

# 5. More Peaceful Times – Hanseatic League



## Your aim

To enable students to compare the medieval Hanseatic League with the modern European Union



## Learning Outcome

By the end of this lesson the students will have explored and come to some understanding of the reasons why people and countries cooperate willingly and the conditions that encourage this cooperation.



## Time

Single class



## Materials or Sources required

- » Resource sheet ‘Hanseatic League; Forerunner to the EU?’
- » Map showing the Hanseatic League Area (ideally on OHP).
- » Some large flip chart or poster sized sheets.



## Preparation

- » Photocopy resource sheet and map for students
- » Paper and resource box



## Potential Partner Activity

Ideas for partner activities given below

## Introduction

The teacher begins the class by introducing the idea of the Hanseatic League while a copy of the map is on view. The main purpose is to highlight the idea that there was a previous version of a European Union during the Middle Ages.

## Individual or Pair Work

The teacher then distributes the ‘Hanseatic League: Forerunner to the EU?’ resource sheet and the students are asked to read it, either individually or in pairs.

Once all students have read the material the teacher can lead a class discussion highlighting key points about the League and comparisons with the European Union.

## Teachers note:

This lesson is in effect a guided comprehension exercise. The students should develop an understanding of how trade has been a driving force in the integration between European countries by comparing the League and the EU. At the end of the class the teacher could highlight the fact that the EU has in a way sprung from the need to make coordinated decisions to facilitate economic activity between member countries. In both the case of the EU and the League, countries decided to cooperate because they saw the benefits that came from increased international trade.

Points of discussion/comparison	Examples/Pointers
<b>How is the League similar to E.U.?</b>	Emphasis on trade/cooperation between countries.
<b>How is it different?</b>	The League was organized by the merchants rather than governments/countries.
<b>What were the key items of trade? Would they still be important today?</b>	Discuss issues like the importance of salt and fur as modern items of trade (salt not so important for preservation today, modern day ideas about fur etc.)
<b>Do religious beliefs still influence what become major items of trade?</b>	The idea that religious beliefs would influence a major item of trade, like fish in Hanseatic times.
<b>What would the key items of trade be today?</b>	Perhaps oil, computers etc.
<b>Why was the Hanseatic League popular with European Rulers in the middle Ages?</b>	The money it generated in taxes.
<b>Is the E.U. popular today with governments? Why/why not?</b>	The EU encourages economic growth, creates jobs, gives grants, and subsidies etc. But it also costs money to run e.g. administration costs, support to poorer member countries etc.
<b>Other areas began to join in with the Hanseatic League towns. Why was this?</b>	They wanted a part of the prosperous trade they saw develop within the League.
<b>Do we have an example of this expansion in the E.U.?</b>	Discuss what could have been the reasons for new member states wanting to join.

## Conclusion

To summarise the points raised during the class and the main points of the lesson the teacher can draw a simple table on the board with the headings as follows:

Main Similarities and Differences	
European Union	Hanseatic League

To end the class the teacher can examine with the class the reasons given for the decline of the Hanseatic League in the 15th century, and ask students to consider in pairs whether it is possible that the European union could also decline at some stage in the future and to give their reasons why?



### Homework Option

The teacher could ask students to write a short article for a newspaper entitled 'Europe United: Lessons from History'

