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# A witness account from 1602 as micro-historical evidence for the international trade in Iceland at the start of the Danish trade monopoly

This article presents a detailed study of a testimony of eight persons before the town council of Hamburg in August 1602. The men had been part of a Helsingør trading company, led by Hamburg-based merchant Johan Holtgreve, that was accused of having traded illegally in Iceland that summer. The testimony provides remarkably detailed insights into the workings of international trade in Iceland: its organisation, international cooperation, and the history of the fishing industry. Moreover, it sheds light on the transition from the dominance of German merchants in Iceland in the sixteenth century to the Danish trade monopoly that followed.

## *Introduction*

On 21 August 1602, a rather international company of eight persons appeared before two town councillors of the City of Hamburg in the so-called Eimbeckisches Haus. They had been accused by the Danish king Christian IV of having illegally traded in Iceland that summer, on a ship from Helsingør with a predominantly Dutch crew, and with a trading company largely comprised of Danes and led by merchant Johan Holtgreve from Hamburg. The latter had defended his actions by stating that he had sailed to Iceland legally, but that the exceptional abundance of sea ice in Icelandic waters had prevented the ship from reaching its intended destination of Spákonufellshöfði (Skagaströnd). Therefore, he said, he had been forced to seek refuge in Básendar on Reykjanes, but he had co-ordinated his actions with the Icelandic governor and not interfered with anyone's business. In

order to corroborate his side of the story, a lengthy witness account was produced before the Hamburg town council, in which a selection of eight persons who had been part of the enterprise—including merchants, the skipper, helmsman and sailors—testified about what happened in Iceland that summer.<sup>1</sup>

The resulting document provides an exceptional insight into the organisation of international trade in Iceland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. It presents a detailed snapshot of how the transition took place between the Germans, who had dominated Icelandic foreign relations at least since the 1530s, and the Danish, who had been given the monopoly of the trade between Iceland and the rest of Europe in 1601. Because historians have mostly focused on either the period of German trade in Iceland or that of the Danish trade monopoly,<sup>2</sup> the transition itself has not received much attention.

Moreover, due to its detailed nature, the document sheds light on a number of features of the workings of trade in Iceland in this period, about which other written sources remain silent, or can only hint. There is, for example, the question of how trade took place on a micro-level: How did foreign merchants and Icelanders communicate with each other? How did they establish trade relations or keep in contact and exchange information? The document provides valuable information on a more general level as well, for example, about the organisation of trading companies, the division of tasks on the ship, and life on board. Finally, the testimony gives us insights into international cooperation in the trade with Iceland, which is usually

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1 RAK (Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen). Særligt stillede landskaber og unionsriger: D 11 Island og Færøerne, Pakke 27 (Supplement II, no. 19). A transcript of the document is available in the online source database *HANSdoc* (<https://hansdoc.dsm.museum>) under the following ID number: 16020830HAM00. In the following footnotes, the ID numbers of the other cited sources with transcripts or descriptions in *HANSdoc* are provided.

2 E.g., Ernst Baasch, *Die Islandfahrt der Deutschen: namentlich der Hamburger, vom 15. bis 17. Jahrhundert*, Forschungen zur hamburgischen Handelsgeschichte 1 (Hamburg, 1889); Jón J. Aðils, *Einokunarverzlun Dana á Íslandi 1602–1787* (Reykjavík, 1919)—for practical reasons, I have consulted the Danish translation of the work: *Den Danske monopolhandel på Island, 1602–1787*, trans. Friðrik Ásmundsson Brekkan (Copenhagen, 1926); Gisli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation: Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland 1602–1787* (Lund, 1983), published in Icelandic as *Upp er boðið Ísaland: einokunarverslun og íslenskt samfélag 1602–1787* (Reykjavík, 1987).

presented in historiography in national terms: The Danes replaced the Germans replaced the English replaced the Norwegians as the dominant force in the international trade with Iceland.<sup>3</sup> Although it is acknowledged that merchants from various countries were active alongside each other, international cooperation in this trade remains little studied, which is where a careful examination of the 1602 source in its historical context is useful.

Written testimonies have long attracted the attention of historians because they often record (micro-)historical details that remain hidden in other documents,<sup>4</sup> and this is also true in the context of international maritime trade.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Iceland, these testimonies become especially important in the sixteenth century, when the extant written material grew exponentially. For example, documents pertaining to the decades-long struggle between merchants from Bremen and Hamburg about the right to trade in the region around Berufjörður in the 1580s and 1590s include testimonies of merchants and seamen from Bremen and regional Icelandic priests and officials. These have provided many details about organisation and operations in the trading stations.<sup>6</sup> The 1602 testimony provides even more details, although the question remains as to how far these can be generalised. After all, the situation described in the source presents only one side of the story, and the events can be considered to have been

3 Gunnar Karlsson, *Lífsbjörg Íslendinga frá 10. öld til 16. aldar*, Handbók í íslenski miðaldasögu 3 (Reykjavík, 2009), 281–314; Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin í sögu Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1970); Helgi Þorláksson, *Sjórán og siglingar: ensk-íslensk samskipti 1580–1630* (Reykjavík, 1999); Helgi Þorláksson, *Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds*, Saga Íslands VI (Reykjavík, 2003), 142, 306; Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 1–57.

4 Famous examples are Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1982); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, 1983).

5 See for example Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'Witnessing the Sea: Testimonials of Seamen in the "Seven Salt Ships" Case (1564–1567) as Sources for Maritime, Social, and Legal History', *The International Journal of Maritime History* 30 (2018): 701–723.

6 Bart Holterman, *The Fish Lands: German Trade with Iceland, Shetland and the Faroe Islands in the Late 15th and 16th Century* (Berlin, 2020), 170–171, 189, 212, 299–304, 334–335, 339, 343; Natascha Mehler et al., 'Gautavík – A Trading Site in Iceland Re-Examined', in *German Trade in the North Atlantic, c. 1400–1700: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Natascha Mehler, Mark Gardiner, and Endre Elvestad, *AmS-Skrifter* 27 (Stavanger, 2019), 265–266; Helgi Þorláksson, *Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds*, 148.

exceptional rather than representative of the normal operation of the trade. Still, through careful comparison with other sources, the document can provide valuable insights into the workings of international trade in Iceland around the turn of the sixteenth century.

*Historical background: The introduction of the  
Danish trade monopoly*

In the year 1602, Iceland's international commerce was in a phase of transition. Traders from northern German towns—especially Hamburg, and to a lesser degree Bremen, Lübeck and Oldenburg—who had dominated international trade with Iceland for more than a century had been prohibited by King Christian IV to trade in Iceland the year before. In their place, merchants from the Danish towns of Copenhagen, Helsingør and Malmö had been privileged with trading in Iceland.<sup>7</sup> Although the reader might be well acquainted with the general history, it is worthwhile to examine certain aspects of this transition in order to provide a proper context for the testimony under discussion.

The sixteenth century has been characterised in Icelandic historiography by some authors as the “German century”—in contrast with the preceding “English century”.<sup>8</sup> German traders had established a near monopoly in the foreign trade with Iceland in the first decades of the sixteenth century, at the expense of English merchants and fishermen: by the middle of the 1530s, German merchants were active in trading stations all around the island. Their focal point was in Hafnarfjörður, where merchants from Hamburg had established a steady presence and even built their own church, although they were officially not allowed to stay there in winter.<sup>9</sup> Starting in the middle of the century, however, the Danish crown tried to limit the influence of German traders in Iceland. After a failed attempt in 1547–1552 to

7 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 67; Helgi Þorláksson, *Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds*, 306.

8 Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Frá landnámi til einokunar’, in *Liftaug landsins. Saga íslenskrar utanlandsverslunar 900–2010*, by Helgi Þorláksson, Gisli Gunnarsson, and Anna Agnarsdóttir, vol. 1 (Reykjavík, 2017), 172.

