p. 54). More recent discussion regarding the consumption of hopped beer in Denmark can be found in K. Baur, *Freunde und Feinde: Niederdeutsche, Dänen und die Hanse im Spätmittelalter (1376–1513)* (Cologne, 2018), pp. 209–10.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, B. Fritz and E. Odelman (eds), *Raven van Barnekows räkenskaper för Nyköpings fögderi 1365–1367* (Stockholm, 1994), quotation from p. 55, with examples of mead purchases for a local lord on p. 137, and for the visiting king and duke of Mecklenburg on pp. 169–71.

a tasty beverage, but—as we have seen—a commodity laden with political overtones, social status and cultural associations.

It is against this more nuanced picture of mead's place in the commercial and political life of the late medieval Baltic that the decision of Hanse communities and officers of the Teutonic Order to present the product to high-profile visitors and allies throughout the later medieval period can best be explained, a topic to which we now turn. It would be otiose to work through the significant quantity of cases preserved in the evidence of financial records, correspondence and chronicles from Hanse communities and the leadership of the Teutonic Order. Instead, the following analysis will focus principally on the giving of and export of mead from Riga, before broadening the horizon to consider mead in the Baltic more generally and its place in Hanse trading networks.

For reasons that remain unclear, 'Rigish' mead was the most expensive and most prestigious mead available in the late medieval Baltic, enjoying a popularity not just in Livonia but throughout the region, sometimes transported thousands of kilometres to reach the cellars of those who desired it.<sup>58</sup> In December 1420, for example, the bishop of Lübeck thanked the master of the Livonian Order 'particularly for the mead' he had sent.<sup>59</sup> Given that the master of the Livonian Order was generally based in either Riga or (after 1481) his castle at nearby Wenden, the gift had probably travelled over 1,000 kilometres by the time it arrived at the bishop's seat in Eutin, just north of Lübeck.<sup>60</sup> Other officers of the Livonian Order were known to deal with the beverage too. In a letter of 1430, the city council of Gdańsk alleged that a ship from Wismar had attacked a vessel captained by one of their own citizens that contained six lasts of Rigish mead (*Rigischen medes*) owned by the 'Lord Marshal of Livonia', the chief military officer in the region.<sup>61</sup> The correspondence does not detail what the lord marshal intended to do with the mead, but trading it for a profit or presenting it to an ally or supporter in a like manner to his superior is not out of the question.<sup>62</sup>

After all, closer to home, the city council of Riga repeatedly exploited their access to the prestigious mead by presenting it to important visitors to the city. To take a snapshot running roughly from the later 1420s to the later 1430s, mead, often along with other gifts, was presented to figures as varied as the council of prelates who assembled in Riga in 1428 to discuss ecclesiastical taxation, the captain of the town guard of Pskov in 1435, visiting Lithuanian diplomats in 1437, the archbishop of Moscow and the

<sup>58</sup>The popularity of mead from Riga is referred to briefly in Mänd, *Urban Carnival*, pp. 213–14. The fact that 'Rigish' mead in particular appeared in source materials of the late medieval period was mentioned in Leopold Goetz's fundamental study of German-Russian trade, but the reasons for its popularity were left undiscussed. See L. K. Goetz, *Deutsch-russische Handelsgeschichte des Mittelalters* (Lübeck, 1922), p. 319.

<sup>59</sup>Verein für Hansische Geschichte, *Die Recesse und andere Akten der Hansestage von 1256–1430*, vol. 7, p. 159 (no. 279).

<sup>60</sup>On the residences of the Livonian Master, see A. Mänd, 'Signs of Power and Signs of Hospitality: The Festive Entries of the *Ordensmeister* into Late Medieval Reval', in B. Nagy and M. Sebök (eds), *The Man of Many Devices, Who Wandered Full Many Ways: Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak* (Budapest, 1999), pp. 282–93, at pp. 282–3.

<sup>61</sup>HU, vol. 7, p. 479 (no. 868).

