

# Herring Trade, Quality Controls and Diplomacy in Cologne in the Fifteenth Century\*

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During the late Middle Ages, herring was a major and defining commodity in northern Europe. Plentiful and preservable for up to two years, it was distributed over large parts of the continent.<sup>1</sup> As a relatively cheap source of protein, it formed an ideal staple for observant Christian societies, in which the consumption of fish was foreseen for about 150 days a year.<sup>2</sup> The herring that supplied Cologne as well as the western and southern Holy Roman Empire was principally caught off the Low Countries. From the early fifteenth century, it began to be shipped massively and became an ‘indispensable commodity’ for Cologne’s economy.<sup>3</sup> Although pickled in barrels of brine, the fish remained a fragile product and needed to be thoroughly inspected by market officials. This local supervision was not sufficient, however, to ensure quality in the long-distance trade. To reduce the quantity of rotten fish arriving in western and southern Germany, consumers pushed for stricter food safety measures. In 1481 and 1494, Cologne—also representing the interests of the Upper German cities—successfully negotiated edicts with the herring exporters. They were issued under the authority of Maximilian of Habsburg and established food safety norms for the three main production regions (Holland, Zeeland and Friesland).<sup>4</sup> These edicts created the interregional coordination of herring quality control that is the subject of this article. It investigates the economic and political reasons why, in the context of the highly decentralized Holy Roman Empire, Cologne and other actors established this regulation. The link between herring quality regulation and Cologne’s diplomacy has not yet been studied. The standard work on Cologne’s herring trade remains Bruno Kuske’s

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<sup>1</sup> C. Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres: Fang und Vertrieb von Ostseehering zwischen Norwegen und Italien (12.–16. Jahrhundert)* (Cologne, 2000), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> A. 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, 2000), pp. 37–9, 41.

<sup>3</sup> B. Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel vom 14.–17. Jahrhundert’, *Westdeutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kunst*, 24 (1905), pp. 227–313, at p. 313.

<sup>4</sup> Maximilian was archduke of Austria in 1481 and became king of the Romans in 1486, before being declared emperor officially in 1508, fifteen years into his rule. From 1477 to 1482, because of his marriage with Mary of Burgundy, Maximilian was also de facto ruler of Burgundy and most of the Low Countries. On the death of his wife, he became regent until 1494, when his son Philip inherited. The edict of 1494 reaffirmed the edict of 1481 and complemented it, adding more detailed measures and foreseeing a yearly reunion of the herring trade’s stakeholders to ensure its good application. *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, ed. K. Höhlbau et al., vols 1–7/1, 8–11 (Halle, Weimar and Leipzig, 1876–1939), vol. 10, pp. 570–4, no. 916; *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kölner Handels und Verkehrs im Mittelalter*, ed. Bruno Kuske, 4 vols (Bonn, 1917–1934), vol. 2, pp. 697–702, no. 1395.

1905 survey, which described the main features of the herring trade, including its quality control, but did not detail the interregional quality control system and its economic and political implications.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have also stressed the significance of herring for Cologne's commerce, but they too have largely ignored the interregional dimension of the herring quality control.<sup>6</sup> The medieval herring trade features prominently in general studies of fishing and the fish trade, but here again interregional quality controls and their political and economic implications are overlooked.<sup>7</sup> Louis Sicking and Adri van Vliet have studied the Flemish and Dutch herring fisheries in the wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Their work reflects a new interest in the relationship between diplomacy and trade conflict that is also found in recent studies of the Hanse.<sup>9</sup> Similar topics have been addressed by the research on the Holy Roman Empire's economic and political history.<sup>10</sup> Although food quality regulation has become a research theme, contributions by German scholars—other than in the case of wine fraud—have as yet been minimal, and the diplomatic dimension of food trade regulation has not been explored.<sup>11</sup>

Using the large corpus of material relating to Cologne, this article analyses the development of the interregional quality control established for herring in the fifteenth century, in which Cologne played a key role.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it will investigate the

<sup>5</sup>Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 227–313.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Franz Irsigler for trade with Upper Germany or Bruno Kuske, Jan van Houtte and Dieter Strauch for trade with the Low Countries. An efficient synthesis of Cologne's commercial ties has been produced by Gunther Hirschfelder, which draws partly on the findings of the latter authors: G. Hirschfelder, *Die Kölner Handelsbeziehungen im Spätmittelalter* (Cologne, 1994).

<sup>7</sup>For the Holy Roman Empire in general: Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*. On the Dutch, Flemish and Baltic herring fisheries: R. W. Unger, 'The Netherlands Herring Fishery in the Late Middle Ages: The False Legend of Willem Beukels of Biervliet', *Viator*, 9 (1978), pp. 335–56; R. Degryse, 'De laatmiddeleeuwse haringvisserij', *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 21 (1966), pp. 82–121, and Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*.

<sup>8</sup>L. Sicking and A. P. van Vliet, "'Our Triumph of Holland": War, Violence, and the Herring Fishery of the Low Countries, c. 1400–1650', in L. Sicking and D. Abreu-Ferreira (eds), *Beyond the Catch: Fisheries of the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic, 900–1850* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 337–64.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, *Traders, Ties and Tensions: The Interaction of Lübeckers, Overijsslers and Hollanders in Late Medieval Bergen* (Hilversum, 2008), and J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'The Late Medieval and Early Modern Hanse as an Institution of Conflict Management', *Continuity and Change*, 32, 1 (2017), pp. 59–84.

<sup>10</sup>On commercial conflicts between German cities, see M. Rothmann, 'Städtische Diplomatie im Wirtschaftskonflikt: der Nürnberger-Frankfurter Messestreit aus den Jahren 1432 bis 1438', *Archiv für Frankfurts Geschichte und Kunst*, 66 (2000), pp. 132–60. On commercial networks see G. Fouquet and H.-J. Gilomen (eds), *Netzwerke im europäischen Handel des Mittelalters* (Ostfildern, 2010). On the Empire's regional power structures, see D. Hardy, 'Tage (Courts, Councils and Diets): Political and Judicial Nodal Points in the Holy Roman Empire, c. 1300–1550', *German History*, 36, 3 (2018), pp. 381–400.

<sup>11</sup>L. Clemens and M. Mathews, 'Weinfälschung im Mittelalter und zu Beginn der Frühen Neuzeit', in H.-G. Borck (ed.), *Unrecht und Recht: Kriminalität und Gesellschaft im Wandel von 1500-2000* (Koblenz, 2002), pp. 570–81. Most works on food quality control come from France, Spain and Italy; see M. Ferrières, *L'histoire des peurs alimentaires: du Moyen Âge à l'aube du XXe siècle* (Paris, 2002), or A. Riera, 'Mercat i regulació: Inspecció, controls de qualitat i defensa dels consumidors als mercats medievals ibèrics', in F. Sabaté (ed.), *El Mercat de Balaguer: una cruïlla* (Balaguer, 2015), pp. 63–79.

<sup>12</sup>The material includes edicts, transcripts of discussions and other notes, as well as the letters received and sent by Cologne. Nearly all the fifteenth-century correspondence has survived. The most important printed sources are in: Kuske, the *Quellen Kölner Handels*; the *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*; and the *Hanserecesse: Die Rezesse und andere Akten der Hansetage*, ed. K. Koppmann et al., part 1, vols 1–8; part 2, vols 1–7; part 3, vols 1–9 (Leipzig, 1870–1913).

economic and political implications of controlling the herring's quality for Cologne and the other parties involved. After an account of the Cologne herring trade (Part I), the article identifies the actors involved in control of the herring's quality (Part II) and the various forms of interregional supervision (Part III). The article then shows how complaints by Cologne's council and other consumers about poor herring quality prompted negotiations that led to the first general herring edict in 1481, which created a system of interregional control. The roles played by the main actors and the interests that motivated their participation in the food regulation system shed light on the distribution of power within the Holy Roman Empire (Part IV) and highlight the significance of the herring trade for Cologne's foreign policy (Part V).