9 Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 31; Sigurður Skúlason, *Saga Hafnarfjarðar* (Reykjavík, 1933), 107–160; Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Frá landnámi til einokunar’, 202–203; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 95.

put Iceland under Copenhagen's control,<sup>10</sup> more effective prohibitions and limitations were gradually imposed on the German trade. The main measure taken was the introduction of a license system in the early 1560s, which obliged a merchant and his company to acquire written permission to visit a certain harbour. Not only did the system provide a means to control the German presence on the island in various places, it also stimulated the merchants' competition with one another. Moreover, it opened the possibility for others (Icelanders, Danish subjects or the king's factors) to enter the trade as well, albeit often in cooperation with German merchants.<sup>11</sup>

The monopoly on the Icelandic trade was finally given to Danish merchants after the summer trading season of 1601,<sup>12</sup> with the details set out in April 1602. It allowed the Danes to use 20 harbours in total: six for Copenhagen (most of the harbours in the Reykjanes peninsula and the Westfjords), seven for Malmö and seven for Helsingør (including Arnarstapi, Búðir and Skagaströnd).<sup>13</sup> However, this did not mean that the German influence was suddenly gone. Some of the merchants held licenses which were still valid for some years, and they were allowed to sail to Iceland to have their outstanding debts repaid.

These final years of the "German century" were quite chaotic, however. The high pressure to keep losses as low as possible led to conflicts within Hamburg's merchant community about the question of who had the right to use the limited cargo space onboard the ships, which were shared between the merchants trading in the harbours of Keflavík, Vatnsleysa, Straumur and Hafnarfjörður.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the

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10 Gunnar Karlsson, *Lífsbjörg Íslendinga*, 308–311.

11 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Frá landnámi til einokunar', 196–197; Helgi Þorláksson, *Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds*, 146–148; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 107–119; Páll Eggert Ólason, *Menn og mentir. Siðskiptaaldrinnar á Íslandi III* (Reykjavík, 1924), 80–100;

12 King Christian IV sent a letter with this message to Bremen on 24 July: SAB (Staatsarchiv Bremen). 2-R.11.ff. Schiffahrt zur See – Islandfahrer (16010724KOB01). A similar letter on the same day is known to have been sent to Oldenburg, and must have been sent to Hamburg and Lübeck as well.

13 *Lovsamling for Island I*, 138–143; *ÁÍ III*, 250–255. See Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 71–73.

14 SAH (Staatsarchiv der freien und Hansestadt Hamburg). Senat - Cl. VII Lit. Kc, no. 11: Handel mit Island (Islandica), vol. 4, documents from 1602–1604. See Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 249–252.

fact that commodities in Iceland were usually sold on credit made it hard to get debts repaid without providing new credit to Icelanders. The authorities were not helping either: according to complaints from Hamburg, Icelanders had been instructed in their parish churches to sell their goods to the Danes only, and not to Germans to pay off their debts.<sup>15</sup> Although this was probably a misunderstanding, the Danish king had indeed ordained that the Icelanders were not allowed to trade with the Germans before the Danish ships were filled with cargo.<sup>16</sup> To make matters worse, the winter of 1601–02 had been extremely harsh, which had caused many animals to die on the island, and the people suffered from starvation. The high abundance of sea ice made it impossible to reach the northern harbours, and fish catches had been bad.<sup>17</sup> In the testimony under discussion, merchant Jurgen Gutmansi stated that he had never thought it could be so cold in summer, and some of the Hollanders expressed their fascination about having held ice in their hands in July.

Not that the Danish merchants were doing much better: they lacked the experience and the means to fully exploit their new privileged position. Already in 1603, Icelanders complained that the Danes were not meeting their needs well, and over the following years, we encounter many complaints about the trading situation, both from the Icelandic and the Danish side.<sup>18</sup> To deal with the problem of establishing trade, the Danes sought help from their German colleagues, who had the know-how, plenty of ships, and strong networks with the Icelanders, often built up over multiple generations. Many German merchants and ships were therefore hired by Danish merchants to assist their trading enterprises for many years, at least until the Danish king decided to organise the Icelandic trade centrally and founded the Royal Icelandic, Faroese and Nordic Trade Company of Copenhagen in December 1619.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Hamburg had estab-

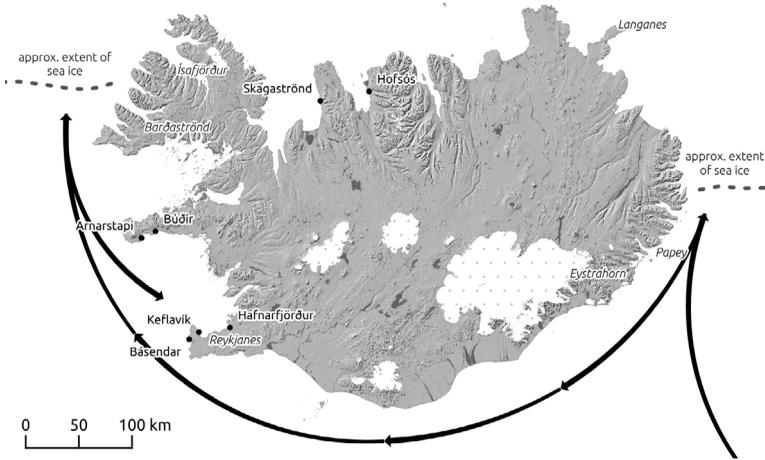
15 RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, 19) (16020913HAM00).

16 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 75.

17 Astrid Ogilvie, 'Stormy Weather: Climate and Sea-Ice Variations in the North Atlantic (Iceland Sector) A.D. 1400–1700', in *German Voyages to the North Atlantic Islands 1400–1700*, ed. Natascha Mehler, forthcoming. Cf. Astrid Ogilvie and T. Jónsson, "'Little Ice Age' Research: A Perspective from Iceland', *Climate Change* 48 (2001): 32.

18 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 86–93.

19 Jón Aðils, 84–85, 97–98; Gisli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade*, 54; Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 51–53.



Map with sailing route and places mentioned in the text.

lished itself in the sixteenth century as the central market for Icelandic goods on the continent, a position that was so strong that Danish ships loaded with Icelandic commodities continued to sail to Hamburg even after its citizens had mostly disappeared from the trade.<sup>20</sup>

### *The story*

The events about which the eight persons testified before the Hamburg town council in August 1602 were exemplary for the transition period between German commercial dominance in Iceland and the Danish trade monopoly. The following story is what had happened that summer, according to the defendants. On 1 May 1602, the ship “indt Huß von Frede” (in the house of peace) set sail from Helsingør to Iceland with its destination the harbour “Spakenefilts hövede” (Spákonufellshöfði/Skagaströnd<sup>21</sup>) in the north. The merchant company was led by Johan Holtgreve from Hamburg, and the ship was captained by Johan Adriansen from Monnickendam (near Amsterdam), assisted by helmsman Marten Horneman from Hamburg.

After having sailed for about two weeks, the ship encountered a big hail and snow storm near the east coast of Iceland (between Lan-

20 Baasch, *Inlandfahrt*, 53–56; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 122–123.

21 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 309–310; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 288–289.

ganes and Berufjörður). The storm forced them to seek shelter along the coast, but there they encountered sea ice, which forced them back onto the open sea around Pentecost. They drifted around in great despair, until the captain saw the island Papey in the distance. Again they tried to sail north, but the tempest forced them to strike sail, and they drifted around aimlessly for three or four days, until they ended up on the southern coast near Eystrahorn. They waited in vain for a few more days for the weather to calm down and the wind to turn, but finally decided to try their luck and sail north along the western coast. After five or six days of sailing, they once again hit sea ice between Ísafjörður and Barðaströnd and had to turn back in despair. By this time, many of the men on board were sick, and some had started to show symptoms of scurvy. For this reason, they decided to seek refuge in Keflavík, where they arrived on 3 June, according to the merchants from Copenhagen who were trading there.<sup>22</sup>

In Keflavík, Holtgreve and his assistant disembarked the ship and travelled to a fishing station a few miles away, because Holtgreve knew that some inhabitants of Skagaströnd usually lived there in winter to fish; he wanted to find out about the situation in Skagaströnd and how to get there. Indeed, they did encounter the persons they were looking for, who told them that all of the fjords were full of sea ice and that the cold and stormy weather had killed all the animals, so it would be of no avail to try to get there. The company left Keflavík again after two days without having bought fish, unsure what to do next, since the Danish merchants in Keflavík would not allow them to remain. However, they had heard from some farmers around Keflavík that there was currently no ship in nearby Básendar, and they decided to seek refuge there.