<sup>62</sup>On the trading activities of the Livonian master and his officers, see J. Kreem, 'Stadt und Landesherr als Geschäftspartner: die Handelsangelegenheiten in dem Beziehungen zwischen dem Deutschen Orden und der Stadt Reval', in N. Angermann (ed.), *Städtisches Leben im Baltikum zur Zeit der Hanse* (Lüneburg, 2003), pp. 93–112, at pp. 98–100.

representatives of the archbishop of Riga in 1438, and also to the archbishop himself, when he visited in person in 1439.<sup>63</sup> Mead was often given along with wine, beer and oats, but it appears that mead was the highest status gift, alongside wine.<sup>64</sup> Visits to Riga from royal emissaries were rare, but when representatives of the king of Poland arrived in 1473, the city council focused its money on gifts that presumably would impress the most: in this case, an unspecified quantity of wine and ‘one tun of mead’.<sup>65</sup> Non-royal visitors that same year, such as the bishop of Turku, a nearby castellan and a certain doctor Hildebrand Humboldt, had to make do with either just beer or wine.<sup>66</sup> Mead may have been part of a broader array of gifts aimed at demonstrating status and offering a suitable welcome, but it probably enjoyed the highest status, reserved only for visitors representing royalty when money was tight.

The bishop of Lübeck’s offering of thanks mentioned above was not mere politeness, but reflected the prestigious nature of the gift received, with mead from Riga bearing the highest status of all meads throughout the late medieval Baltic.<sup>67</sup> The rich records left by Hanse towns and the Teutonic Order in Prussia underline not just Rigish mead’s high financial value and lively export, but its cultural esteem too. Special occasions called not just for mead, but for *Rigish* mead, such as in Marienburg in 1405, when the grandmaster paid six Prussian marks for half a last of ‘mead from Riga’ to celebrate the blessing of two recently-appointed bishops who visited Marienburg in 1405.<sup>68</sup> Importing Rigish mead from Livonia came with additional costs—in the case of 1405, the grandmaster paid a further 16 Scotter in ‘carrying fees’ (*furlone*) to transport the mead from Riga to Marienburg—and proved far more expensive than sourcing local mead.<sup>69</sup> But it was worth it.

A similar opinion regarding Rigish mead prevailed outside Marienburg, both among other officers of the Teutonic Order and in nearby cities.<sup>70</sup> When forces of the Teutonic Order took to the field, local mead with no geographical appellation was generally provided, such as the ten Prussian marks spent purchasing ‘10 tuns of mead’ in preparation for a campaign in 1402 that was to be launched from Königsberg.<sup>71</sup> Special visitors, however, necessitated special mead. When a Lithuanian duke accompanied the leading military officer of the Teutonic Order on a campaign later that same year, ten Prussian

<sup>63</sup> A. von Bulmerincq (ed.), *Kämmerei-Register der Stadt Riga 1348–1361 und 1405–1474*, 2 vols (Munich, 1909–13), vol. 1, pp. 164, 192, 199, 205, 211. A recent introduction to the record-keeping and financial administration of the city of Riga in this period is offered in M. Mahling, *Ad rem publicam et ad ignem: das mittelalterliche Schriftgut des Rigaer Rats und sein Fortbestand in der Neuzeit* (Marburg, 2015), pp. 95–9.

<sup>64</sup> The political relationships of the city council of Riga with neighbouring cities and lords are explored in the following study, but no reference is made to their gift-giving: T. Brück, ‘Zwischen Autonomie und Konfrontation—Bemerkungen zur Politik des Rates von Riga in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts’, in I. Misāns and H. Wernicke (eds), *Riga und der Ostseeraum: von der Gründung 1201 bis in die Frühe Neuzeit* (Marburg, 2005), pp. 144–68.

<sup>65</sup> Bulmerincq, *Kämmerei-Register*, p. 328.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>67</sup> Mänd, *Urban Carnival*, pp. 213–14.

<sup>68</sup> Link and Sarnowsky, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen*, vol. 3, p. 313 (no. 152).

<sup>69</sup> For purchases of local mead, Link and Sarnowsky, *Schuldbücher und Rechnungen*, vol. 3, p. 313 (no. 155); p. 317 (no. 215). For further information about the prices of Rigish mead in the later 1300s and early 1400s, see Hirsch, *Handels- und Gewerbsgeschichte Danzigs*, p. 246.