## I. The Low Countries Herring Trade, Quality Control and Cologne

The herring supplied to Cologne in the fifteenth century came largely from the Low Countries, especially Holland, Zeeland, the Zuiderzee and Brabant.<sup>13</sup> Some herring from the Scanian Fairs, as they were known, was also arriving in Cologne by the end of the fourteenth century, but the imports from Scania (a formerly Danish province, located at the southern tip of today's Sweden) never reached substantial volumes and virtually ceased with the start of North Sea herring imports.<sup>14</sup> The Scanian fish trade is significant, however, because of its connections to the development of the Low Countries fisheries. Scanian herring was the first mass consumption herring distributed over long distances and it dominated the European market from the late thirteenth century to the early fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Its export zone included the Low Countries, an important market where herring could be exchanged for textiles or wine.<sup>16</sup> The Low Countries herring fisheries remained largely undeveloped until a shift occurred between the 1380s and 1400s. In order to establish their monopoly at the Scanian Fairs, the Wendish cities blocked the access of Holland, Zeeland, Flanders and England. This Wendish exclusion policy reduced drastically herring imports in the Low Countries and eventually pushed the provinces to create their own fisheries, starting with Flanders in 1393.<sup>17</sup> The fisheries of Holland and Zeeland then underwent dramatic expansion, which quickly allowed them to meet the demand of their own region.<sup>18</sup> Soon they were able to export to Germany and even to the Baltic region, where North Sea herring started to compete with the declining Scanian herring.<sup>19</sup> During the sixteenth century Holland and Zeeland herring would dominate in much of Europe.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 'Low Countries' here covers diverse principalities in today's Northern France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Germany. Along with Holland, Zeeland and Brabant, the principalities of Gelderland, Utrecht, Flanders, Friesland and Bergen figure in this article.

<sup>14</sup> Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, p. 257.

<sup>15</sup> The main fairs took place in Skanør, Falsterbo and Malmö: *ibid.*, pp. 39–280.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254–5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–3. On improvements in Low Countries boats and fishing techniques, see Unger, 'The Netherlands Herring Fishery'.

<sup>18</sup> By the 1450s, the imports of Scanian herring had all ceased: Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, pp. 93, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–117, 239–40, 433–4.

<sup>20</sup> Sicking and van Vliet, "Our Triumph of Holland", p. 337.

Herring was not exported fresh to Germany. Various preservation techniques were deployed to allow it to be despatched long distance.<sup>21</sup> Young ‘basket herring’ (*korfharing*), caught between May and July, was lightly salted and dried in straw before being transported in baskets. The ‘barrel herring’ (*tonharing*), an adult salted herring, was mostly fished in August, salted at sea and packed in barrels filled with brine. The buckling, also an adult herring, was dried or smoked before being packed in either barrels or baskets.<sup>22</sup> The *tijbuckinck* or ‘buckling of the Ij’, a variety of buckling, was exclusively caught in the Zuiderzee during winter (before 2 February). The *tijbuckinck* was the most desirable buckling, and buckling—along with barrel herring—was generally the prime choice for consumers.<sup>23</sup>

During production and distribution, the four herring varieties travelled various routes. With exception of *tijbuckinck*, the fish came from North Sea waters. After the catch, the fishermen would sail to one of several dozen ports, mostly in Holland and Zeeland.<sup>24</sup> If authorized by the port’s controllers, the loads would leave for export. The buckling went through an additional step, being dried or smoked in special ‘smoke houses’, mostly in Antwerp or ’s-Hertogenbosch.<sup>25</sup> The fish was then exported to the western and southern Empire or to the Baltic region.<sup>26</sup> In the west, after travelling to Cologne the herring continued its journey into Upper Germany and towards the Alps, reaching markets in cities such as Frankfurt, Strasbourg, Basel and Nuremberg.<sup>27</sup>

Bruno Kuske showed that while we can draw a general outline, it is difficult to establish precise details for the scale of the herring transport or for those involved in it. Unlike for wine, for herring we have no yearly records of amounts taxed in Cologne, but we can estimate that in the fifteenth century at least 1,000 herring barrels transited the city each year.<sup>28</sup> The transport of the fish from the coast to Cologne was generally operated in the name of at least two persons. Two or more persons would direct

<sup>21</sup>Herring can live for up to twenty-five years and measure sixteen to forty-five centimetres. A fish aged between two and nine years can spawn and is considered ‘adult’; before that it is ‘young’ and after that ‘old’. The young and adult herring have the best flesh. See ‘Clupea harengus’, *FishBase*, <http://www.fishbase.se/Summary/SpeciesSummary.php?D=24&AT=hareng>.

<sup>22</sup>Although smoking was carried out in the Middle Ages, Cologne’s sources contain no evidence of smoking until the sixteenth century. A. Gautier, ‘Du hareng pour les princes, du hareng pour les pauvres (IX<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)’, *Deshima, revue française des mondes néerlandophones*, 1 (2007), p. 35; Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, p. 262.

<sup>23</sup>Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 242–3, 261–2.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 234–64. Cologne interacted with about thirty towns concerning quality matters. See also Part II and Fig. 1.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup>‘Upper Germany’ or the ‘Upper Country’ mean the cities and regions located south of Cologne. ‘Upper Country’ and ‘Low Country’ were the terms used in Cologne’s medieval sources.

<sup>28</sup>On the wine trade, see R. van Uytven, ‘Die Bedeutung des Kölner Weinmarktes im 15. Jahrhundert: ein Beitrag zu dem Problem der Erzeugung und des Konsums von Rhein- und Moselwein in Nordwesteuropa’, *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, 30 (1965), pp. 234–52. This estimate for herring is a product of a correlation of the average load on boats and carts with some rare yearly records of the number of herring boats arriving in Cologne. The most frequently used boats generally carried between 80 and 100 barrels. Carts only transported a few dozen barrels. The records of 1465/66 and 1470/71 suggest that at least 1,000 barrels were conveyed annually. Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 284–5; Van Uytven, ‘Die Bedeutung des Kölner Weinmarktes’, p. 245. This number does not include baskets of herring (it is difficult to estimate their amount in boats or carts) and applies to years without major trade disruptions caused by war or climatic events.

the transport of the fish to Upper Germany. In addition to Low Countries merchants who sold in Cologne and Upper German merchants who bought in Cologne, Cologne merchants also transported herring from the coast to Cologne and onwards to Upper Germany.<sup>29</sup> Some merchants acted for themselves, but many shipments were conveyed by commissioners known as *Faktoren* or *Wirte*, who were citizens of Cologne who bought or sold respectively for a third party.<sup>30</sup> While it is difficult to know the share of the trade held by the merchants of individual cities, Cologne merchants and commissioners evidently played an important role.<sup>31</sup> The bulk of the shipments travelled on the Rhine and other rivers, and herring loads therefore passed through Cologne on their way southwards. With its merchants and commissioners as well as its location, Cologne thus had a central position in herring distribution within Germany.<sup>32</sup>

During its journey, the herring was repeatedly unpacked, inspected and repacked. The inspection would start on the fishing boat and continue inside the fishermen's home port.<sup>33</sup> Its next stop as it travelled to Upper Germany was usually Cologne.<sup>34</sup> The city's staple privilege (*Stapelrecht*) meant that virtually all goods that passed through had to be stored there for three days, and no commodity could enter or leave the city without undergoing inspection by various city controllers.<sup>35</sup> Officers first searched for and removed spoiled fish.<sup>36</sup> They then inspected the barrels or baskets in light of more specific criteria: the right catch season, the salting, the quality of the barrels or baskets, and the filling and packing. The last of these gauges was intended to counter the frequent mixing of types and qualities of herring. Cologne's distinctive mark was stamped on the herring barrels that had been approved.<sup>37</sup> The checks made in the fishing towns and in Cologne's port were 'local' in the sense that they were undertaken by local controllers according to local regulations. They were quite separate from the

<sup>29</sup> Along with each merchant, servants or carriers helped moving the loads. Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 232–81.

<sup>30</sup> Typically, *Wirte* were selling for export merchants, for example Hollanders who never traded personally in Cologne; *Faktoren* were often buying for Upper Germans. *Ibid.*, pp. 276–86.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 276–84.

<sup>32</sup> Cologne's location between the Lower Rhine and Middle Rhine, where loads had to be transhipped from one type of boat to another, buttressed its position as an intermediary. Land routes were also used, but they were never as convenient as waterways for the transport of heavy goods; they did, however, provide an alternative when the Rhine was frozen or flooded and allowed traders to bypass the numerous toll stations. See Y. Leiverkus, *Köln: Bilder einer spätmittelalterlichen Stadt* (Cologne, 2005), pp. 84–7.

<sup>33</sup> Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 242–8, 262.

<sup>34</sup> Before reaching Cologne, the loads might stop in towns in the Low Countries that had a staple right—for example Antwerp, Deventer and Wesel—where the shipments could be examined. Nevertheless, such inspection is rarely mentioned in the Cologne sources. B. Kuske, 'Handel und Handelspolitik am Niederrhein vom 13.–16. Jahrhundert', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 36 (1909), pp. 315–27.