Once the ship entered the harbour of Básendar, they were welcomed by boat by the local inhabitants, who were happy that someone had come to them. The inhabitants claimed that each year for more than 20 years, a ship had traded in the harbour with them, even though there had been a ship in nearby Keflavík as well.<sup>23</sup> Now there

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22 RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, 19) 16020800KOB00.

23 Indeed, the Danish merchants discontinued trade in Básendar, which is not mentioned in the monopoly regulations of April 1602. The harbour was notoriously difficult to sail to, and the Danes focused on Keflavík instead. However, German merchants had been in Básendar and Keflavík simultaneously for much of the sixteenth century. See Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 73, 287–288; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 246–250.

was only a merchant in Keflavík, and although they were catching a lot of fish, all of their horses had died, so that they could not transport their catches to Keflavík—which, according to the testimony, was a three-mile journey over land or five by sea. Those who still had horses had indeed gone to Keflavík with their fish, but the merchants there had not wanted to trade with them because the fish was already one or two days old by the time they arrived. Therefore, the locals asked Holtgreve if he would buy some of their fish in exchange for food, which he did. Holtgreve later claimed that he had only exchanged food with them, and had not sold them any other commodities such as retail items, cloth or metalwares.

Hearing of this, the Danish merchants in Keflavík complained about the situation to the bailiff (“*vaget*”, Icelandic *fógeta*). The bailiff wrote to a farmer named Brun Olber Magens sohn (Brynjólfur Magnússon), who came to Básendar with a merchant from Keflavík to tell Holtgreve and his company that they should leave the place. Holtgreve responded that he would rather wait for the arrival of the governor (“*hovetman*”, Icelandic *hirðstjóri*). He showed the local fish to the merchant from Keflavík, who confirmed he was not interested in buying it. The same day, it was reported that governor Enevold Kruse had arrived with his ship, and a German called Otto as well as an Icelander were sent to him (probably in Bessastaðir) to discuss the matter. Upon hearing the story, Kruse wrote to Holtgreve that he was very sorry for his troubles, but asked him to refrain from trading and to inquire if it was not yet possible to reach Skagaströnd. Thereupon Holtgreve informed the locals they should not bring him fish anymore.

Since the sea ice had not disappeared yet, the company from Helsingør remained in Básendar for another four days, when they were visited by the bailiff, the Copenhagen merchants from Keflavík and Grindavík, and some farmers. On the occasion, Magnus, the merchant in Keflavík, had not wanted to shake Holtgreve’s hand, but had attacked him and called him names; he was calmed down by the bailiff. The bailiff inspected the fish and train oil and saw that it was not more than six lasts,<sup>24</sup> and Holtgreve and the locals confirmed that

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24 A last as unit of volume was dependent on the type of cargo transported. In Icelandic trade, it was defined as 10 hundrað (1200) fish, but it was also used as a general unit for the cargo capacity of a ship, in which case it is estimated to correspond to a little less than two metric tonnes. German ships in the Ice-

this was only the fish and oil that Holtgreve had bought before Kruse had forbidden him to trade. After the Copenhagen merchants had sailed away on 5 July,<sup>25</sup> the company remained in Básendar, waiting a little longer for the sea ice to go away; in the end, they had to return to the continent without having reached Skagaströnd.

Meanwhile, the merchants in Copenhagen had written an angry letter to the king, claiming that Holtgreve had set the farmers and fishermen in Keflavík against them when he visited the harbour. They also complained that he had traded in Básendar, which belonged to their assigned harbours of Keflavík and Grindavík, despite admonitions from the bailiff and the governor. Moreover, other merchants from Hamburg had traded in the Vatnsleysa harbour, interfering with their business as well.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, they had to send two of their ships back to Copenhagen with much less merchandise on board than expected, and therefore had suffered great losses.<sup>27</sup> On 6 August 1602, the king sent a letter to the Hamburg town council accusing the merchants of illegal trade, and he demanded that once the ships arrived in Hamburg, they would be confiscated and sent on to Copenhagen.<sup>28</sup>

The town council acted on the demands of the king, confiscated the ships and their cargoes and took Holtgreve into custody in the building of the brewer's society in town. However, they did not send the ships on to Copenhagen. Instead, Holtgreve asked the crew of his ship and his fellow merchants to testify before the town council, and he wrote an explanation of his actions. These documents were

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landic trade usually had a cargo capacity of about 60 lasts, with extremes up to 100. See Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 73, 100–102; Adolf E. Hofmeister, 'Hansische Kaufleute auf Island im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert', in *Kirche – Kaufmann – Kabeljau: 1000 Jahre Bremer Islandfahrt*, ed. Adolf E. Hofmeister and Alfred Löhr, Kleine Schriften des Staatsarchivs Bremen 30 (Bremen, 2000), 41; Thomas Wolf, *Tragfähigkeiten, Ladungen und Maße im Schiffsverkehr der Hanse vornehmlich im Spiegel Revaler Quellen*, Quellen und Darstellungen zur hansischen Geschichte NF 31 (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 1986), 58, 66–68.

25 According to the Copenhagen merchants: RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, 19) 16020800KOB00.

26 The Hamburg merchants in Vatnsleysa, however, did have a valid license for the place: RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, 19): 16001014KOB00. It was a joint enterprise between the Hamburg merchants formerly sailing to Keflavík and Hafnarfjörður; see Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 250–252.

27 RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, 19) 16020800KOB00.

28 *Ibid.*: 16020806KOB00.

sent back to the king on 12 September.<sup>29</sup> It is unknown how the case ended. The last extant document about it is a request from 26 September from Holtgreve to the town council of Hamburg: Holtgreve asked to be released from custody since he had heard the king was in Norway, and therefore it would take a long time for the case to be solved.<sup>30</sup> As Jón Aðils has suggested, the king might have been satisfied with Holtgreve's explanation and refrained from taking further actions.<sup>31</sup> Another option is suggested by the testimony itself, as Jurgen Gutmansi, the merchant from Helsingør, claimed that the merchants from Copenhagen, Helsingør and Malmö had agreed that should a problem arise, they would solve it among themselves and not bother the authorities with it. Holtgreve himself claimed that he had promised to defend his actions in Helsingør against accusations from Copenhagen. It is therefore possible that Holtgreve travelled to Denmark after being released and solved the problem with the Copenhagen merchants informally.

Of course, it is impossible to determine whether Holtgreve and his company were telling the truth when they presented the story described above. Some aspects are plausible, as that Helsingør merchants were indeed allowed to visit Spákonufellshöfði and sea ice was a severe problem in 1602. However, Holtgreve may also have had trading interests or unpaid debts in Básendar, as we will see below, and may therefore have adjusted the story to fit his own interests. However, even if they were lying, the company must have tried to produce a story that sounded plausible for others who had knowledge of the trading situation in Iceland. Therefore, interesting information can be identified about trading practices, of which the testimony presents us unprecedented details that the merchants brought forth as arguments to legitimise their actions in Iceland.

### *Trading practices*

Trading practices during the time of the Danish trade monopoly are fairly well known due to more extensive records from the seventeenth and eighteenth century,<sup>32</sup> but for the German trade in the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: 16020912HAM00.

<sup>30</sup> SAH. 111–1 Islandica, vol. 4: 16020926HAM00.

<sup>31</sup> Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> See Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*; Gisli Gunnarsson, *Upp er boðið Ísaland*, passim.

sixteenth century, this is a subject about which the sources mostly remain silent. Therefore, combined with the scarce evidence from other sources, the testimony provides many details about the trading practices of the German merchants in Iceland in the sixteenth century. It sheds light on a number of aspects: the practicalities of seafaring and the division of labour, communication and relations with Icelandic trading partners, the organisation of the trading companies, and even the Icelandic fishing industry.

### *International seafaring practices*

Before each testimony, the eight witnesses are shortly introduced by name, age, home town or region, and function on board. This gives us a first impression of the people on board the ship (see table).

Name	Age	Home town/region	Function on board
Johan Adriansen	42	Monnickendam (Holland)	Skipper
Marten Horneman	c. 50	Hamburg	Helmsman
Matthias Erasmus	25	Copenhagen	Junior merchant
Jurgen Gutmans	c. 20	Helsingør	Merchant
Cornelius Johansen	c. 48	Waterland (Holland)	Chief boatswain
Jacob Johansen	32	Waterland	Cook
Peter Clawsen	38	–	Sailor
Gert Hinrichsen	18	–	Sailor

In addition to these witnesses, three other persons are mentioned as well, namely, Johan Holtgreve from Hamburg (the merchant leading the enterprise), a junior merchant called Neels (who was probably Danish), and a German man called Otto.