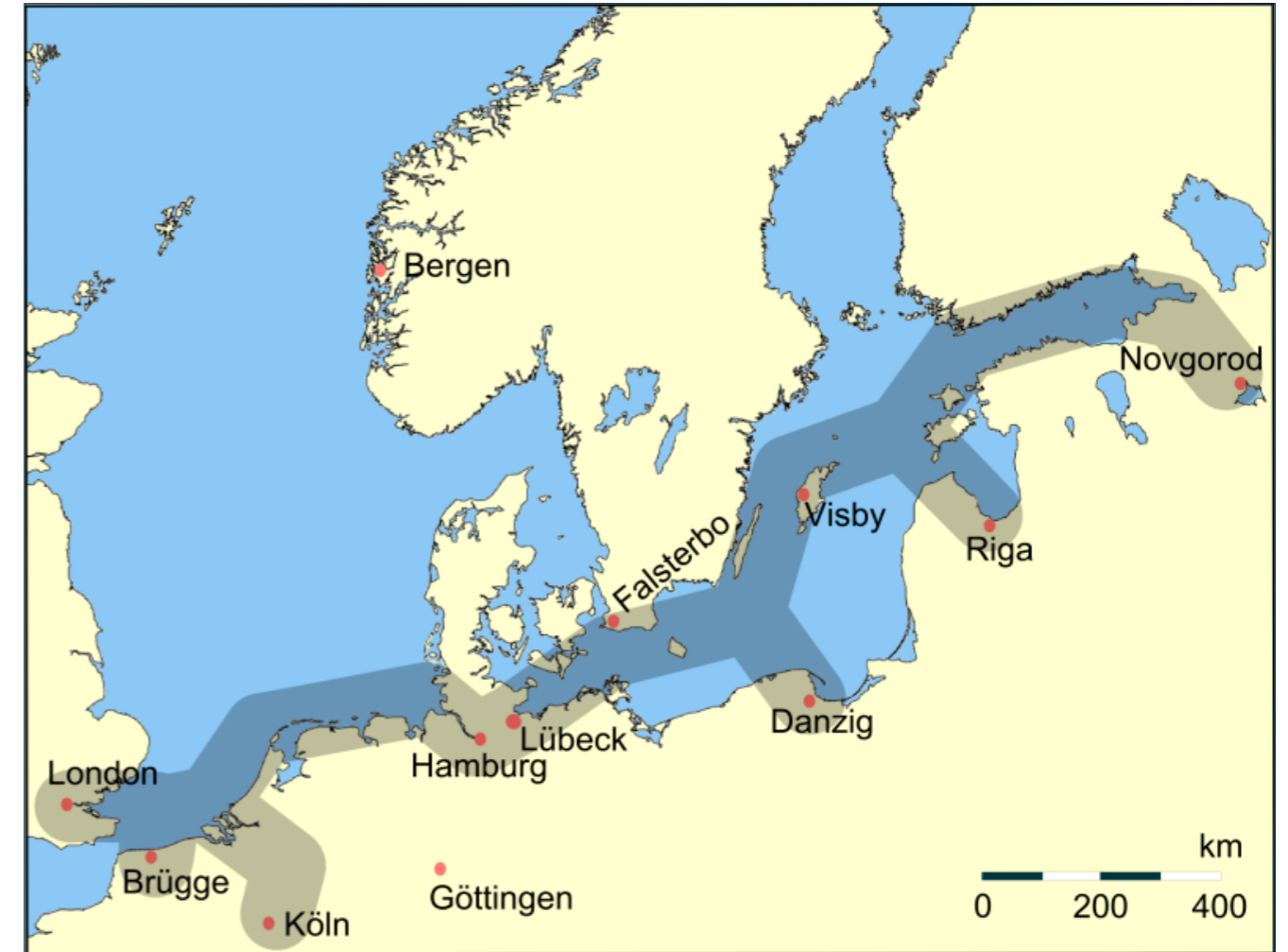


### Potential Partner Activity

Design a leaflet that might have been used to advertise the Hanseatic League which would encourage towns and villages to join and exchange these with your partner school, asking them to select a winner.

Map:

## The Main Trading Routes of the Hanseatic League



## The Hanseatic League: Forerunner to the EU?

The modern European Union as we know it was not the first time in history when people in Europe came together to form a peaceful economic union. During the Middle Ages trade grew and prospered in Europe and as it grew the merchants became wealthy and influential. The towns were given charters by their local rulers, which allowed them to govern their town independently, to trade freely and to raise taxes. These taxes allowed them to maintain the town and some of the taxes were returned to the ruler. Thus, merchants and rulers had a mutual interest in protecting and fostering trade.