<sup>35</sup> Incoming products had also to be offered for sale. The staple right had been granted by Cologne's archbishop in 1259 and it was most extensive in the fifteenth century. See D. Strauch, 'Des Kölner Stapels Aufstieg und Abgesang', in C. Haug and R. Thiele (eds), *Buch-Bibliothek-Region: Wolfgang Schmitz zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden, 2014), pp. 483–510, esp. pp. 486–90.

<sup>36</sup> Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*, p. 199. In Cologne, rotten fish would be thrown in the Rhine: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 257.

<sup>37</sup> Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 251–60, 288–94.

‘interregional control’, which was formed by control measures agreed between producers and consumers.<sup>38</sup>

Cologne participated in the herring trade for two main reasons: to ensure its food supply and to bolster its economy. As the most populous German city, with about 40,000 inhabitants, Cologne needed to import substantial quantities of alimentary goods.<sup>39</sup> Herring represented a sizeable portion of those imports, although the fish was neither as indispensable as cereals nor as sought after as meat.<sup>40</sup> Along with other varieties of fish, herring was particularly significant because of the duty that meant Christians ate fish at least once a week and because it could serve as a substitute in times of shortage or famine. Herring was the most plentiful type of fish, as well as one of the cheapest varieties and one of the easiest to preserve.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, herring fuelled Cologne’s trade, second only to wine as the most commercial food product.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Cologne’s fish merchants frequently exchanged fish from the north for wine from the south. Their trade placed them among the wealthiest citizens of Cologne.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the herring trade contributed significantly to the city’s finances, for the many loads that came to the city were taxed and provided substantial income.<sup>44</sup> Cologne was therefore eager that herring, like other taxable goods, should have to stop off in the city as it was taken south.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the herring trade also had political and institutional impact, especially in a city governed by a merchant oligarchy. Since 1396, the members of the ruling council (*Ratsherren*) had been representatives of the craft and merchant guilds. The number of representatives per guild varied according to its economic significance. The council was headed by two mayors, who were elected by and from the members of the council.<sup>46</sup> Some of Cologne’s wealthy fish merchants were members of the

<sup>38</sup>Quality regulation was not limited to Low Countries fish: more than a century previously, Scanian herring had been subject to specific regulation, with Lübeck, the biggest distributor, issuing the most comprehensive norms and already using its mark on the barrels as a sign of quality. Given Lübeck’s position in the Hanse, its standards probably influenced other cities and might have been of interregional scope. Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, pp. 244–9; Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*, pp. 189–91.

<sup>39</sup>F. Irsigler, ‘Kölnener Wirtschaft im Spätmittelalter’, in H. Kellenbenz (ed.), *Zwei Jahrtausende Kölner Wirtschaft*, vol. 1: *Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1975), p. 225.

<sup>40</sup>F. Irsigler, ‘L’approvisionnement des villes de l’Allemagne occidentale jusqu’au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle’, in *L’approvisionnement des villes de l’Europe occidentale au Moyen Age et aux Temps modernes: Cinquièmes Journées internationales d’histoire, 16-18 septembre 1983* (Auch, 1985), p. 128. On Cologne’s food supply, see also J. Lindlar, *Die Lebensmittelpolitik der Stadt Köln im Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1914).

<sup>41</sup>Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*, pp. 37–9, 41; Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 264–312.

<sup>42</sup>See Van Uytven, ‘Die Bedeutung des Kölner Weinmarktes’. For other key products in Cologne’s trade (fustian, silk and other textiles and metalwares), see F. Irsigler, *Die wirtschaftliche Stellung der Stadt Köln im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert: Strukturanalyse einer spätmittelalterlichen Exportgewerbe- und Fernhandelsstadt* (Wiesbaden, 1979).

<sup>43</sup>Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 278–9.

<sup>44</sup>The sources only permit rough estimates for the fifteenth century. The taxes on foodstuffs accounted for at least half of the city’s revenue. Most came from cereals and wine. The revenue from direct taxes on herring and fish came after and was equivalent to that from salt and beer. If one takes account of indirect taxes such as the tax on barrels, the total income extracted from herring and fish was surely important. Furthermore, while the wine trade declined, the herring trade grew in the fifteenth century, which explains Cologne’s repeated efforts to promote it. See R. Knipping, *Die Kölner Stadtrechnungen des Mittelalters mit einer Darstellung der Finanzverwaltung*, 2 vols (Bonn, 1897–1898), esp. vol. 1, pp. 2–13, and Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 286–312.

<sup>45</sup>See Cologne’s letters of 1457 and 1485: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 92, no. 183, and p. 508, no. 995. Even if Cologne’s efforts were not totally successful, most herring loads did transit the city’s port.

<sup>46</sup>See W. Herborn, *Die politische Führungsschicht der Stadt Köln im Spätmittelalter* (Bonn, 1977).

council, and although several of them went on to become mayors, there is no indication that they abused their position by obstructing strict quality control measures likely to hamper their business.<sup>47</sup> The local fish merchants had no monopoly on Cologne's herring and fish trade, and unlike in French and Italian cities, their guild was not directly in charge of food controls.<sup>48</sup> In Cologne, as in other German cities, food quality checks were carried out by city agents. The hiring of merchants or members of a company for such positions was strictly forbidden.

The officials who controlled the fish trade included the 'master of the fish store-house' (*Fischkaufhausmeister*), who oversaw the main wholesale trade operations; no shipment could be unloaded at the port without his authorization. Also essential were the *Unterkäufer*, intermediaries in non-retail sales who inspected the products. At least four *Unterkäufer* were mandated for the fish trade. They were often accompanied by a *Heringröder*, a city employee authorized to print Cologne's mark on herring barrels that passed inspection. The neutrality of these agents was guaranteed by their direct supervision by the council.<sup>49</sup>

The interests of the Upper German cities and lords largely coincided with those of Cologne. All were importers of herring, which formed a significant part of their food supply, and herring was similarly significant for their commerce and tax revenue. Many Upper German merchants were involved in the transport of herring to western and southern Germany and like in Cologne the herring barrels were taxed during transit. Cologne's staple taxes were thus not exceptional; they simply applied to a larger quantity of goods as a result of the city's strategic location at the intersection of major trade routes.<sup>50</sup>

## II. Actors Involved in Interregional Control and their Interconnections

Not all cities and lords involved in trading Low Countries herring to western and southern Germany were active in interregional supervision. Those that were fell into three categories: Low Countries producers, Upper German consumers, and—with more marginal involvement—the Wendish cities of the Hanse (see Fig. 1). Although Cologne was a herring consumer, its role in the control of the trade was different from that of the Upper German cities. As with the fish's distribution, the city acted as an intermediary in the control, linking consumers in the south to the producers in the north. Cologne's correspondence shows that the city received numerous complaints from the Upper German cities about poor herring quality and also sent numerous missives to the Low Countries passing on Upper German complaints.<sup>51</sup> The aim of

<sup>47</sup>For instance, the fish merchant Herden Dude was member of the council from 1461 to 1477. Fish merchants first appeared as mayors around 1500: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 277–8.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 279–82. On other cities, see Ferrières, *L'histoire des peurs alimentaires*, pp. 44–6.

<sup>49</sup>Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', pp. 288–94. On similar control personnel in other German cities: Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*, p. 197.

<sup>50</sup>On taxes in the late medieval Empire, see D. Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels zwischen Köln und den Niederrheinlanden im Spätmittelalter', in D. Geuenich Dieter (ed.), *Köln und die Niederrheinlande in ihren historischen Raumbbeziehungen (15.-20. Jahrhundert)* (Pulheim, 2000), pp. 67–98, here pp. 79–84.

<sup>51</sup>Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 259.



**Figure 1:** The Actors in Interregional Herring Quality Control and their Connections to Cologne, Fifteenth Century. Cartography inspired by H. Eiden and F. Irsigler, 'Environs and Hinterland: Cologne and Nuremberg in the Later Middle Ages', in J. A. Galloway (ed.), *Trade, Urban Hinterlands and Market Integration, c. 1300-1600* (London, 2000), p. 45. Free content.

this section is to analyse these three groups in relation to Cologne and to highlight how their collaboration created a system of quality control.

The first group comprises the Low Countries producers.<sup>52</sup> In Cologne's correspondence, some thirty Netherlandish towns are recorded as recipients of complaints or some form of enquiry regarding the quality of the herring.<sup>53</sup> Even when they belonged to the same principality (usually Holland or Zeeland), these cities appear to have acted independently of one another. Thus throughout the fifteenth century, Cologne would

<sup>52</sup>This group includes all the Low Countries towns that either produced or sold herring and were held accountable for the product's quality. The principalities covered are Holland and Zeeland as well as Gelderland, Utrecht, Brabant, Flanders, Friesland and Bergen. Not included is the Lower Rhine region south of Wesel (with principalities such as the Archbishopric of Cologne, the Duchy of Jülich, the County of Berg); there is no evidence that they participated in any interregional control. Kuske, 'Handel und Handelspolitik', pp. 326–7.

