

Besprechungen

David Kirby, Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen: *The Baltic and North Seas. (Seas in History.)* Routledge Publ. London, New York 2000. XIV, 353 p., 19 ill. (£ 40.00.)

The present volume is characterized by an interesting and innovative approach to the history of the Baltic-North Sea region. Instead of comparative national history, the work focuses on the sea as a space in which people interacted in various ways. The book does a great deal to demonstrate the existence of a large international community of important shared characteristics in Northern Europe.

This book is coauthored by David Kirby of the University of London and Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen of the University of Turku. Logistically, the project was split roughly in the middle. K. wrote the first eight and a half chapters while H. was responsible for the rest. Both authors bring their own interesting perspectives to the history of the region. K., of course, has already produced an impressive, albeit more conventional, two-volume history of the Baltic region. His focus is principally on geography and political, economic, and social issues. H., in turn, considers issues that have tended to receive less attention in traditional historiography on the Baltic: sociology, gender, women, and the environment. The combined product is both impressive and highly stimulating. By casting their net far and wide, the authors manage to shed light on the richness of Baltic history in a way that has not been done before, certainly in a single volume.

The book consists of three broad sections. The first defines the seas in terms of geography and perceptions. The remarkable opening chapter on the "discovery" of the seas describes advances in science and the intellectual history of conceptualizing this intimidating force which, for centuries, was tied up with legend. There is a valuable introduction describing the emergence of the northern seas in the wake of the Ice Age, followed by an account of the historical struggle against the sea following the establishment of precarious human settlements on the flat marshlands of Northern Europe. This is accompanied by an account of the steady advances in land reclamation and technology designed to protect coastal regions. The introductory section closes with an account – regrettably with very few illustrations – of depicting and imagining these seas.

What follows are five chapters that effectively constitute the core of the book. They cover the various activities that seas have given rise to: travel, shipbuilding, trade, fishing, and – last but not least – warfare over the highly contested Baltic littoral. The enormous scope of this task notwithstanding, the centuries of human efforts to "tame" the seas, or benefit from them in various ways are described in an eminently readable and surprisingly comprehensive manner. The examples included shed light on virtually all epochs of Baltic and North Sea history.

The closing section of the book combines socio-cultural discussion with ecology. There is a lengthy description of sailors' lifestyles, followed by an account of the role of maritime women. The book closes with an overview of more recent developments in the impact of seas on life in northern Europe.

It is easy to fault a book with as ambitious a scope as this for any number of things. The book's main virtue is also its principal weakness. By attempting so much, the authors have had to compromise on depth and detail. Centuries of political or economic history are squeezed into just dozens of pages. Moreover, the selection of topics and examples becomes somewhat haphazard. Why not more on culture, language, identity? Similarly, references to Scandinavia preponderate, while there is astonishingly little about Germany and Poland, or even Russia.

It does seem that a book of this nature would have benefited from a more thorough discussion of Baltic-North Sea geography, given the crucial role that these immutable natural parameters have done to shape the lives of people around the "northern Mediterranean".

The Gulf Stream, as well as the often vast river basins which give the northern seas enormous hinterlands are only a few examples of crucial issues worthy of further exploration.

Similarly, the historical significance of the Baltic could have been emphasized more. The region was, after all, crucial for the economic take-off of early modern Europe and the stage for a protracted power struggle among the great powers of Europe. There is little about the Dutch *moedervaart* and even less about Russian expansionism. In general, Chapter 6 (Seafaring and Power) is of crucial importance in a book like this and could have been made more thematic, perhaps even longer. And while it is true that "The seventeenth century was arguably the last time that the northern seas were at the epicentre of international politics" (p. 128), the region has continued to remain home to most of the great powers of the world and, moreover, played a crucial role in the establishment of the Atlantic economy, not least because of the region's technological innovation: Dutch ships, Amsterdam banks, and insurance. The last chapter is a very important part of the book and should have been elaborated. The importance of the North Sea oil industry has been considerable in reviving the fortunes of many coastal communities and would have deserved a more thorough treatment.

Certain other issues are arguably overemphasized. The discussion about seamen is quite long. The chapter about women is very important but could have been conceptualized as a discussion of coastal families and their lifestyles. A great deal more could have been said about the historic cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the coastal area – the eastern littoral of the Baltic and the Dutch coast being particularly good examples of distinct communities dominating the coasts but having a minor presence further inland.

In many instances, the authors choose to treat complex issues by means of particular cases or anecdotal accounts. Usually, this works remarkably well by offering some of the essential flavor of many issues without overwhelming the reader with what would inevitably have been highly condensed summaries. However, there are cases where the anecdotal approach passes the point of diminishing returns. Especially in discussing the personal experiences of coast-dwellers and seamen, the authors occasionally resort to generalities and platitudes which could just as easily have been said about any other sea and are almost entirely divorced from any historical context. Citations from literature, postcards, are memoirs intriguing, yet often quite frustrating at the same time.

Its obvious limitations notwithstanding, this book is a valuable introduction to a fascinating region which has done much to shape world history. It is very well written and thought-provoking on a number of levels. The authors have met the daunting challenge of writing the history of the northern seas with considerable distinction.

Cambridge/Mass.

J. T. Kotilaine

Zwischen Reric und Bornhöved. Die Beziehungen zwischen den Dänen und ihren slawischen Nachbarn vom 9. bis ins 13. Jahrhundert. Beiträge einer internationalen Konferenz, Leipzig 4.–6. Dezember 1997. Hrsg. von Ole Harek und Christian Lübke. (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mitteleuropa, 11.) Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2001. 248 S., 92 Abb. (DM 86.–.)

Die in diesem Band versammelten Beiträge gelten der bislang eher schwach beleuchteten dänisch-elbslawischen Beziehungsgeschichte – und vermögen deshalb noch kein Gesamtbild zu zeichnen. Auf die Archäologie entfällt die Hälfte der Aufsätze. Torsten Kempke skizziert den revidierten Forschungsstand zur slawischen Frühgeschichte: „Slawisierung“ der südlichen Ostseeküste zwischen 650 und 850, Entstehung der *emporía* bereits seit dem frühen 8. Jh. (Groß Strömkendorf) und noch im selben Jahrhundert Errichtung von Burgwällen. Der Niedergang der meisten Seehandelsplätze setzte bereits im 9. Jh. ein, während Burgwälle nun erst ihre bekannte weite Verbreitung erlebten. Hanne Wagnkilde und Karen Løkkegård Poulsen analysieren „slawische“ Grabfunde