Sometime in the 12th century seafaring merchants in German and Scandinavian towns around the Baltic Sea began to form associations or “hansas” (medieval German word meaning ‘association’ or ‘guild’) with each other in order to negotiate special privileges for their members while they were trading abroad and to protect them from pirates and robbers. Much of the area around the Baltic and Germany lacked strong government at the time and therefore the merchants took this initiative since there were no navies to protect their cargoes. They agreed about how they would regulate trade and maintain and protect the ports, which were crucial to their livelihood.

This began in such towns as Lubeck (Germany), Visby (Sweden) and Novgorod (Russia). Lubeck had acquired the monopoly on the valuable herring trade in the Baltic Sea. Fish was a very important commodity in medieval times because of the Catholic Church ruling about not eating meat on Fridays and in Lent. Lubeck’s Hansa made agreements with the merchants in Hamburg who had easy access to the salt mines in Kiel; salt was essential for the preservation of fish. This is an example of the kind of natural alliances that built up between the merchants of the different towns in the area. Cologne had built up a similar alliance of towns on the River Rhine, and had gained special privileges for German merchants to trade in England (especially London) and Flanders since the 11th century.

Eventually by the mid 13th century these trading agreements between merchants of different towns began to grow into a loose network which became known as the ‘Hanseatic League’ and they drew up common regulations for the control of shipping for grain, timber, fish, fur, flax, honey and cloth. BY the 14th century the hansas had transformed from an association of merchants into a league of merchant towns. The taxes charged for trade increased as trade prospered, which made the Hanseatic League popular with the rulers who collected the taxes. This resulted in the League acquiring a position of great influence. Rulers of neighbouring areas realised the advantage of this prosperous trade, which yielded high taxes; and so they asked the League to set up towns in their territory, which would be part of the League. Towns such as Riga (Latvia), and Tallinn (Estonia), were then built by the League. German craftsmen often came to these towns to build the churches, guildhalls and public hospitals and later settled in the towns bringing the German craftsmanship with them. Many of these original buildings are still standing today in these Baltic cities, but a description is given below of the kind of atmosphere that would have been present there in medieval times.

*“The entire town bustled with well-organised enterprise. Surrounded by stone walls, narrow, winding streets led to the central market place which teemed with trade: merchants flogging spices and expensive cloths; craftsmen selling tools, furniture or jewellery; and peasants vending poultry, eggs, honey, grains, pigs and sheep. Town festivities were held here, and criminals were publicly humiliated. Watching over all was the Guild Hall in the centre of the square, symbol of the Hansa merchants’ administration and the town’s independence. The Hanseatic merchants introduced mayors, magistrates’ courts and tradesmen’s associations called guilds into their town structures.”*

*From: Andrea Buma; Hanseatic League, Early European Free Trade Alliance.*

The League was of great commercial and political importance. Lubeck became the main city of the League and from the 1530s a Diet (assembly) of member towns was held in Lubeck every 3 years. At this meeting conflicts were resolved, new members were admitted and negotiations with towns for foreign trade were arranged. Towns could also be excluded if they didn’t conform to the regulations agreed. The League protected its ships by quelling pirates and even hiring armies and warships to fight when necessary. They also built lighthouses and trained sea pilots in order to make navigation safer. The main purpose was commercial, but the League also tried to ensure peace so that trade could prosper. By the 14th century there were over 100 member towns. In the 15th century however the League began to decline for a number of reasons:

- » It lacked any centralised power;
- » English (who started merchant adventurers guilds of their own) and Dutch merchants began to expand their own trade in competition with the Hansa towns;
- » Nation states began to emerge and assert their own authority over their territory. Rulers became stronger and independence of towns was reduced;
- » The valuable herring grounds which had started it all off moved inexplicably from the Baltic to the North Sea off the Netherlands;
- » The Age of explorations opened up new trading routes and the discovery of the New World reduced the importance of the Baltic trading area.

The last Diet was held in 1669. Although the League was never officially dissolved, it gradually began to lose its importance and influence after the 15th century.