<sup>53</sup>For the complete list of cities for which there are records, see [Fig. 1](#).



frequently send the same letter to ten towns simultaneously.<sup>54</sup> That is not to say that Cologne interacted with each in the same way. Some appear more frequently in the letters Cologne sent, such as Zierikzee, Brielle, Dordrecht and Antwerp, which were economically significant and important in herring production.<sup>55</sup> In preparation for a meeting at the Frankfurt fair in 1470 to discuss quality issues in the herring trade, Cologne identified a series of producers with whom to open talks.<sup>56</sup> This Cologne document listed sixteen Low Countries towns and differentiated between those ‘where herring was brought to land and the buckling dried’ and those that produced the *tijbuckinck*.<sup>57</sup> Cologne was also aware of the different types of actor involved in the fishing towns.<sup>58</sup>

Cologne’s relations with herring exporters changed over time. While Cologne had interacted with the Low Countries long before the fifteenth century, the exchanges concerning herring quality control developed slowly.<sup>59</sup> In the early years of the large-scale herring trade, Cologne was not fully aware of the structure of the production region or to whom it should address complaints. This is clear in the letters received by Cologne from ’s-Hertogenbosch and Antwerp in 1410 that responded to earlier complaints about basket herring and buckling. While the letter-writers acknowledged the problems, they denied any responsibility, as the herring had not been caught by their people.<sup>60</sup> The same situation also applied for other types of fish.<sup>61</sup> Few Cologne merchants personally purchased fish in the Low Countries at this stage.<sup>62</sup> This would change in the following years and the document from 1470 shows that Cologne’s knowledge of the herring fishery landscape had sharpened.

Among the Upper German cities, at least eighteen discussed quality issues with Cologne. Eleven were directly involved in the establishment of interregional quality norms: Mainz, Speyer, Worms, Koblenz and Bingen—Cologne’s closest neighbours on the Rhine—and six others, comprising Trier, Strasbourg, Metz, Frankfurt, Nuremberg and Basel. As Bruno Kuske stressed in 1905: ‘Cologne was the intermediary for the upper land [southern Germany] in its relations with the lower land [the Low Countries], for the continent with the coast’.<sup>63</sup> This function was exercised

<sup>54</sup> This situation changed from about 1500, with Habsburg rule and the concentration of government in The Hague, to which Cologne could partly address its complaints: Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, p. 240.

<sup>55</sup> Other towns to which Cologne addressed numerous letters were Veere and Vlissingen (in Zeeland), Vlaardingen, Rotterdam and Schiedam (in Holland) and Harderwijk (in Gelderland).

<sup>56</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 9, pp. 657–9, no. 717.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Nederlensschen steiden, dae der herijnc an lant kompt in der buckinck gedruygt wirt an van des thijbuckings.’ The herring and buckling towns listed were Antwerp, Brielle, Schiedam, Rotterdam, Vlaardingen, Vlissingen, Veere, Zierikzee, Goedereede and Westkappelle. Antwerp alone dried buckling. The *tijbuckinck* towns were Hoorn, Enkhuizen, Edam, Monnickendam and Harderwijk. *Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 659, no. 717.

<sup>58</sup> In 1467 Cologne told Brielle and ten other towns to inform their ‘citizens, merchants and captains [of fishing boats] (*uwen burgeren, koepluyden ind styrmannen*) about sanctions for those who carried improper goods. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 190, no. 431.

<sup>59</sup> J. A. van Houtte, *Die Beziehungen zwischen Köln und den nördlichen Niederlanden vom Hochmittelalter bis zum Beginn des Industriezeitalters* (Cologne, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 5, pp. 507–8, no. 974; p. 508, no. 975.

<sup>61</sup> Harderwijk, for instance, dismissed Cologne’s complaints about the defective quality of salted haddock, plaice and whiting, saying they were not produced by the city. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 505–506, no. 969.

<sup>62</sup> Cologne’s salesmen are recorded buying first in 1396 and then with greater frequency from the 1420s onwards: Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, p. 241.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260. There could also be lower levels of mediation; Mainz sometimes represented the interests of cities, as in 1481. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 448–9, no. 854.

in Cologne's transmission of complaints from south to north and by explicit references in its letters to the Low Countries.<sup>64</sup> As with the connection between Cologne and the Low Countries, the ties between Cologne and Upper Germany developed gradually. Before 1459, Cologne did not present itself to the herring producers as Upper Germany's representative.<sup>65</sup> This changed in 1459 in an exchange with Upper German cities about regulating herring quality issues together. The exchange was triggered by a complaint made by Basel to Cologne that suggested a series of measures to improve quality standards. While Cologne agreed with the proposal, it asked Basel first to notify Mainz, Strasbourg, Speyer and Frankfurt and to agree on a joint position with them.<sup>66</sup> Basel duly did so and a joint position was reached at the Frankfurt Lenten fair of 1459.<sup>67</sup> While we have no direct evidence of the agreement, Cologne now explicitly mentioned the cities 'from the upper land' (*uyss Oeverlande*) in its complaints to the Low Countries, affirming its representation of their interests.<sup>68</sup> The connection to the second group would eventually be formalized at the meeting at the Frankfurt fair in 1470, which bound Cologne to at least nine cities.<sup>69</sup>

The Wendish cities, especially Lübeck, can be included among the agents of interregional control, although the ties between Cologne and its partners in the Hanse were of lesser importance.<sup>70</sup> The Wendish cities did not intervene directly to regulate the quality of the herring exported to western Germany, but Cologne periodically communicated with them about the matter as members of the Hanse with whom they had interests in common (Holland's herring was also exported to the east).<sup>71</sup> All these connections were embodied in a series of individuals, some of whom will appear in the analysis of the diplomatic negotiations concerning interregional quality control. And these exchanges took place in the context of a wider web of interpersonal ties between cities on other matters.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 540, no. 1064.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 415, no. 1184; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 318, no. 490.

<sup>66</sup> Only Cologne's response to Basel of 16 April has been preserved: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 102, no. 211 = *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 522, no. 841, note.

<sup>67</sup> Basel's letter of 9 July 1459 and Cologne's answer of 25 July: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 102, no. 211, note 1 = *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 522, no. 841, note.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, pp. 522–3, no. 841.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 638, no. 696. The text has not survived but it is referred to in several letters: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 244; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 441, no. 833.

<sup>70</sup> Holland and Zeeland are not included as they were not considered members of the Hanse after the 1430s. Still, being labelled 'non-Hansards' did not stop Cologne from trading with them. See J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'The Close "Other": Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Hollanders and the Hanse', *German History*, 31, 4 (2013), pp. 453–72, esp. pp. 461, 463–4.

<sup>71</sup> On Cologne's place in the Hanse, see H. Wollschläger, *Hansestadt Köln: die Geschichte einer europäischen Handelsmetropole* (Cologne, 1988). On Holland's Baltic herring trade, see Unger, 'Netherlands Herring Fishery', and Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, pp. 90–117, 227–60.

<sup>72</sup> See Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels'; F. Irsigler, 'Köln, die Frankfurter Messen und die Handelsbeziehungen mit Oberdeutschland im 15. Jahrhundert', in H. Stehkämper (ed.), *Köln, das Reich und Europa: Abhandlungen über weiträumige Verflechtungen der Stadt Köln in Politik, Recht und Wirtschaft im Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1971), pp. 341–429.