<sup>70</sup> Further purchases of Rigish mead for the grandmaster and his leading officials are collected in E. Joachim (ed.), *Das Marienburger Tresslerbuch der Jahre 1399–1409* (Königsberg, 1896), pp. 149, 150, 173, 235, 344, 388, 393.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

marks were found to purchase just one last (that is, one twelfth of a tun) of Rigish mead (*Rigischs metehē*) especially for the guest.<sup>72</sup> The same money could have brought the Lithuanian duke ten times the quantity of local mead that year, reflecting the luxury nature of the Rigish mead and the need to pay decent sums to acquire it. The high cost of the commodity was reflected elsewhere in Prussian civic taxation. When the city council of Gdańsk, for example, set taxes on the sale of alcohol within their walls in 1456, Rigish mead (*Rigisch methe*) was taxed at the highest rate, but the reputation of Rigish mead also surfaced elsewhere in the Baltic.

The appearance of Rigish mead in poundtoll and mercantile records further west confirms that the beverage enjoyed a similarly high status in the Baltic and North Sea across the fifteenth century. Rigish mead was taxed at a higher rate compared to other meads in the poundtoll collected at Lübeck between 1492 and 1496, with one tun generally taxed at twenty-four shillings, while mead from Gdańsk, for example, was assessed at twenty, and that from Stockholm at eighteen.<sup>73</sup> In fact, to judge from the same poundtoll, Rigish mead dominated the export market, with thirty-four of the thirty-eight entries recording mead noting the shipper's origin as Riga.<sup>74</sup>

Indicative of its quality and reputation is the fact that Rigish mead was exported not just westwards for sale in markets in Flanders and England, but within the Baltic too, to cities with strong meadbrewing traditions of their own.<sup>75</sup> Rigish mead was shipped from Riga to Tallinn, to Gdańsk and to Lübeck.<sup>76</sup> When mead was shipped further afield by Hanse members, it is no surprise to find that it was owned by citizens of Riga, such as the four merchants who alleged that their mead had been seized on ships raided by English vessels near the Flemish coast in 1406.<sup>77</sup> Ilgvars Misāns has argued that the city of Riga was never able to dominate the politics of Livonia, having to cooperate and compromise with their fellow Hanse counterparts in the region, often to the detriment of their own wishes and plans.<sup>78</sup> Misāns goes on to conclude that Riga lacked the potential to exercise regional leadership in the fourteenth century and could only influence affairs, rather than direct them, in the fifteenth century, being of equal or lesser rank to the Hanse cities of Tallinn and Tartu.<sup>79</sup> A close study of Rigish mead sheds a different light on the relationship between the Hanse communities in Livonia, at least

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>73</sup> H. Vogtherr, *Die Lübecker Pfundzollbücher 1492–1496* (Cologne, 1996), pp. 559, 975, 1249, 1473 (for examples of mead from Riga), p. 1067 (for mead from Stockholm), p. 1152 (for mead from Gdańsk).

<sup>74</sup> Vogtherr, *Die Lübecker Pfundzollbücher 1492–1496*, passim.

<sup>75</sup> The regulations for the brewing of mead in Tallinn (see n. 48) and for the taxing of local mead in Gdańsk (see n. 37) point to meadbrewing in both cities. There are no such regulations for Lübeck, but meadbrewers were certainly resident in the city. See the case of Johannes Hamelen, 'brewer of mead' (*braxator medonis*), appearing in a property transaction in 1388: U. Simon, *Das Lübecker Niederstadtbuch (1363–1399)*, 2 vols (Cologne, 2006), vol. 1, p. 629.

<sup>76</sup> For examples, see LEK, vol. 1.11, p. 580 (no. 736) (Riga to Gdańsk in 1458); *ibid.*, vol. 1.11, p. 586 (no. 751) (Riga to Lübeck in 1458); *ibid.*, vol. 1.12, p. 152 (no. 269) (Riga to Tallinn in 1464).

<sup>77</sup> See n. 4 for the source. On this spell of English raiding in 1406, see K. Militzer, 'Der Handel der livländischen Kaufleute mit Brügge und London', in Angermann (ed.), *Städtisches Leben*, pp. 231–55, at 251–2.