Possibly, there were more than only these 11 persons on board. The Hamburg Confraternity of St Anne, a religious and social security organisation for the merchants trading with Iceland, kept a register of donations from ships returning from the North Atlantic islands to the port of Hamburg each year. This register gives us a good overview of the persons on board the ships returning to Hamburg from Iceland since the 1530s.<sup>33</sup> They show that the largest ships,

<sup>33</sup> SAH. 612–2/5 Kaufmannsgesellschaft der Islandfahrer, Annenbruderschaft, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00). See Richard Ehrenberg, 'Aus der Hamburgischen Handelsgeschichte', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 10 (1899):

usually trading in Hafnarfjörður and Keflavík, had between 40 and 60 people on board, of which the crew consisted of only ten to 20 men and the rest were merchants. Smaller ships sailing to most other harbours had only 12–21 persons on board, most of whom were crew members.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, for Dutch ships sailing to the Baltic and Norway in the 1630s, the average crew size was ten to 12 persons.<sup>35</sup> As the crew of the ship in question was mainly formed by Hollanders (the ship itself might even have been Dutch; see below) and had Skagaströnd as its destination harbour, we can assume that the 11 named persons comprised the majority—but not necessarily all—of the persons on board.

There was a clear division between merchants and their servants on the one hand and the crew on the other. Even skipper Johan Adriansen, who as leader of the sailing enterprise was the person with the highest authority on board during the journey, made clear in his testimony that he had absolutely nothing to do with the trading itself. This was not necessarily standard procedure at the time: in the High Middle Ages, commercial seafaring in northern Europe had been practised by merchants who had sailed themselves, and the roles of crew member, merchant and shipowner had overlapped. Over the course of centuries, these roles became ever more specific, with skippers and crews being increasingly hired by shipowners or merchants.<sup>36</sup> The fifteenth and sixteenth century were right in the middle of this development, and in the German trade with Iceland, examples

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16–40; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 9–10. An overview of the ships included in the register is supplied as additional online material to Holterman, *Fish Lands*, at <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110655575-016>.

34 Bart Holterman, 'Size and Composition of Ship Crews in German Trade with the North Atlantic Islands', in *German Voyages to the North Atlantic Islands (c. 1400–1700)*, ed. Natascha Mehler, forthcoming.

35 Karel Davids, 'Maritime Labour in the Netherlands, 1570–1870', in *Those Emblems of Hell? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570–1870*, ed. Paul C. van Royen (Liverpool, 2017): 46 (Table 5).

36 Christina Deggim, 'Zur Seemannsarbeit in der Handelsschiffahrt Norddeutschlands und Skandinaviens vom 13. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* 117 (1999): 7–11; Götz Landwehr, *Das Seerecht der Hanse (1365–1614): vom Schiffordnungsrecht zum Seehandelsrecht*, Berichte aus den Sitzungen der Joachim-Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, 21,1 (Göttingen, 2003), 80–83; Ruth Prange, *Die bremische Kaufmannschaft des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts in sozialgeschichtlicher Betrachtung*, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Staatsarchiv der Freien Hansestadt Bremen 31 (Bremen, 1963), 41–42.

abound of skippers who were part—and often the leaders—of the trading enterprise,<sup>37</sup> to such an extent that the German trade with Iceland has been characterised as a typical skipper's trade.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the strong position of skippers in the trade, there was an increasing tendency to charter ships and skippers in the trade with Iceland in the sixteenth century. In Bremen, for example, skipper Bruning Nagel is known to have been hired to sail to Iceland for merchants from Hamburg and Oldenburg in the 1570s and 1580s.<sup>39</sup> The donation register of the Hamburg Confraternity of St Anne hints at the same practice, as the names of some skippers appear in relation to different groups of merchants and different destination harbours each year.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, it is known that merchants from Lübeck and Denmark chartered ships from Hamburg, Bremen and other German towns to sail for them to Iceland before the introduction of the Danish monopoly.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in the first years of the Danish trade monopoly in Iceland, many Danish merchants lacked the ships and the expertise to sail to Iceland themselves and are therefore known to have chartered Hamburg ships; this is indicated, for example, by the references to merchant Anthoni Bögell from Helsingør in the Hamburg donation register from the early seventeenth century.<sup>42</sup>

Skipper Adriansen's claim that he had nothing to do with the trading itself suggests he had also been hired by Holtgreve and/or his Helsingør partners. An interesting aspect here is that he was from the Waterland region in Holland, along with the cook and the chief boatswain. Of the two other crew members mentioned in the document, Peter Clawsen and Gert Hinrichsen, it is not mentioned where they came from, but since there seems to have been a clear division between the Hollanders as crew and the Danes and Germans as merchants, we might assume the entire crew consisted of Hollanders. The only exception is helmsman Marten Horneman from Hamburg; his special position will be discussed below.

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37 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 339–343.

38 Prange, *Kaufmannschaft*, 39.

39 SAB. 2-R.11.ff.: complaint from Jurgen Thim, 19 March 1577 (15770319HAM00); complaint from Joachim Kolling, 6 April 1580 (15800406OLD00).

40 SAH. 612–2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00); <https://doi.org/10.1515/978311065575-016>.

41 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 342, 352–353.

42 SAH. 612–2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00); <https://doi.org/10.1515/978311065575-016>.

The crew consisting of Hollanders is remarkable for two reasons: first, Hollanders are hardly ever mentioned in the trade with Iceland before the seventeenth century, even though they had been explicitly granted permission to trade there in 1490.<sup>43</sup> There were a few exceptions, such as the appearance of a Dutch ship in Hafnarfjörður in 1471<sup>44</sup> and appeals from Hamburg merchants to the bishop of Hólar from 1532 and 1536 to prevent merchants from Holland from buying all the sulphur in the harbour of Húsavík,<sup>45</sup> but generally they seem to have had little interest in Iceland in this period. Skipper Adriansen does not seem to have had any particular experience in sailing in Icelandic waters, since he stated that he did not know the names of the regions of Ísafjörður and Barðaströnd where they encountered sea ice for the second time.

Second, although the presence of Hollanders in international shipping reflects the general ascension of the Dutch Republic to one of the dominant powers in international seafaring in this period, the great demand for workforce on the republic's merchant and navy fleet combined with the high mortality on the ships—especially those sailing to the East and West Indies—and the country's small population led to a large labour migration of foreigners (e.g., Germans, Danes) into the Dutch provinces. Migration in the other direction, i.e., Dutch sailors serving abroad, was much less widespread.<sup>46</sup> That a Dutch crew would be hired by a Danish–German enterprise therefore seems a bit uncommon, unless the entire ship was from Holland, possibly owned by Adriansen and chartered by the Helsingør merchant company. Indeed, most of the foreign workforce employed in the Dutch Republic worked in the navy and on merchant vessels sailing to Asia and the Americas, where wages were lower and dangers were higher, whereas crews on coastal vessels had a much smaller

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43 Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 16–17; Marie Simon Thomas, *Onze IJslandsvaarders in de 17de en 18de eeuw: bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche handel en visscherij* (Amsterdam, 1935), 7–8.

44 *DI* 11:22 (14730901UTR00).

45 *DI* 9:529; 16:341 (15360525HAM00).

46 Erik Goebel, 'Danes in the Service of the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century', *International Journal of Maritime History* XVI, No. 1 (June 2004): 77–93; Davids, 'Maritime Labour', 59–60. Some of the Dutch workforce might have even been recruited from Iceland; see Jón Þ. Þór, 'Iceland', in *Those Emblems of Hell? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570–1870*, ed. Paul C. van Royen (Liverpool, 2017): 162.

percentage of foreigners on board. The region of North Holland, north of Amsterdam (including Waterland), was an especially important supplier of skippers and ship crews in the early seventeenth century.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, the document does not hint at the ownership or origin of the ship. Neither is it possible to derive this information from the ship name “indt Huß von Frede” due to the document being written in German and the close linguistic proximity of the Dutch, German, and Danish languages. However, it seems to have happened more often in the seventeenth century that German traders in the North Atlantic chartered Dutch ships. For example, the notarial archives of Enkhuizen record a case from 1643 in which a merchant from Bremen chartered a skipper from Ameland (one of the Dutch islands) to sail his ship to Shetland for him, load his commodities there and bring them back to Bremen.<sup>48</sup> Combined with the lack of material and experience of the Danish merchants at the beginning of the Danish trade monopoly in Iceland mentioned above, it is thus not unlikely that the Helsingør company would have chartered a ship and its crew from Holland, where the shipping industry was rapidly growing at the time.