### III. Forms of Interregional Control

The supervision of herring quality at the interregional level was conducted in various ways.<sup>73</sup> Most frequently, letters were sent from Cologne and from the Upper German cities with complaints about bad herring. They generally reported rotten fish but also mentioned fish caught too early, salted improperly or packed carelessly. Cologne's complaints to the Low Countries producers all underlined the economic loss incurred by merchants who bought bad loads.<sup>74</sup> The purchase of a barrel containing partially rotten or damaged herring would certainly have reduced a merchant's profit, although it is possible that losses were sometimes exaggerated to elicit a response. From the 1460s, letters began to raise explicit hygiene concerns, a complaint primarily related to fish having been caught prematurely, making the herring therefore 'not suitable for human consumption'.<sup>75</sup> Unseasonable fish tends to rot more quickly. This objection draws attention to the public health implications of herring imports for Cologne, although, as in the case of the economic argument, exaggeration was always possible.<sup>76</sup> Many letters refer to the 'common good' (*gemeynen gutz*), indicating it had been harmed or should be protected.<sup>77</sup> The idea of the 'common good' is a topos of medieval texts of all kinds.<sup>78</sup> Sources also deploy the phrase 'as customary of old' (*as van alders gewoenlich*). Such reference to the past is another well-known rhetorical device of the Middle Ages, intended to legitimate a practice, whether old or not.<sup>79</sup> After framing its demands politely, Cologne did not hesitate to close a letter with warnings, often cautioning that if the complaint was not resolved, the city would have to bar the guilty merchants from its markets and 'sanction and take measures' (*straiffen ind rijchten*). These 'measures', as some letters explain, might include a fine to compensate for financial loss.<sup>80</sup> We do not know to what extent these sanctions were applied and if they did serve as a deterrent.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Next to product quality, there were other important issues for Cologne's herring merchants; for example, the confiscation of goods at toll stations accounts for many of Cologne's letters about herring. Low Countries merchants, by contrast, were mainly interested in selling without additional taxes or other impediments. See Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', and Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels'.

<sup>74</sup> For instance, in 1467 Cologne stressed the financial damage (*schaden*) caused to its citizens by the incautious packing of herring in the barrels. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 189, no. 431.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> On food safety in the herring trade, see N. Brunmayr, 'Der Hering unter Aufsicht: ein Fall von Lebensmittelhygiene in der Stadt Köln im 15. Jahrhundert', *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter* (forthcoming).

<sup>77</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 380, no. 580; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 408–9, no. 781. Nuances include *gemeinen besten* (1487) or *gemeinen guede ende welfart* (1493); see *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 541, no. 1064, and p. 666, no. 1320.

<sup>78</sup> See E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A.-L. van Bruanene (eds), *De Bono Communi: The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th–16th c.)* (Turnhout, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> In some letters the reference to a 'before' can indeed be validated: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 667, no. 1320. But in others the relevant practice was in fact new, as in the first letter mentioning the *tjibuckinck's* catch season and that it starts on 2 February – surely a new measure: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 385, no. 587.

<sup>80</sup> Some letters are rather brief, like the complaint of 1459 to Brielle and other towns. *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 523, no. 841. Others are more comprehensive, like one of 1467 in *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 190, no. 431.

<sup>81</sup> A letter to Antwerp of 1459 recalls a previous warning of 1457: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, p. 385, no. 586, and pp. 522–3, no. 841.

Beside letters, Cologne also sent administrative documents, such as the template of certificates for the catch season. These certificates recorded the catch date, and Cologne attempted to make them compulsory for all fish merchants in order to prevent fish from being caught too early.<sup>82</sup> Finally, Cologne sometimes also returned loads or exchanged barrels in order to settle a routine dispute.<sup>83</sup>

The letters and other interactions between the Upper German cities and Cologne are similar. Most of the letters sent by the Upper German cities to Cologne about herring quality were complaints. They made similar demands and relied on comparable arguments. When spoiled or poor quality herring was found in barrels, financial losses were invoked; health concerns were also sometimes explicitly stressed, and frequent reference was made to the ‘common good’ and to past practice.<sup>84</sup> Complaints from the south often referred to the Cologne mark imprinted on the barrels, especially when the barrels contained degraded herring despite this assurance of quality.<sup>85</sup> Cologne was clearly expected to ensure the quality of goods passing through its staple. Some loads that arrived in Upper Germany were also returned.<sup>86</sup>

Less regularly, Cologne corresponded with Lübeck and its partner cities of the Hanse, which were not directly involved in the control of Low Countries herring transported to Germany. Most letters deal with the standardization of barrel sizes. Until the 1450s, unstandardized barrels were a significant problem in the herring trade, for both Low Countries and Baltic herring, for loads containing irregular quantities of fish could undermine a merchant’s business. In 1421, Cologne addressed the issue with Lübeck, stating that the Netherlandish fish barrels that arrived at its port were of all sizes. Cologne therefore asked Lübeck to send a model of the ‘Rostock standard’, which the Wends were already trying to have adopted in the Baltic; Cologne would then push the Low Countries towns to standardize their barrels.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. The Edict of 1481 and the Culmination of Interregional Control

The most effective way of initiating regulatory cooperation was to engage in dialogue with producers, as happened in the case of the negotiations of 1480/81, which led to the first interregional edict.<sup>88</sup> This event appears to be the first occasion when officials of both producing and consuming cities met in person to discuss the problem of Low Countries herring quality. The talks of 1480/81 were organized by an exchange

<sup>82</sup> These 1476 templates referred to barrel herring and *tijbuckinck*: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 362–3, no. 697, and p. 363, no. 699.

<sup>83</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 6, p. 315, no. 563.

<sup>84</sup> A 1494 letter from Speyer contains all these elements: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 680–1, no. 1357.

<sup>85</sup> A 1481 letter from Nuremberg: *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 441, no. 833.

<sup>86</sup> Cologne’s 1481 letter to Mainz asked for the return of allegedly spoiled herring for inspection. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 450, no. 856. Cities located further away simply destroyed the load and sent a complaint: Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, p. 258.

<sup>87</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 1, p. 227, no. 658, note 1. Dutch barrels were gradually standardized. The ‘Brielle standard’, based on that of Rostock, was implemented from the 1420s. Around 1500 it was replaced by the ‘Dordrecht standard’, which became the norm. Thenceforth the sources rarely mention barrel-size issues: Kuske, ‘Der Kölner Fischhandel’, pp. 250–1.

<sup>88</sup> The transcripts have not survived, but fifteen letters and a draft in the Cologne correspondence enable us to reconstitute the proceedings.

of letters that led to a series of meetings, three of which were attended by Cologne's representatives.<sup>89</sup> The first two meetings took place in Antwerp, on 2 June 1480 and sometime during the following August; the third was convened in Bergen Op Zoom, on 6 December 1480. The Cologne representatives (probably members of the council) negotiated with several partners: the envoys of Dordrecht, Zierikzee and Antwerp, who were later joined by envoys of other Low Countries towns; the Bruges Kontor of the Hanse and subsequently also Lübeck and Hamburg; and Archduke Maximilian, de facto ruler of the Low Countries principalities.<sup>90</sup> Complaints had been accumulating prior to these negotiations. Since 1459 Cologne's letters had been proposing an edict (*ordinancie*) on herring quality be issued by producers.<sup>91</sup> The agreement of 1470 between Cologne and the Upper German cities on measures to improve herring quality, copies of which had probably been sent to the Low Countries cities, only added to the pressure.<sup>92</sup>

The idea of direct discussions apparently originated in Cologne's letter of 22 May 1480 to Dordrecht and Zierikzee. Responding to their apparent readiness to improve quality standards, Cologne invited them to a meeting in Antwerp on 2 June 1480, during the Pentecost fair.<sup>93</sup> This first gathering proved productive: Cologne's envoys sent back the draft of an edict containing measures agreed with Dordrecht and Zierikzee, and also with Antwerp.<sup>94</sup> The envoys also suggested that Cologne ask for a mandate from Archduke Maximilian to translate the draft into a formal edict.<sup>95</sup> To this end, Cologne mobilized its Hanseatic connections and in July 1480 contacted

<sup>89</sup> The other meetings brought together the Dutch cities and the Hanse: *Hanserecesse*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 246, 261, 265, 267, 278.

<sup>90</sup> The 'Bruges Kontor' was one of the four Kontors of the Hanse (with Bergen, London and Novgorod), which were semi-autonomous Hanseatic settlements outside the league's 'territory' formed by Hanseatic merchants trading in these places. Each Kontor had its own speciality; Bruges focussed on textiles and wine. From the 1350s, the Bruges Kontor had a formal administration and the right to make internal rules and was formally subordinated to the decisions of the Hanseatic diet. Its merchants were divided into *Drittel* (thirds) according to their geographic origins: the Wendish-Saxon, the Westphalian-Prussia (including Cologne) and the Livonia-Gotland. Each elected six *alderluyden* ('Old Men') who, assisted by clerks, regulated the internal life and represented the Kontor's interests abroad. In the negotiations of 1480/81, the *alderluyden* and the clerks would represent the Kontor and write to Cologne. The identity of most of the Kontor's members remains unknown: E. Schubert, 'Novgorod, Brügge, Bergen und London: die Kontore der Hanse', *Concilium medii aevi*, 5 (2002), pp. 1–50; J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'De Kantoren van de Hanze: Bergen, Brugge, Londen en Nowgorod', in H. Brand and E. Knol (eds), *Koggen, Kooptieden en Kantoren* (Hilversum, 2009), pp. 90–107. See also V. Henn, '... dat wie up dat gemelde kunthoer tho Brugger ... eyn kleyn upmercken gehat und noch hebben ... neue Forschungen zur Geschichte des Brügger Hansekontors', *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 132 (2014), pp. 1–45.

