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Research on international trade and transport – a generational shift?

Scandinavian economic historians made a strong presence at the *World Economic History Congress* (WEHC), Boston, this summer. Around one hundred Nordic scholars featured on the list of participants, accounting for five per cent of all attendees.¹ This number is significantly higher than at the WEHC in Kyoto three years ago, although the relative share was about the same. (Ojala & Sogner, 2015) The fact that the number of Nordic scholars attending economic and business history conferences is on the rise corroborates the analysis presented earlier this year by Espen Ekberg and Martin Jes Iversen (2018). Nordic scholars have, luckily, more to offer than just strength in numbers. They also offer research of high quality. Indeed, during the conference season of 2018, Nordic scholars presented exciting new results, new approaches as well as fresh perspectives on long-running academic debates at the WEHC, the *European Business History Conference* in Ancona as well as at the *Economic and Business History Society Conference* in Jyväskylä and in a number of other meetings. Some of those papers, we hope, will find their way here and to the readers of the *Scandinavian Economic History Review*.

This issue of *Scandinavian Economic History Review* features five articles dealing with topics related to pre-industrial international trade and transport. The issue is not a purpose-built special issue, but an outcome of an influx of articles on these topics over the past few months. As a journal, we strive to offer our readers content of high academic quality, which reflect the established research traditions as well as the trends within our fields. With this issue we offer you both.

The topics addressed here have long held a prominent position in the Nordic economic history literature. The early writings of Eli F. Heckscher marked a shift in this respect, although important publications came before that, too (see e.g. Magnusson, 1978). The consistently high share of articles on trade and shipping published in this journal up to the 1980s reads as a testament to the importance of these topics. Between 1953 and 1989 no fewer than 79 articles in the *SEHR* dealt with international trade and transport in one way or another; that is over one quarter of all content published. This is clearly higher than the share of these topics published in other leading journals of economic history, such as *The Journal of Economic History*. (Whaples, 2002) Moreover, the majority of the articles dealt with the early modern era. Then something changed. In the 1980s, articles on trade and shipping started to decline. This was no seasonal fluctuation but signalled an underlying trend. During the 1990s, less than ten percent of the articles in the *SEHR* were on trade and shipping (Ojala, 2003). Little changed in the early 2000s. What once had been at the very heart of Nordic economic history now found itself marginalised and on the periphery.

¹ The figures are based on the number of scholars who signed up. As with most other conferences, not everyone could make it to the WEHC. Hence the absolute numbers were somewhat lower, but the relative share is thought to be roughly the same.

This issue reflects a recent upsurge in research on trade and shipping in general and the early modern period in particular. Is this just a temporary change, or are we witnessing a generational shift? If trade and transport is coming home to Nordic economic history research, then why?

There are several obvious reasons for Nordic economic historians' interest in international trade and transport: international trade is especially important for small, open economies with limited domestic markets. Moreover, these activities have left vast amounts of sources that are, even with their limitations, suitable for in-depth studies by scholars with qualitative as well as quantitative inclinations. The resurgence of these topics can be explained, at least in part by a change in research infrastructure, especially by the deployment of large databases, which also have served as sources for several studies in this issue of the *SEHR*. International trade and transport is, furthermore, the glue that connects the Nordic countries to the rest of the Europe and indeed the world. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of these studies have focussed on Nordic trade relations with Western Europe; and thereby implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally offered analysis on the perceived "westernization" of Nordic economies throughout the centuries.

Whilst there are clear similarities across the Nordic countries when it comes to *how* research on international trade and transport has been conducted, each country tends to have its own academic stamp on *what* is being addressed. This latter was already apparent in the early articles published in the *SEHR*. Research conducted in Sweden, for example, tended to place emphasis on the role of iron exports (e.g. Adamson, 1969; Hildebrand, 1958), whilst exports of forest product exports have played a more important role in economic history research in Finland and Norway (e.g. Åström, 1975; 1987; Kjærheim, 1957;). Similarly, scholars in Norway and Iceland have dominated research on fisheries and whaling (e.g. Østensjø, 1963; Jonsson, 1983; 1986). Among scholars in Denmark, the role of Denmark as an intermediary between the Baltic and North Seas has been a pervasive theme (e.g. Friis, 1953; Feldbæk, 1973). This national division of labour is hardly surprising: the research reflects the relative importance of how people made a living within a given area and within a specific time frame.

This issue of the *Scandinavian Economic History Review* presents five articles analysing international trade and transport before the industrial era. Rodney Edvinsson and Christoffer Tarek Gad introduce a new database on Swedish and Finnish foreign trade from 1738 to 1805. The findings suggest a clear increase in trade during this period, although there is hardly any evidence of increased specialization in trade. Moreover, they show that the composition of imports did not broaden, thus suggesting that the consumer revolution was a phenomenon occurring later in both countries.

The Danish Sound Toll has been a subject of research in a number of articles published in the *SEHR* during its 66 years of existence. Whilst previous research refer almost entirely to the Sound Toll Tables compiled by Nina Ellinger Bang and Knud Korst, the article by Manish Kumar uses the recently launched Sound Toll Records Online database, which enables him to propose a new method for estimating the volume of timber exported from the Baltic. In his study Kumar concentrates on timber exports to Portugal from 1669 to 1815. The results suggest that the overall volume of timber export trebled during the 18th century. How robust are these findings? The methodology Kumar has applied is somewhat rough and the Sound Toll data is not as exact as one could hope for, as also conceded by Kumar himself.

International trade and transport was, and still is, tightly coupled with availability of information. Therefore the cost of information was of utmost importance, as Hannes Vinnal underscores in his article here. Vinnal shows how the real price of postage declined in the North and Baltic Sea regions, especially after the 1770s. This, in turn, could in theory have led to more efficient markets. However, the early modern transfer of information remained slow and costly until the introduction of new technologies such as steam and the telegraph.

Tim Leunig, Jelle van Lottum and Bo Poulsen offer an in-depth case study on naval warfare, and more specifically on the treatment of prisoners of war during the Napoleonic Wars. In this article they focus on the British treatment of Danish and Norwegian prisoners. These prisoners were men at sea: mainly naval personnel, privateers and merchant seamen, and there were thousands of them. The authors present an analysis that challenges existing presuppositions on several levels and topics. For instance, the prison hulks where the sailors were kept, were not “floating tombs” as has been previously suggested. On the contrary, death rates were fairly low, and the quality and quantity of both food and medical care were reasonably good compared to contemporary standards.

Tax on international trade through tariffs and customs, served as the major sources of governmental income before income tax became an increasingly important source of revenue from the late nineteenth century onwards. In Sweden customs duties came to be the state’s single most important source of revenue until the First World War. In his article Henric Häggqvist analyses how and why the customs duties could increase as much as they did during the period from 1830 to 1913. He finds that increased revenue was initially achieved through higher tariffs on a few key commodities, whilst the latter part of the period saw heftier tariffs on agricultural and capital goods.

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