### *Personal experience, networks and the organisation of trade*

Sailing a ship is one thing, but navigating a ship in a specific coastal region is quite another. Sometimes a skipper might have been well acquainted with a certain region, but often the helmsman was the one responsible for navigation. Especially in a time when reliable nautical charts were a new development and not yet widely accepted by sailors, much depended on the navigational skills and experience of the helmsman.<sup>49</sup> Detailed maps of coastal areas in Iceland were

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47 Davids, ‘Maritime Labour’, 36–37; Jan Lucassen, ‘The International Maritime Labour Market (Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries)’, in *“Those Emblems of Hell”? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570–1870*, ed. Paul C. van Royen (Liverpool, 2017): 18.

48 Noord-Hollands Archief, Enkhuizen. Notarieel archief no. 1015 A 222.

49 Albrecht Sauer, ‘Negotiating Northern Waters: Navigating from Germany to the North Atlantic Islands’, in *German Voyages to the North Atlantic Islands (c. 1400–1700)*, ed. Natascha Mehler, forthcoming.

absent, and the use of local pilots for navigating around the island's harbours is not known from contemporary sources.<sup>50</sup> In Hamburg, however, there was a large community of men who had far-reaching experience with sailing to Iceland, often obtained from a young age. It is therefore no coincidence that this function on board the ship under discussion was filled by a man from Hamburg, and if we take a look at his career, we can see why Marten Horneman was a splendid choice for the job.

In the records of the Confraternity of St Anne from Hamburg, we can trace Horneman's first appearance in the trade with Iceland to 1575. In the following years, he is often part of the crew, more specifically in the role of helmsman, on ships that were probably sailing to Vopnafjörður and Keflavík. Between 1586 and 1595, he is even attested as skipper of a ship sailing annually to Keflavík, and from 1597 to 1599, we find him sailing to Vopnafjörður again. After the introduction of the Danish trade monopoly, Horneman appears every now and then in the register, such as in 1604 and 1607, as well as in 1608 on a ship returning from the Westfjords, probably in the service of Danish merchants.<sup>51</sup> Sailors at the time often started sailing in early adolescence, which means that Horneman, who must have been born around 1550, was probably already active in Iceland before the time he is first mentioned in the sources.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he probably built upon family tradition, as the Hamburg records show many more members of the Horneman family in the Icelandic trade. Marten appears, for example, in 1578 on the ship of skipper Johan Horneman, who might have been his father.<sup>53</sup> A Hinrik Horneman is already mentioned in 1539 in a Hamburg chronicle; he set sail for Iceland but drifted off course before reaching the Greenland coast for 18 weeks until he managed to make it back to Hamburg, with many of his crew having died or suffering from scurvy.<sup>54</sup>

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50 It should be noted here that the testimony recorded that the farmers from Básendar guided the trading ship into the harbour with their boats. However, this seems to have been done only for direct entry into the harbour; examples of Icelanders being hired to act as pilots guiding ships in local waters are not known.

51 SAH. 612-2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00); <https://doi.org/10.1515/978311065575-016>.

52 Sauer, 'Negotiating Northern Waters'; Holterman, 'Ship Crews'.

53 SAH. 612-2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00), f. 251v.

54 Johann Martin Lappenberg, ed., *Hamburgische Chroniken in niedersächsischer Sprache*, unchanged reprint (Wiesbaden, 1971), 169.

Although we do not have evidence that Marten Horneman had any particular experience in the Skagaströnd region, he could build upon a great deal of experience in sailing to Iceland, and therefore was a welcome addition to the enterprise. The importance of his experience is even explicitly formulated in the document, as Jurgen Gutmanski stated that they could have sailed to Arnarstapi or Búðir in Snæfellsnes (two of the harbours granted to Helsingør in the 1602 monopoly) when the ship could not reach northern Iceland, but the helmsman did not know his way around that region. This also explains why the ship ended up sailing instead to Keflavík—where Horneman had sailed each summer for more than a decade—even though they were not allowed to trade there.

Maybe even more so than the seafaring itself, engaging in commerce in general, and in Iceland around 1600 in particular, put a great emphasis on personal experience and networks. This was due to the system of buying commodities from foreign traders on credit, which the Icelanders had to repay in stockfish the next year. The system originated in the Hanseatic–Norwegian stockfish trade in Bergen in the fourteenth century and was subsequently adopted in Iceland, which was part of the Bergen staple system at the time. Once the trade with Iceland had untied itself from the trade with Bergen, the German merchants faced some disadvantages: unlike in Bergen, where the Hanseatic trading station (*Kontor*) was a permanent institution controlling the credit relations with stockfish producers in one place, in Iceland the Hanseatic merchants were not allowed to establish a permanent presence, trade took place in many harbours all around the island, and Icelanders were free to trade with multiple merchants.<sup>55</sup> This made the establishment of trust-based personal networks between German merchants and their Icelandic clients all the more important, to guarantee that debts were repaid.

The system promoted commercial relations of a long duration, since starting new transactions meant providing new credit. Bremen's

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55 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 158–164. An interesting insight into the many debts that Icelanders could incur with foreign merchants is the heritage of lawman Vigfús Erlendsson from 1521, which lists debts with 11 German and seven English merchants: DI 8:579. For the credit system in Bergen, see Arved Nedkvitne, *The German Hansa and Bergen 1100–1600* (Cologne, 2014), 406–412; Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, *Traders, Ties and Tensions: The Interactions of Lübeckers, Overijsers and Hollanders in Late Medieval Bergen* (Hilversum, 2008), 149–151.

merchants emphasized this characteristic in their protests against the introduction of the Danish trade monopoly in 1601, when they stated that they had

become acquainted with the inhabitants of the districts belonging to the harbours to which they have sailed for many years, by their annual trading and enterprises, in such a way that they know each other very well, and that it is more convenient for [the Icelanders] to continue trading with acquaintances instead of starting new commerce with strangers, and also having to learn about their trading conditions, quality [of their commodities] and facilities.<sup>56</sup>

It was exactly the lack of experience and the unfamiliarity of Copenhagen's merchants that the Icelanders complained about to the Danish king in 1603.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, the Danish merchants were keen to employ German merchants when they started trading in Iceland, because the latter had the experience and trusted networks with the Icelanders that they had built up over decades, sometimes over generations.

In this case, the merchant of choice was Johan Holtgreve, whose experience we can trace in the records of the Hamburg Confraternity of St Anne as well. The donation register shows him among the merchants on ships to Bäsendar each year from 1583 to 1591, and again from 1597 to 1599.<sup>58</sup> For some reason, he stopped trading in Bäsendar after that summer; he tried to acquire a license for the harbour of Álf-tafjörður in the Westfjords in autumn 1599 with the help of lawman Jón Jónsson, who stated that the Hamburg merchants currently active there were not bringing enough commodities to meet the demands of the local population, and that Holtgreve had been active in Iceland for 18 years.<sup>59</sup> Despite Jón's support, the license was not granted, and we find Holtgreve in 1600 and 1601 on ships trading in Skagafjörður (Hofsós). On none of these occasions does Holtgreve seem to have been the leading merchant of the enterprise: licenses for Bäsendar and Hofsós were given each time to other people.<sup>60</sup>

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56 SAB. 2-R.11.ff.: instruction for Johan van Affelen, 15 November 1601 (1601111 5BRE00).

57 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 86–87.

58 SAH. 612-2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00); <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110655575-016>.

59 RAK. D11, Pakke 27 (Suppl. II, no. 19) — 15990000HAM00, 15990000HAM01, 15990000HAM01.

60 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 423, 425, 429, 433, 436.