<sup>91</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 8, pp. 522–3, no. 841.

<sup>92</sup> Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 244; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 247, no. 531, note; p. 362, no. 696. The complaints were not without effect. Fishing towns reacted by prescribing stricter controls in local edicts, as in Brielle in 1410 or 's-Hertogenbosch in 1476, although there was no coordinated regulation: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 5, p. 507, no. 971; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 358, no. 683.

<sup>93</sup> The Dordrecht and Zierikzee letters to which Cologne responded are missing, so it is unclear whether they made any proposals. Cologne encouraged them to spread the invitation to others, but only Dordrecht, Zierikzee and Antwerp were initially present: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 513, no. 815.

<sup>94</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 432–3, no. 816.

<sup>95</sup> In their letter of 7 June 1480, Johann Rummel and Johann Eicheister, two Cologne representatives in Antwerp, suggested that other towns should not be informed since doing so might thwart an edict. *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 515–6, no. 820.

the Hanseatic Kontor in Bruges, sharing with it the problems of the herring trade and the state of ongoing negotiations, as well as asking it to solicit the archduke.<sup>96</sup> Maximilian received the request shortly after, but he wanted more information and proposed the matter be discussed in Antwerp at the Bamis market of August 1480.<sup>97</sup> Although the meeting took place, the Hanseatic representative was apparently unable to speak to the archduke.<sup>98</sup> A third gathering was therefore organized, to be held in Bergen Op Zoom on Saint Nicholas's Day, with additional towns in Brabant, Holland and Zeeland invited to join the discussions.<sup>99</sup> Before the meeting, Cologne took care to marshal its partners. It reminded Antwerp, Dordrecht and Zierikzee of their recent agreement and also notified them of the involvement of the Hanseatic Kontor in Bruges. In turn the Kontor was informed of Cologne's agreement with the three cities. All four were then gently asked to collaborate in the negotiations.<sup>100</sup> Cologne also requested Lübeck and Hamburg empower the Bruges Kontor by giving it the backing of the whole Hanse, which they did.<sup>101</sup> A letter of April 1481 then indicates that the discussions had been successful.<sup>102</sup> On 31 July 1481 the edict was sealed and published.<sup>103</sup> On 13 August 1481 Cologne informed the Upper German cities of its publication.<sup>104</sup>

Analysis of the 1480/81 negotiations shows that the meetings were organized at the margins of annual fairs, as had been the meetings of 1459 and 1470 between Cologne and the Upper German cities.<sup>105</sup> Various actors participated in the process. The representatives of Dordrecht, Zierikzee and Antwerp played a key role. They attended all the discussions, whereas other cities only joined at a later stage. One cannot be sure whether Dordrecht and Zierikzee represented the interests of the other fishing ports, but they were credible negotiators for each of the two main herring-producing principalities. Antwerp came as the main buckling dryer and as a leading herring distributor.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 10, pp. 520–1, no. 830.

<sup>97</sup> Antwerp's Bamis market was scheduled between August and October: A. Sutton, *The Mercery of London Trade, Goods and People, 1130–1578* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 236. The meeting took place in August: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 524–5, no. 839.

<sup>98</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, p. 525, no. 840. The reason may have been the ongoing War of the Burgundian Succession (1477–1493). Maximilian was negotiating with French envoys until autumn 1480: H. Wiesflecker, *Kaiser Maximilian I.: das Reich, Österreich und Europa an der Wende zur Neuzeit*, vol. 1: *Jugend, burgundisches Erbe und römisches Königtum bis zur Alleinherrschaft, 1459–1493* (Vienna, 1971), p. 157.

<sup>99</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 443, no. 816.

<sup>100</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 524–525, no. 839 (to Dordrecht and Zierikzee, 1 Sept. 1480); p. 525, no. 841, and p. 532, no. 855 (to Antwerp, 18 Sept. and 20 Nov. 1480; p. 525, no. 840; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 435, no. 820; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 532, no. 856, and p. 532, no. 857 (to the Hanseatic office, 1 Sept., 25 Oct., 20 Nov. and 28 Nov. 1480).

<sup>101</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 435, no. 820; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 532, no. 856.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 559, no. 897. In June 1481 a meeting of representatives of Holland, Zeeland and Friesland still had to discuss the herring edict proposal. Their agreement was probably the last text submitted to the archduke: *ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 570, note 1.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 10, pp. 570–4, no. 916. Its application was delayed: *ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 575, no. 920.

<sup>104</sup> The letter was sent to ten German cities: Koblenz, Bingen, Mainz, Frankfurt, Worms, Speyer, Trier, Metz, Strasbourg and Nuremberg: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 446, no. 847.

<sup>105</sup> This confirms that fairs served not only market functions but also other purposes. See Irsigler, 'Köln, die Frankfurter Messen', pp. 372–3, and M. Rothmann, 'Marktnetze und Netzwerke im spätmittelalterlichen oberdeutschen Wirtschaftsraum', in Fouquet and Gilomen, *Netzwerke*, pp. 136–88.

The importance of the three towns' contribution is underlined by the fact that the agreement they signed in June 1480 with Cologne formed the basis for the edict of 1481.<sup>106</sup> The Upper German cities did not send representatives to the talks and were informed by Cologne when the matter was concluded.<sup>107</sup> Evidently they had been represented by Cologne. Even in the absence of an explicit mandate from the Upper German cities, the developments of the previous decades suggest that they trusted Cologne to defend their interests. The Wendish cities of the Hanse, especially Lübeck, were also involved, mainly by endowing the Bruges Kontor with the authority of the league. The Kontor's mediation was decisive in securing the assistance of the arch-duke. As for Archduke Maximilian himself, he neither took the initiative nor decided the measures, but his consent was essential for the publication of the edict. The connections activated in the 1480/81 negotiations were not affirmed in the negotiations for the edict of 1494, when discussions were more centralized.<sup>108</sup>

Obtaining the edict of 1481 was a diplomatic success for Cologne. It had been crucial to connect Dordrecht and Zierikzee to the Hanse (the Bruges Kontor and Lübeck and Hamburg), for Holland was always in competition, and sometimes in conflict, with the Wendish Hanse.<sup>109</sup> Cologne chose the timing and the arguments judiciously, involving the Hanseatic Kontor only once an agreement had been reached with Antwerp, Dordrecht and Zierikzee. When the three towns were informed of the involvement of the Kontor, Cologne underlined their common interests in the herring trade and the help afforded by the Hanseatic settlement in convincing the archduke. The letters also illuminated Cologne's diplomatic strategy. For example, in their letter of 7 June 1480 the Cologne envoys Johann Rummel and Johann Eicheister made their recommendations right after the agreement with the three Netherlandish cities, suggesting a mandate could be sought from the archduke and advising against involving further towns in the ongoing negotiations, for to do so could endanger the whole enterprise.<sup>110</sup> The effectiveness of Cologne's diplomatic efforts is clear from the content of the 1481 edict, which included all the points of the agreement of 1480; virtually all of Cologne's demands prepared for the Frankfurt fair of 1470 were also met.<sup>111</sup>

The 1481 edict met Cologne's calls for stricter quality measures for herring and thus served its food supply and trade interests. Other partners also stood to gain from its implementation. Like Cologne, the Upper German cities aimed to force producers to improve the quality of their herring, which would enhance their food supply as well as their commerce and finances.

<sup>106</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 446, no. 847 and *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 570–4, no. 916.

<sup>107</sup> *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 446, no. 847.

<sup>108</sup> They were conducted by Maximilian's son Philip, the official ruler of the Low Countries principalities (including Holland and Zeeland) since 1494. The proceedings were also speedier than in 1480/81 (just over a month). *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 11, p. 480, no. 759; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 697, no. 1395.

<sup>109</sup> See Wubs-Mrozewicz, "The Close "Other".

<sup>110</sup> *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 515–16, no. 820.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 657–9, no. 717; *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 432–3, no. 816; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 570–4, no. 916. Only the restriction of the catch season of the *tijbuckinck* was not included in the edict of 1481, though it was added in 1494: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 699, no. 1395. Catch season certificates did not appear in either edict, but brand marks on the barrels were prescribed.