<sup>78</sup> I. Misāns, 'Riga—ein Vorort der livländischen Städte im Mittelalter', in Misāns and Wernicke, *Riga und der Ostseeraum*, pp. 169–79, at pp. 178–9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177–8.

from cultural and commercial perspectives, with the city emerging as the pre-eminent exporter of high-quality mead by 1400, with a heightened international reputation to match.

Just why Rigish mead was regarded as particularly prestigious within the Hanse trading zone remains unclear. Rights to the honey around Riga were clearly worth competing for, with access to the bee product sparking conflicts between German-speaking settlers and native Livs as early as 1210/11.<sup>80</sup> Pollen samples from late medieval sites within the city of Riga suggest an unusually high concentration of linden trees in the surrounding area, and honey made from linden trees was (and remains today) particularly prized for its taste profile and medicinal properties.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the honey was particularly tasty in the locale and produced decent mead, making it worth exporting. Just what made ‘good’ mead in the minds of contemporaries, however, remains difficult to ascertain. Possible hints are offered by a commentary written in southern Germany or Austria around 1470 on the health-giving qualities of food, where the author noted that ‘mead is good to drink’ (*met is gut ze trincken*) when it has been ‘well cooked’ (*wol gesoten*) and that ‘mead is healthy which has lots of honey’ (*met ist gesunt der vil honigs hat*).<sup>82</sup> Perhaps Rigish mead was more desired because it was cooked (that is, brewed) in a particular fashion, or because it was stronger in terms of the quantity of honey used compared to water, making a more robust and more alcoholic beverage that travelled better and was perceived as healthier.

#### IV. Mead in Politics and Diplomacy

It is important here to place Rigish mead within the broader culture surrounding the honey beverage in general. While Rigish mead represented the most prestigious mead, exploited by Hanse merchants with access to it and consumed by lords and prelates who could afford it or convince peers to give it to them, locally sourced mead played an important role in communities across the region, allowing them to regulate their diplomatic relations and provide a welcome to visitors befitting of their status.

A look at the city accounts of Tallinn, where mead (alongside wine) was similarly presented to important visitors, underlines how gifts of mead were likewise reserved only for individuals high in status, with diplomatic representatives (*boden*) and local lords (*her*) honoured with mead, but servants of diplomatic representatives and the sons and mothers of lords receiving only beer.<sup>83</sup> On a smaller scale, the sense emerges that not having mead to present to important guests could be embarrassing for individuals. The commander of the Teutonic Order’s convent at Königsberg wrote a worried letter in 1506 to his superior pleading for money and victuals, claiming that his cellar was so empty that he would struggle to offer visiting guests even a single cup of mead.<sup>84</sup> The grandmaster and his entourage were able to drink eighteen and a half tuns of beer

<sup>80</sup> Kļaviņš, ‘Reorganising the Livonian Landscape’, p. 204.

<sup>81</sup> A. Brown, ‘Vegetation Change in Livonia: The Palynological Data’, in A. Pluskowski (ed.), *Environment, Colonization, and the Baltic Crusader States* (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 105–35, at pp. 124–5.

<sup>82</sup> M. Adamson, *Medieval Dietetics: Food and Drink in Regimen Sanitatis Literature from 800–1400* (Frankfurt/Main, 1995), p. 209.

<sup>83</sup> Vogelsang, *Kammereibuch*, vol. 1, pp. 180–2, 201.

<sup>84</sup> LEK, vol. 2.3, p. 5 (no. 9).