The introduction of the Danish trade monopoly therefore gave Holtgreve the opportunity to become the merchant leading a trading company in Iceland, in a region where he had some connections already (Skagaströnd and Hofsfós were neighbouring trading districts). We can clearly see the importance of this experience and personal networks in the testimony, as Holtgreve knew where he could find the fishermen from Skagaströnd who worked in the fishing settlements near Keflavík in order to obtain information about the situation in northern Iceland. The Danish merchants in Keflavík misinterpreted his knowledge and accused him of having set the farmers and fishermen against them. Likewise, Holtgreve knew about Básendar as an alternative destination and had connections with its inhabitants, since he had traded with them for many years; some of them might even still have been indebted to him. This is confirmed by the testimony of the cook, Jacob Johansen, who emphasized that the inhabitants of Básendar knew Holtgreve personally.

We might assume that the Helsingør company employed Holtgreve because they wanted him to educate them and to introduce them to his Icelandic clientele. The Danish merchants in the testimony were still quite young: Matthias Erasmus was 25, Jurgen Gutmansi around 20. On the other hand, given his trading career of at least 20 years, Johan Holtgreve must have been at least 40. Moreover, Matthias Erasmus and Neels are both described as junior merchants. Erasmus is even explicitly named as Holtgreve's assistant, and he accompanied him during his visit to the fishing stations near Keflavík in search of information about the situation in the north. This was a kind of mentoring system we can see for much of the sixteenth century in the German trade with Iceland: young merchants were taken along as servants of a senior merchant—often a family member or a father-in-law—until they managed to lead their own trading company; the older generation would then stay at home, although would often still be involved in the company.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that Holtgreve was the operational leader of the trading company does not mean he also shared in the profits. In the German-Icelandic trade, trading companies were usually organised as so-called *maschups*, in which various merchants provided the capital for the enterprise and were mutually liable. Merchants partaking in the *maschup* could remain at home and let their partners run the practical side of the

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61 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 363–364.

business, or even hire others to do business for them.<sup>62</sup> In the records from 1585 of the Oldenburg Icelandic trading company, for example, we can see that of the 29 stakeholders, only two sailed to Iceland themselves, and that they hired additional merchants who were not part of the company to help them. These merchants did not share in the profits, but received a salary for their services.<sup>63</sup> It is likely that before the foundation of the Royal Icelandic Trade Company in Copenhagen in 1619, the Danish merchants made use of trading companies similar to the *maschup*,<sup>64</sup> and that they hired Holtgreve for a salary.

An additional way in which crew members and hired merchants were remunerated was the so-called *Führung*, or portage, a remnant from the Middle Ages when the roles of merchant, crew member and shipowner still overlapped. The *Führung* granted each person on board part of the ship's storage space, which he could use for transporting his own merchandise; this made each person on board theoretically a petty merchant. Remuneration in *Führung* next to a paid salary was still standard practice in the late sixteenth century, as we can see once again from the 1585 Oldenburg records. Although many sailors sold their *Führung* for extra money, there is evidence that some sailors did indeed trade on their own in Iceland as well.<sup>65</sup> After the introduction of the Danish trade monopoly, there were many suspicions that hired German merchants were misusing their *Führung* to secretly trade with their former trading partners in Iceland on their own account.<sup>66</sup> Probably for this reason, the 1602 testimony puts much emphasis on the statement that Holtgreve had only traded on behalf of his *reders* (i.e., the owners of the trading company) and not on his own account, suggesting that he was indeed not a stakeholder in the trading company.

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62 Holterman, 331–336.

63 SAO (Stadarchiv Oldenburg). Best. 262-1 Handels- und Zollprivilegien der Oldenburger in Island, no. 2 (15850307OLD00).

64 In the early years of the Danish trade monopoly, we can see individual merchants joining various companies sailing to different harbours; see Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 94–95. Likewise, it is known that Danish and German merchants sometimes formed *maschups* together in the late sixteenth century; see Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 336, 354.

65 A list from 1549 of confiscated commodities from Hamburg ships shows commodities taken from sailors as well. SAH. 111–1 Islandica, vol. 2 (15490000HAM01).

66 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 83–84.

*Communication between Icelanders and foreign merchants*

We have seen the importance of foreign traders' personal connections with Icelanders for obtaining information. Due to the international character of the group of persons involved, the testimony provides us with many details about how—mostly in which language—communication between Icelanders and foreigners took place.

Since the late Middle Ages, the *lingua franca* of commerce in Scandinavia was Low German, which was tightly connected with the importance of the German Hanse; Low German was gradually replaced (at least in writing) by High German after the Reformation. Danish merchants must have known it well, given their close relations with the Hanse in trading, and given the fact that many members of the Danish merchant class were of German descent. In fact, the influence of Low German even led to significant changes in the grammar and vocabulary of the Danish language.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Hollanders must have been able to communicate in it, or in some kind of pidgin form, because of the many similarities between Low German and Dutch as well as the importance of trade with the Baltic for the Dutch economy. The Dutch crew members and the Danish merchants therefore must have had little trouble testifying in Low German before the Hamburg town council, and we can assume that communication amongst them took place in the language as well. Low German, by itself or in some mix with Danish, must have also been used in communication with the Danish merchants stationed in Keflavík and with the governor of Iceland.

It is known that many Icelanders had some knowledge of Low German as well. This was due to frequent contact with Hanseatic traders and the Danish governors—many of whom were noblemen from the Low German-speaking parts of the Danish realm—and the fact that many Icelanders are known to have travelled to Hamburg on merchant ships in the sixteenth century, some of them even settling there.<sup>68</sup> Some preserved letters in Low German by Icelandic of-

67 Alessia Bauer, 'Cultural Colonialism as a Result of Commercial Activities: The Linguistic Perspective', in *German Trade in the North Atlantic, c. 1400–1700: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Natascha Mehler, Mark Gardiner, and Endre Elvestad, *AmS-Skrifter* 27 (Stavanger, 2019), 166–167.

68 See Friederike Christiane Koch, *Untersuchungen über den Aufenthalt von Isländern in Hamburg für den Zeitraum 1520–1662*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte Hamburgs* 49 (Hamburg, 1995).

ficials attest to the language proficiency of Icelanders in Low German in writing.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, there are traces of linguistic influence of Low German—possibly mediated by Danish—on the Icelandic language before the purification reforms of the nineteenth century, although these influences remained very limited compared to those of other Scandinavian languages. Most of these traces can be found in the religious and commercial linguistic realm.<sup>70</sup>

However, the testimony makes it clear that most of the communication between Icelanders and foreign merchants took place in Icelandic. The main indicator is that the Hollanders among the witnesses all stated they could not say anything about what had been discussed with the locals because they did not understand the language, whereas they did not seem to have had any problems following the discussions with the Danish merchants and with the governor. It remains a question to what extent the Danish merchants on board knew Icelandic, since they seem to have been new to the trade with Iceland. However, their testimonies both state that they understood the Icelandic farmers, so they must have known Icelandic or communicated in a pidgin language with elements from Low German, Danish and Icelandic that was too unfamiliar for the Hollanders to follow.<sup>71</sup>

Notwithstanding the possibility of a pidgin language, there are other indications that foreign merchants predominantly dealt with their Icelandic customers in Icelandic. The most important are the clauses included in agreements about the rights and duties of foreign traders in Iceland from the Þíningsdomur of 1490 onwards, which forbade a winter stay by foreign merchants. Where the Þíningsdomur only made an exception to that rule in the case of a shipwreck, in an Althing verdict from 1527 an exception is made for small boys who do not trade as well.<sup>72</sup> A 1533 verdict explicitly makes an exception for those who want to learn the language and get to know the Ice-

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69 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Frá landnámi til einokunar', 175.

70 Bauer, 'Cultural Colonialism', 167–169.

71 On pidgin trade languages in general, see Agnete Nesse, 'Trade and Language: How Did Traders Communicate across Language Borders?', in *The Routledge Handbook of Maritime Trade around Europe 1300–1600*, ed. Wim Blockmans, Michail Krom and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz (New York, 2017), 95–97; Bauer, 'Cultural Colonialism', 164.