The interests of herring producers or fishing towns in the Low Countries did not coincide completely with those of Antwerp. The towns that produced herring may not have accepted the edict willingly, for the new quality norms would have required greater effort and increased their operating costs. However, they faced losing their German customers, by far their largest buyers, if they did not make concessions, and in light of their heavy reliance on the herring trade, a few new control measures was a price they had to pay. Internal conflicts may have complicated the picture for Holland and Zeeland's cities. The quarrel between the Hooks (*Hoeken*) and Cods (*Kabeljauwen*) had resumed as an armed confrontation in early 1480.<sup>112</sup> The approval of the edict required the consent of all cities and lords, so such disputes could have undermined an agreement on appropriate regulation. Remarkably, a solution was found before the successful repression of the Hook upheaval in September 1481 and the end of the war. The Cods (who included the fishermen and supported Maximilian) were able to attend the court in The Hague in June 1481 and to accept the edict.<sup>113</sup>

Antwerp shared some of the interests of the Hollanders and Zeelanders. The city was one of the main buckling drying stations, which made it part of the production chain. At the same time, however, Antwerp was also a major herring marketplace involved in exports to Germany. Given that barrel or young herring traded in Antwerp was not fished by that city, the only way to regulate it properly was to require stricter standards from the fishing towns. Since herring was a significant source of income for Antwerp (through the taxes levied on it and the profits of local merchants), the city had an incentive to push for those standards. In this sense, Antwerp's interests concurred with those of Cologne, and it is therefore no surprise that Cologne made Antwerp, with which it already enjoyed a close relationship, a privileged partner in the negotiations.<sup>114</sup>

The interests of the Hanseatic Wendish cities in backing the edict of 1481 were somewhat opaque. After lending their support to the Bruges Kontor, Lübeck and the other Wends consented to the edict at the Hanseatic diet of 16 September 1481.<sup>115</sup> It is not clear what they stood to gain, particularly given their constant competition with Holland.<sup>116</sup> Lübeck and the Wends had successfully kept the Hollanders away from the Scanian Fairs during the 1380s–1400s.<sup>117</sup> In the 1480s, competition from Holland had grown, as it had started to produce its own herring and export it to the Baltic, posing an immediate threat to the Wends and to Lübeck especially. Not only did North Sea herring compete with the Scanian herring trade, it endangered Lübeck's whole

<sup>112</sup>This conflict divided two counties from the 1350s to around 1500 and periodically became violent. See W. P. Blockmans, 'Hoeken und Kabeljauwen', in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, 10 vols (Stuttgart, 1977–1999), vol. 5, col. 64.

<sup>113</sup>We have no evidence of the edict's approval by the court, but had it not been approved, it would not have been published.

<sup>114</sup>H. Pohl, 'Köln und Antwerpen um 1500', in Stehkämper, *Köln*, pp. 469–552.

<sup>115</sup>The representatives of the Bruges Kontor asked Lübeck to do so in their letter of 31 March 1481. *Hanserecense*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 261–4, no. 316. The Dutch herring quality regulation was on the agenda of the Hanseatic meeting of September 1481. The recess listed some of the edict's content and some matters related to it. *Ibid.*, part 3, vol. 1, p. 278, no. 334. An abbreviated version of the edict is included in the appendix of the recess. *Ibid.*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 280–1, no. 335.

<sup>116</sup>The relationship between Wends and Hollanders cannot be summarized as a series of conflicts, however: periodic wars were followed by regular trading and even phases of closer cooperation. See Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'The Close "Other"', pp. 461–71.

<sup>117</sup>Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, pp. 90–3, 254–5.



east–west commerce, which relied primarily on the exchange of goods (such as herring or cod) for valuable eastern products (such as Russian fur or amber). With their herring, the Hollanders were well positioned to take Lübeck’s place. Moreover, their ships often travelled through the Sound and thereby avoided the Hanseatic city’s staple.<sup>118</sup>

Yet, despite the threat posed by Holland, the Wendish cities did not attempt to hamper herring exports from the Low Countries. The main reason for this reticence seems to be that this struggle, which would have required effort and incurred great expense, was not their highest priority in the 1480s. They appear to have been largely preoccupied with their relations with the Danish Crown, which had become increasingly tense through the century, above all in relation to the Scanian fisheries. By not confirming Hanseatic privileges and by constantly raising taxes, the kings of Denmark had accelerated the decline of the Scanian Fairs and made them increasingly unattractive for foreign merchants. Scanian herring still represented a substantial part of Lübeck’s trade and was widely distributed within the Baltic, but the trade had become highly uncertain.<sup>119</sup> In response, Lübeck and the other Wends had attempted to diversify their herring supply (notably by relying on other Danish fisheries).<sup>120</sup> Holland’s herring seems to have been a component of this diversification strategy. As importers, Wends were naturally concerned about the herring’s quality and no longer had any reason to oppose or hamper its regulation.<sup>121</sup> Even though they had no long-term interest in favouring Holland’s profitable trade, the context of the 1480s–1500s forced them to do so temporarily and therefore to support the edict of 1481.

The Bruges Kontor was subordinate to the Hanse, but its merchants had economic interests of their own. Neither the Kontor nor its merchants were much involved in the herring trade.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, Hanseatic merchants had major economic interests in Bruges, indicative of that city’s significance in the late medieval European economy. Roughly 1,000 Hanseatic merchants were present in Bruges during the fifteenth century, where they were largely involved in trading textiles for products such as Russian fur, Baltic amber or Norwegian cod.<sup>123</sup> The existence of the Bruges Kontor was never secure, yet in the late fifteenth century it faced serious trouble.<sup>124</sup> The representatives

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227–60. Avoidance of the east–west route via the Elbe and Trave (and thus through Lübeck) was probably one of the main causes of Lübeck’s economic decline: R. Hammel-Kiesow and A. Graßmann, ‘Lübeck’, in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 5, col. 2146–50.

<sup>119</sup> There had also been little or no catch in some years. In the 1490s, the Danish king even arrested Lübeck merchants to impose new taxes: Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres*, pp. 100–8.

<sup>120</sup> For example, those of Aalborg and Limfjord, which were less dependent on the Danish crown. *Ibid.*, pp. 323.

<sup>121</sup> The recess of the Hanseatic diet of September 1481 mentioned these imports, raised quality concerns and suggested the need to complain to The Hague about herring that had been caught too early and had therefore deteriorated. *Hanserecesse*, part 3, vol. 1, p. 278, no. 334.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 254–5. In the 1480s some Holland and Zeeland herring was exported to France, possibly via Bruges: *ibid.*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 265–7, no. 319. However, northern France generally relied on its own herring fisheries. Bruges did not despatch herring to Cologne and Germany. The only reference to a Flemish town exporting herring to Germany concerns Ghent in 1410: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 5, p. 508, no. 975.

<sup>123</sup> Rhineland wine was also traded and banking activities were significant: Schubert, ‘Novgorod’, pp. 19–27; J. M. Murray, ‘The Well-Founded Error: Bruges as *Hansestadt*’, in S. Jenks and J. Wubs-Mrozewicz (eds), *The Hanse in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), pp. 188–9.

<sup>124</sup> Since its foundation, the Kontor had been moved to other cities multiple times. These displacements, however, were part of a successful strategy that consisted in boycotting Hanseatic trade with Flanders and in pressuring the counts not to restrict the commercial privileges of its members: Schubert, ‘Novgorod’, p. 24.

of the Kontor were acutely conscious of the economic decline of Bruges caused by the silting of the Zwin channel and the shrinking of its textile industry, which directly affected Hanseatic trade, and they sought ways of safeguarding their commercial interests.<sup>125</sup>

Playing a role in significant diplomatic events may have been part of the Kontor's strategy and would explain its energetic involvement in the prelude and aftermath of the edict of 1481.<sup>126</sup> It had already proved its ability to act as a high-profile intermediary in 1474, when the Peace of Utrecht, which ended the Anglo-Hanseatic war, was signed in the Kontor's meeting house in Bruges.<sup>127</sup> The herring edict provided another opportunity to engage proactively in mediation. Archduke Maximilian resided in the Low Countries, and the Hanseatic merchants were important in securing his consent to the edict. At the same time Maximilian was confirming privileges to appease the region, and the Kontor may have wanted its own privileges confirmed or even extended.