(c.2,480 litres) and five tuns of mead (c.670 litres) alone in a matter of days when they visited Seehesten in 1450, and important courtly events could require significant purchases of mead in advance.<sup>85</sup> The grandmaster, for example, purchased four tuns of raw honey (c.540 litres) before meeting with the grand duke of Lithuania in 1399, with the accounts recording the additional expense of half a Prussian mark to brew it into mead.<sup>86</sup>

Alongside major events and the visits of important individuals, the quotidian demand for mead among the Teutonic Order's brethren clearly consumed significant quantities of the beverage, sometimes stretching supplies and purse strings. In 1410 in Gdańsk, for example, the convent had to give the cellarer twenty-eight Prussian marks as 'honey money' (*honiggelde*) to top up his existing stock of 11 tuns of honey (c.1540 litres) that was destined to be brewed into mead.<sup>87</sup> The importance attached to the mead supply by the convent's brethren clearly weighed on their minds, for the scribe recording the giving of the additional cash added in a note stating that the convent reserved the right to inspect the cellarer's accounts to ensure that he had not wasted their money and had secured a good deal on any additional honey purchased.

The high financial and cultural value of mead filtered throughout the broader central European region and by the later medieval period presenting mead to high-profile guests was a cultural practice that spanned Slavic, Baltic and German-speaking communities. The Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, writing in the later 1400s, noted that when Witold, the grand duke of Lithuania, threatened to besiege Novgorod in 1428, the city's representatives scoffed with laughter, offering to return to their well-fortified home and prepare mead for his arrival.<sup>88</sup> This joke was well aimed, given that the grand duke himself offered mead to important visitors at his court. In the following decade, for example, the grandmaster of the Teutonic Order dispatched his representative, a certain Hans Balg, to treat with Witold amidst political tension between the two rulers. Balg found the grand duke holding court at Trakai, in central Lithuania. After an icy start to the reception, Balg and Witold finished their preliminary discussions in a good mood, with Balg noting in his account of his embassy that the grand duke 'gave me his hand' and said 'good night'. As Balg went on to report, he returned to his lodgings in Trakai to find that Witold had sent him some mead and invited him to dine with him, both of which boded well for his visit.<sup>89</sup>

The aforementioned ban on the export of honey from Samogitia, then held by the Teutonic Order, to Lithuania in 1407 would have had real consequences, for it hindered the grand duke's ability to secure the raw material he needed to brew mead, a vital resource in managing the day-to-day affairs of court. When rumours circulated through Livonia in 1494 that the grand prince of Moscow intended to marry his son to a Danish princess, the bishop of Tartu confidently reported that the ruler was gathering 'all the honey that one could get' in his lands to celebrate the nuptials.<sup>90</sup> Much of this

<sup>85</sup>Franzke and Sarnowsky, *Amtsbücher*, p. 216.

<sup>86</sup>Joachim, *Das Marienburger Tresslerbuch*, p. 39.

<sup>87</sup>W. Ziesemer (ed.), *Das Große Ämterbuch des Deutschen Ordens* (Gdańsk, 1921), pp. 691–2.

<sup>88</sup>J. Długosz, *Historiae Polonicae libri XII*, ed. A. Przezdziecki, *Joannis Długossii senioris canonici Opera Omnia*, X, XI, XII, XIII and XIV, 5 vols (Kraków, 1873–8), vol. 13, p. 362. An abridged account is available in English: J. Długosz, *The Annals of Jan Długosz*, trans. and abridged by M. Michael (Chichester, 1997), p. 447.

<sup>89</sup>LEK, vol. 1.8, p. 501 (no. 853).

<sup>90</sup>LEK, vol. 2.1, p. 742 (no. 977).

honey would have been brewed into mead, perhaps by the aforementioned Heinrich Elferinkhausen, who—as noted above—returned from Moscow in 1495 after an invitation by the grand prince to brew mead especially for him.<sup>91</sup> Mead was important business, and it was worth the grand prince's while to secure the best meadbrewer possible, given the essential role that the beverage played in communicating status and smoothing diplomatic and social tensions.<sup>92</sup>