72 *DI* 9:343 (15270702ISL00).

landers' customs.<sup>73</sup> From later documents, we learn that young foreign merchants had to obtain prior written permission to stay over the winter and were not allowed to trade during that time or to engage in sexual relations with women.<sup>74</sup> Likely, a winter stay in an Icelandic home was therefore an essential element in the education of a young merchant aspiring to trade in Iceland, a way to get to know his future trading partners and to make sure that he could communicate in their mother tongue. This possibly was not limited to merchants alone: even Marten Horneman, who as helmsman and skipper was probably not directly involved in dealing with Icelandic customers, stated that he could understand the Icelandic farmers.

### *Fisheries and transportation*

The testimony also provides highly detailed information about the practicalities of international trade in Iceland and the production of the most important export commodity, namely, stockfish. It is generally known that an export-oriented fishing industry developed in Iceland from the thirteenth century onwards, in tandem with the growing international trade in dried fish with the European continent through the port of Bergen.<sup>75</sup> Despite this development, there was never a class of professional fishermen in Iceland before the nineteenth century. This was due to the seasonal character of fishing and farm work: from February to mid-May, farmhands from all over Iceland flocked to the fishing stations, most of them located on the western coast between the Westman Islands and the Westfjords. Helped by the cold climate, the winter fish catches were air-dried to produce the stockfish that the foreign merchants would collect the following summer. In summer, labour was needed on the farms and little fishing took place, with many farmhands from the south travelling north in July and August to help with the hay-making.<sup>76</sup>

73 *DI* 16:333 (15330630TIN00).

74 *ÁÍ* 1:135–137, 332–333. Cf. Helgi Þorláksson, 'Frá landnámi til einokunar', 176.

75 Patricia Pires Boulhosa, 'Of Fish and Ships in Medieval Iceland', in *The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World c. 1100–c. 1400*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim, 2010), 184–190; Orri Vésteinsson, 'Commercial Fishing and the Political Economy of Medieval Iceland', in *Cod & Herring: The Archaeology of Medieval Sea Fishing*, ed. James H. Barret and David C. Orton (Oxford, 2016), 71–79; Karlsson, *Lífsbjörg Íslendinga*, 180–182.

76 Jón Þ. Þór, 'Iceland', 164, 167.

By the time the Helsingør trading company reached Keflavík at the beginning of June 1602, the fishing season would therefore normally have been over and the seasonal fishermen from the north back at their home farms. However, Holtgreve and Erasmus were able to find people from Skagaströnd in a fishing station near Keflavík at that time. This begs the question of who these people were: in the testimony, they are described as “people from Spákonufellshöfði [... who] came there each year in winter to fish”,<sup>77</sup> which suggests they were fishermen. Of course, they could have been part of the companies of men who transported the stockfish with horses overland to the north,<sup>78</sup> but this is unlikely for two reasons: first, they gave Holtgreve the information that it was impossible to get to Skagaströnd because almost all the animals—including horses for transporting the stockfish—had died; second, these men must have stayed at the fishing stations only for a short time to pack the fish onto the horses, and in that case Holtgreve must have been extremely lucky to have found them at the fishing site.

It is therefore most likely that these men were fishermen indeed. Their presence at the fishing station at a time when the fishing season should have been over was possibly explained by the extreme weather: the sea ice in winter had made it hard to fish for a long time, and/or farm work in the north was still impossible due to the cold weather, so the fishing season was prolonged or shifted. The negative influence of bad weather on fishing activity in winter was not exceptional, and it is recorded in later centuries that during bad winters, it was sometimes not possible to fish for weeks in a row.<sup>79</sup>

The possibility that fish was still being caught at the time the Helsingør trading company arrived in Iceland is also suggested by another statement in the testimony, namely, that the farmers in Básendar tried to sell their fish to Holtgreve, claiming that the merchants in Keflavík were not interested in buying them. In Jurgen Gutmansí's testimony, the term used to refer to these fish was “blotfisch” (from Icelandic *blaut*, ‘wet’), i.e., fresh fish that had just been caught rather than previously processed stockfish, which is also sug-

77 “die lude von Spakenefilts hövede [...] aldar alle jahr im winter henkamen unnd aldar uthreden und sich tho fischen begeben.”

78 This well-established practice is known from later centuries: Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir*, vol. IV (Reykjavík, 1985), 457, 468–473.

79 Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir*, 197.

gested by the addition that fish were given daily to the fishermen from the sea by God.<sup>80</sup> This fresh fish must have been salted and then dried by the merchants themselves, as we know from later seventeenth-century sources.<sup>81</sup> In later times, *blautfiskur* even became synonymous with fish that was already salted but not dried yet, although it is not known if this was already the case in 1602.<sup>82</sup>

The addition of salt makes it possible to dry fish in climates less suitable for producing stockfish, or in summer. However, the high price of salt in the Middle Ages made this an expensive process, especially since the salt had to be imported first. This was possibly the reason why the stockfish produced in Arctic regions such as Iceland and northern Norway, where salt was normally not needed, was so sought after. In the later Middle Ages, the supply of salt rose, in part through the growing trade in boy salt (sea salt) from France and the Iberian peninsula; this reduced the price and made the salting of fish more commercially viable.<sup>83</sup> The English fishermen who fished in Icelandic waters in the summers during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries must therefore have salted their catches, as they did in the fisheries on the banks of Newfoundland after their discovery in 1497.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in Shetland, where fishing normally took place in

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80 “dat ohnen der almechtige tagliches den fisch ricklich uth der sehe geve”.

81 Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir* IV, 321.

82 *Íslenska alfræðiorðabókin* (Reykjavík, 1990): “blautfiskur: flattur, saltaður fiskur einkum þorskur en einnig keila og langa; saltaður í stæður og látinn standa og oft staflað um og saltaður að nýju.” With thanks to Lísbet Guðmundsdóttir and Hans Christian Küchelmann for the reference.

83 Volker Henn, ‘Der hansische Handel mit Nahrungsmitteln’, in *Nahrung und Tischkultur im Hanseraum*, ed. Günter Wiegmann and Ruth-E. Mohrmann (Münster, New York, 1996), 27–28; Angelika Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel im Mittelalter: Wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen nach urkundlichen und archäologischen Quellen des 6. bis 14. Jahrhunderts im Gebiet des Deutschen Reiches* (Husum, 1997), 177; Karl Heinz Schwebel, *Salz im alten Bremen, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Staatsarchiv der Freien Hansestadt Bremen* 56 (Bremen, 1988), 12–19.

84 Helgi Þorláksson, *Sjórátt og siglingar*, 290, 295–296; Evan Jones, ‘England’s Icelandic Fishery in the Early Modern Period’, in *England’s Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300*, ed. David J. Starkey, Chris Reid and Neil Ashcroft (London, 2000), 109; Anna Agnarsdóttir, ‘Iceland’s “English Century” and East Anglia’s North Sea World’, in *East Anglia and Its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Robert Liddiard (Woodbridge, 2013), 208; Mark Gardiner, ‘The Character of Commercial Fishing in

summer, salted fish gradually replaced the stockfish produced there, to such an extent that a 1707 prohibition of importing salt on foreign ships meant the end of the presence of traders from Bremen and Hamburg. The Shetland fishermen also delivered fresh fish to the German traders, who dried them near their trading booths.<sup>85</sup>

Although most of the fish exported from Iceland was freeze-dried stockfish, salted fish was not uncommon: according to Lúðvík Kristjánsson, it is first attested in 1603, when a salt house is known to have existed in Ríf, although it can be assumed that the English and German traders bought salted fish as well.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, there are more and earlier signs indicating the use of salt in preserving fish: a 1549 list of confiscated commodities from Hamburg merchants by the bailiff in Iceland includes 500 salted fish and 80 salted ling<sup>87</sup>; and an account book of Oldenburg merchants in Kumbaravogur (Snæfellsnes) from 1585 also includes a limited amount of “bloete fisch” bought from Icelanders, which must have been salted with the salt they brought with them as well.<sup>88</sup>

The farmers and fishermen in Básendar also complained that they could not transport their catches to the merchants in Keflavík because all of their horses had died during the winter. Skipper Adriansen remarked rightfully that they could have brought the fish to Keflavík by boat, since they had come out to their ship by boat.<sup>89</sup> However, the way by sea was longer than over land, and even those who still had horses stated that it did not make much difference: once they arrived in Keflavík, the fish would be one or two days old and the Danes would not be interested in buying them anymore (another

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Icelandic Waters in the Fifteenth Century’, in *Cod and Herring: The Archaeology of Medieval Sea Fishing*, ed. James H. Barret and David C. Orton (Oxford, 2016), 82; Todd Gray and David J. Starkey, ‘The Distant-Water Fisheries of South West England in the Early Modern Period’, in *England’s Sea Fisheries: The Commercial Sea Fisheries of England and Wales since 1300*, ed. David J. Starkey, Chris Reid and Neil Ashcroft (London, 2000), 100–104.