## V. Conclusions

It has been the premise of this article that the trade and consumption of mead in the late medieval Baltic deserve to be better understood and warrant inclusion within broader surveys of northern European trade and alcohol consumption as a veritable Hanse cultural good. The allure of mead and, in particular, Rigish mead, underlines how the honey-based beverage evolved like many other Hanse commodities in the later medieval period to attract a certain prestige and status. The reputation for quality that Rigish mead developed is not unusual, aligning it with the numerous other Hanse commodities that enjoyed a similarly heightened status for reasons that remain unclear, at least to modern historians. Uncertainty lingers, for example, over just why hopped beer from Hamburg or Wismar was desired over hopped beers produced by other Hanse cities.<sup>93</sup> Uncertainty also revolves around why contemporaries in the west similarly prized the 'Polish' and 'Lembrisch' wax—like mead, a commodity intimately linked to the labour of bees—exported by Hanse merchants from eastern Baltic ports in significant quantities.<sup>94</sup> Jahnke has argued that Mediterranean products such as rice and figs, commodities traded by Hanse merchants in the North Sea and Baltic throughout the later medieval period, deserve to be seen as 'Hanse' goods alongside more intensely studied products such as grain, fish and cloth, and mead surely deserves to be treated likewise.<sup>95</sup> In its wide export and its appearance in urban ordinances, civic correspondence and political negotiations, mead was a commodity of significance whose consumption was culturally embedded in German-speaking communities across the region.

<sup>91</sup> The increasing power of Ivan III Vasilyevich, grand prince of Moscow (1462–1505), and its influence on Hanse politics in the region, can be followed in Bessudnova, 'Die Schliessung', esp. pp. 77–81.

<sup>92</sup> The predilection for mead in Russian communities in the late medieval period is surveyed in Goetz, *Deutsch-Russische Handelsgeschichte*, pp. 316–17.

<sup>93</sup> The economic advantages of hopped beer in general are discussed in J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'Hopped Beer as an Innovation: The Bergen Beer Market around 1200–1600 in the European Context', in H. Brand (ed.), *Trade, Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange: Continuity and Change in the North Sea Area and the Baltic, c.1350–1750* (Gröningen, 2005), pp. 152–68, at pp. 154–5. For discussion of the popularity of Hamburg beer, see Blanckenburg, *Die Hanse und ihr Bier*, pp. 33–7.

<sup>94</sup> For a discussion of why contemporaries may have prized Baltic wax over locally produced wax or wax from the Maghreb, see A. Sapoznik, 'Bees in the Medieval Economy: Religious Observance and the Production, Trade, and Consumption of Wax in England, c.1300–1555', *Economic History Review*, 72, 4 (2019), pp. 1152–74, at p. 1163. The prestige surrounding Baltic wax and some of the scholarship surrounding gift-giving is examined in detail in Whelan, '"On Behalf of the City"'.

<sup>95</sup> On rice, see C. Jahnke and S. Karg, 'Der Reishandel im Hanseraum', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 134 (2016), pp. 97–131, at p. 131. On figs, C. Jahnke, 'Der Feigenhandel im Hanseraum', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 133 (2015), pp. 41–75, at p. 66–7.

Mead also mattered to individual contemporaries, sometimes a great deal. An officer of the Teutonic Order, a certain Walter von der Loes, was especially frustrated in 1505 when he ordered mead from a citizen of Gdańsk, only to be delivered 'two containers of beer'.<sup>96</sup> Leaving the beer untouched, von der Loes went on to spend the next two years writing individually to the city council of Gdańsk, to the fraternity of merchants there and even to his grandmaster to make known his irritation at being without his mead and demanding compensation.<sup>97</sup> Whether von der Loes ever received his shipment cannot be known, but the tone emerging from his correspondence is clear: sometimes only mead would do.

## Abstract

This article represents the first study of the trade and consumption of mead, the alcoholic beverage brewed by fermenting honey with water, in the late medieval Baltic. Focusing on the Teutonic Order and the Hanse settlements in the region, the article argues that the consumption of mead was culturally embedded in German-speaking communities, heightening the status of the beverage, turning it into a vital resource in the exercise of power and influencing the government and administrations of cities and lordships. From a broader perspective, a close study of the drink underlines the cultural and economic significance attached to bee produce in the later medieval period, with ecology and cultural practice combining to make honey and its pre-eminent product, mead, a distinctive international export that enjoyed high esteem and significant demand across Hanse trading networks.

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<sup>96</sup> LEK, vol. 2.2, pp. 583–4 (no. 754).

<sup>97</sup> LEK, vol. 2.2, pp. 593 (no. 772); vol. 2.3, pp. 11–12 (no. 23), p. 136 (no. 196).