85 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 43–44.

86 Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir* IV, 323.

87 SAH. 111–1 Islandica, vol. 2 (15490000HAM01).

88 Ásgeir Ásgeirsson and Ólafur S. Ásgeirsson, *Saga Stykkishólms 1596–1845: kauphöfn og verzlunarstaður* (Stykkishólmur, 1992), 105.

89 In addition to horses, boats were indeed used to transport stockfish from the fishing to the trading stations: see Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir* IV, 463–464.

sign that this involved fresh fish that would be salted by the merchants).<sup>90</sup>

Regardless of whether the testimony presents a distorted version of what really happened, the complaint from the fishermen sheds light on the logistics of trade on the island. It makes clear that the merchants would stay in their assigned harbour or trading station and that their customers would come to them to trade. Moreover, if fish had to be salted, this was apparently done by the merchants at the trading station and not by the fishermen at the fishing stations.<sup>91</sup> This is a system that is indicated by other sources as well. For example, in the donation register of the Confraternity of St Anne from Hamburg, a 1586 note relates the story of an Icelander who came to the German merchants in Hafnarfjörður to pay his father's debts, but did not remember the name of the merchant to whom his father was indebted; the load of fish was therefore donated to the confraternity until it became clear to whom the fish belonged.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, in 1600 merchants from Hamburg were granted a licence for Hvalfjörður, on the grounds that the fjord was too far away from Hafnarfjörður (about ten miles) for the locals to visit the latter harbour.<sup>93</sup> This suggests that in the German period, it was usual practice for Icelanders to visit the merchants at the trading stations, at least in the southwest, where many trading stations were located close to each other. By contrast, in the eastern region around Berufjörður, we have evidence that the Bremen merchants there visited their customers at home, due to the large geographical extent of the trading region.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the custom that foreign merchants were visited by their Icelandic clients in the fishing stations, the merchant in Keflavík could of course have collected fish in Básendar if he would have wanted to, especially given the special circumstances and the fact

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90 "Item wahr, dat sie berichtet, dat etzliche von ohnen so noch perde gehatt aldar hengewesen und fisch darhen gebracht dat doch der koepman mit ohnen nicht handeln wollen sundern vorgeven, dieweill die fisch einen dach oder twe oldt, so dienede ehr ohme nicht."

91 This is also attested on many instances in the seventeenth century: see Lúðvík Kristjánsson, *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir* IV, 323.

92 SAH. 612-2/5, 2 Bd. 1 (15330000HAM00), f. 316r.

93 RAK. D11, Pakke 24 (Suppl. II, 8): overview of licensed harbours, 1601 (1601000XXX00).

94 Mehler et al., 'Gautavík', 260–265.

that the two places were only half a mile apart, as he claimed.<sup>95</sup> After all, he is mentioned to have come to Básendar to argue with Holtgreve. However, he still was not interested in buying the Básendar fish, stating that he thought they were too small. Of course, this might have been a mere excuse for Holtgreve and his men to justify their illegal trading in Básendar, as we only hear this story from the defendant's perspective.

Nevertheless, there might have been some truth in the statement, related to the currency system in Iceland. The international trade was predominantly moneyless, with fish serving as a substitute for money. Moreover, the prices for most basic commodities such as flour and beer were fixed by the authorities.<sup>96</sup> On the continent, however, prices for commodities were not fixed and were significantly rising throughout the sixteenth century, especially for grain, with the price of fish lagging behind.<sup>97</sup> This means that the profit margins for the merchants in the Icelandic trade must have become smaller and smaller.<sup>98</sup>

We first find evidence that the Germans were running into problems because of this price divergence in 1545, when Icelanders complained that German merchants were using false measures and weights.<sup>99</sup> When King Frederick II admonished the Germans to stop using these weights in 1556, the Hamburg merchants replied that it was no longer profitable for them to trade in Iceland because the prices had risen so steeply on the continent; they asked for permission to calculate the price of fish by weight instead of per piece, since they had to accept small fish as payment as well.<sup>100</sup> Although the

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95 According to the defendants, the two places were separated by three miles overland and five miles by sea.

96 Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 57–59.

97 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 385; Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 73–75; for the prices of fish on the continent in this period, see Herbert Hitzbleck, 'Die Bedeutung des Fisches für die Ernährungswirtschaft Mitteleuropas in vorindustrieller Zeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Niedersachsens' (PhD thesis, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 1971), 140–158.

98 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds', 184–190.

99 *DI* 11: 367 (15450630TIN00); Baasch, *Islandfahrt*, 65; Björn Þorsteinsson, 'Island', in *Det nordiske syn på forbindelsen mellem Hansestæderne og Norden: Det Nordiske Historikermøde i Århus 7.–9. august 1957*, ed. Vagn Dybdahl, 2nd ed. (Aarhus, 1972), 192.

100 *DI* 13:76 (15560210KOB00); RAK D11, Pakke 26 (Suppl. II, 16): 13 March 1556 (15560313HAM00).

latter request was refused, the fixed prices must have been changed afterwards, as evidenced by account books from Bremen from 1558 and Oldenburg from 1585.<sup>101</sup> After the Danes took over from the Germans, this economic development continued, which often led to complaints from Icelanders that the Danish merchants were raising the prices illegally and using false weights and measures, and from the Danes that the rising prices on the continent made their Icelandic trade unprofitable. On multiple occasions, including in 1619, 1684 and 1701, new prices in the Icelandic trade had to be negotiated: in each new price list, the prices had risen.<sup>102</sup>

Given these developments, Copenhagen merchant Magnus might have considered it unwise to buy the small fish from the farmers in Bäsendar in 1602. Holtgreve, however, considering the disastrous trading situation of that year and being experienced in the trade, took what he could get to mitigate his losses. All in all, the Copenhagen strategy was no better, and the company incurred significant losses that year as well. The complaint against their competitors from Hamburg and Helsingør may therefore have been an unsuccessful attempt to make up for their losses, caused by the extreme weather and their possible inexperience with the trading conditions in Iceland.

### *Conclusion*

The testimony of eight merchants and sailors from 1602 is of course a historical snapshot. It presents that year's trading season in Iceland under exceptional circumstances: the transition between the German-dominated international trade in Iceland during the sixteenth century and the following Danish trade monopoly; the extreme cold of that year; and a story of conflict where peaceful trading seems to have been the norm. These factors caused the testimony to record anything but the normal situation. Paradoxically however, exactly because of the exceptional circumstances in which the document was recorded, we gain a remarkably detailed description of trading practices in Iceland at the time. Combined with other sources and with

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101 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Frá landnámi til einokunar', 187; Holterman, *Fish Lands*, 59, Table 2.2; SAB. 7,2051: debt register of Clawes Monnickhusen (15570000 BRE00); SAO. 262-1, no. 3: debt register of the Oldenburg merchants 1585 (15850000OLD00).

102 Jón Aðils, *Monopolhandel*, 386-419.

recent studies about the German period in the Icelandic trade, it is very well possible to make some general statements about the workings of international trade in Iceland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on a microlevel.

For example, the document shows the organisational structures behind the trade were sometimes complex: the transition between hired ships and crews and the medieval practice of seafaring merchant shipowners; the international cooperation, both in the realms of seafaring and commercial enterprises; and the often unclear distinctions between capital providers, seafaring merchants, stakeholders and hired personnel. With regard to the situation in Iceland itself, we can see the importance of personal experience and networks, the multilingual communication taking place on various levels, and the practicalities of transportation of commodities to and from the trading stations. Moreover, the document sheds light on the practices of fishing and the production of the dried fish that was in demand on the European market, and the relation between price levels in Iceland and on the continent. All these elements allow the testimony to describe international trade in Iceland at a level of detail that no other older document can provide.

*Keywords:* German merchants; Economic History; Seafaring; Danish Trade Monopoly; Microhistory