The archduke himself may have had indirect interest in the herring quality regulation. He was after all ruler of the Low Countries territories and, as archduke of Austria and likely heir to the imperial throne, effectively the emperor's representative.<sup>128</sup> Since his marriage to Mary of Burgundy in 1477, Maximilian had been at the centre of the War for the Burgundian Succession (1477–1493) and led troops against France while also seeking to thwart uprisings and demands for autonomy in the Low Countries.<sup>129</sup> Between January 1480 and September 1481, moreover, the Hooks were fighting the Cods in Holland and Zeeland, and although this conflict had nothing to do with Maximilian, the Hooks had openly declared their hostility to the Habsburgs, forcing Maximilian to quash the rebellion and put loyalist Cods in charge by the end of 1481.<sup>130</sup>

In this context, Maximilian and his advisers may have seen political benefits in supporting the herring quality edict. A centralized trade regulation might buttress his authority in Holland, Zeeland and Friesland, while improving quality standards in the biggest trade sector in Holland and Zeeland might increase the tax revenue that financed his expensive campaign against France, which many Low Countries cities had already refused to support.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, it was in the Empire's interest for Maximilian to support Cologne's demand for an edict, especially as Cologne also represented many other wealthy Upper German cities. As Frederick III struggled to maintain order in the south and east of the Empire in the 1470s and 1480s, he needed to safeguard his imperial authority in other regions.<sup>132</sup> The negotiations of 1480/81

<sup>125</sup> On the impact on Hanseatic trade, see *ibid.* pp. 19–27. In a letter to Lübeck of 13 April 1481 that included a copy of the edict of 1481, the Kontor's representatives complained about direct trade between France and Hamburg, which bypassed the Bruges staple right: *Hanserecesse*, part 3, vol. 1, pp. 265–7, no. 319.

<sup>126</sup> The correspondence continued after the edict's publication and the Hanseatic representatives showed the same willingness to accede to Cologne's demands, for example on 4 September 1481, about the delay in applying the edict: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 576–7, no. 924.

<sup>127</sup> Schubert, 'Novgorod', p. 23.

<sup>128</sup> Wiesflecker, *Kaiser Maximilian I.*, vol. 1, pp. 182–5.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 113–247.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 154–60.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 155.

<sup>132</sup> See H. Koller, 'Friedrich III., Ks., dt. Kg.', in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 4, col. 940–3.

thus shed light on power relations in the Holy Roman Empire by highlighting how actors with different and even competing interests could cooperate in creating a comprehensive interregional food regulation.

Cologne's diplomatic efforts regarding the quality of herring shipments sought legally binding measures. These endeavours had been ongoing for several decades and various local regulations had been implemented. The edicts of 1481 and 1494 were distinguished from previous decrees, however, by their scope. They were no longer local, but interregional. They established a coordinated system for herring quality control, as was clearly stated in the 1494 text, with enforcement of the regulation to be scrutinized annually by an assembly of the herring trade partners.<sup>133</sup> The edicts were both commercial agreements and regulations protecting not only consumers but also public health, which although not explicitly mentioned in the edict was underlined by Cologne's mayor Gerhard van Wesel in 1497.<sup>134</sup> The reiteration of new versions through the sixteenth century has cast doubt on the effectiveness of the interregional herring quality control system, with Dieter Strauch even claiming that the edict of 1481 was toothless and rapidly forgotten.<sup>135</sup> The control system was certainly imperfect and complaints about herring quality continued, but even today food safety regulations are rarely fully effective, and the edict of 1481 did at least establish herring quality supervision at the interregional level. Herring producers now had legal obligations to German consumers and were forced to engage with them to discuss the enforcement of controls.<sup>136</sup>

## V. Cologne's Herring Quality Control and its Foreign Policy

How significant was herring quality control for Cologne's foreign policy? As we have seen, in 1481 Cologne invested considerable effort in ensuring a successful outcome. Further insight is provided by the sources pertaining to Cologne's staple right.

Cologne's trading partners frequently criticized the city's staple right. While most other cities or lords were equally heavy-handed in the late medieval Empire, Cologne's taxes were particularly frustrating because of the city's location at the intersection of the main trade routes.<sup>137</sup> The other cities routinely complained at the rising cost of doing business but could not exert sufficient pressure to effect change.<sup>138</sup> The four prince-electors of the Rhine, by contrast, did have the means to do so.<sup>139</sup> For them,

<sup>133</sup>It took place in The Hague. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 701, no. 1395.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 697, no. 1395 and *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 571, no. 916. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 744, no. 1467.

<sup>135</sup> Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels', p. 95. Strauch exaggerates: in the late 1480s, Cologne repeatedly reminded the Low Countries of the edict and the need for its observance: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 477, no. 913.

<sup>136</sup>The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century food safety norms remained in force until the early nineteenth century: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 245.

<sup>137</sup>The discontent of Cologne's partners rose markedly when Emperor Frederick III granted the city the new 'Rhine toll' in 1475, which earned Cologne more criticism than income: Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels', pp. 79–84.

<sup>138</sup>See the complaint of Antwerp in 1481: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 577, no. 925. Cologne still provided many advantages for trade and the Upper German cities regarded its staple right as beneficial in so far as it concerned fish and other perishable goods: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 259.

<sup>139</sup>The prince-electors were the archbishops of Cologne, Trier and Mainz and the Count Palatine of the Rhine. The archbishop of Cologne had ruled the city until 1288. After Cologne became autonomous, ties with the archbishop remained important since he possessed part of the surrounding territory. See E. Schubert, 'Kurfürsten', in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 5, col. 1581–3.

this issue was both financial and political: Cologne's wealth and rising influence had become a challenge to their traditional power. While the prince-electors did not take drastic measures for most of the fifteenth century, from 1489 to 1491 they virtually besieged the city and blocked its goods on the Rhine. The city's cereal supply was cut off, worsening the great famine of 1491.<sup>140</sup> However, the electors' own imports transited the city, which meant they could not blockade Cologne for long. By 1497 they had been forced to return to diplomacy and to enter talks with the city about the application of its staple right.<sup>141</sup>

Herring and food safety controls were central to these discussions. The first matter discussed was a complaint by the Neuss fish merchants about Cologne's herring regulations.<sup>142</sup> As leader of Cologne's delegation, mayor Gerhard van Wesel responded by reminding the electors of his city's efforts to obtain the herring edict of 1494. Claiming that the regulation was of 'greater use to the upper land' than to Cologne, he underlined that its goal was to ensure the 'common good and the prosperity of the shared commerce' while also safeguarding public health.<sup>143</sup> He argued that Cologne should be considered 'a centre for the handling [and the inspection] of easily spoiled goods' (*einer heufstat der verhandlungen der fentguedere*).<sup>144</sup> *Fentguedere*, or *ventgut*, is a term specific to Cologne denoting all easily spoiled goods, from fish and butter to non-edible commodities such as wax.<sup>145</sup> The term was unknown to Mainz's representative and van Wesel had to define it for him.<sup>146</sup> Cologne's argumentation relied primarily on food quality control. It drew attention to the quality checks done by the city's agents and reminded the four electors of the city's ability to forge interregional regulations like the edicts of 1481 and 1494. Cologne thereby underlined its importance as an intermediary in the distribution and control of herring, but it also did more: it provided the electors with expertise, as its precise knowledge of the herring's production and conservation was strategic information that the princes likely did not have.<sup>147</sup>

Cologne's food safety policy served the city's own interests. Quality control aimed first and foremost to protect local consumers and to secure a vital element of their food supply. But impressing its concerns on the prince-electors also helped Cologne strategically. The city gained substantial income from taxes on goods in transit. Ensuring that the herring distribution to Upper Germany prospered was key to these revenues.

<sup>140</sup> See Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels', p. 81, and Irsigler, 'Köln, die Frankfurter Messen', pp. 354–5. The famine is mentioned in the *Koelthoffsche Chronik*: 'Die cronica van der hilliger stat van Coellen (1499)', in H. Cardauns (ed.), *Die Chroniken der niederrheinischen Städte*, vol. 14 (Leipzig, 1877), pp. 880–1.

<sup>141</sup> The negotiations took place on 17 and 18 October 1497 in Oberwesel; further meetings occurred until about 1550: Kuske, 'Der Kölner Fischhandel', p. 259.

<sup>142</sup> Neuss's fishermen criticized allegedly new herring trade edicts displayed on boards in Cologne; Cologne claimed they were not new, but merely advertised higher fines: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 743, no. 1467.

<sup>143</sup> 'That the herring were fit for human consumption' (*dat sulchen herinck also verhandiert und bereit wurde, dat hei der naturen des minschen in der verbruchungen bequeme syn moechte*). *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 744, no. 1467.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 743, no. 1467.

<sup>145</sup> See also Lampen, *Fischerei und Fischhandel*, p. 192.

<sup>146</sup> To clarify the situation, Cologne later sent a longer list of products referred to as *fentguedere*: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 753–5, no. 1473.

<sup>147</sup> Although not registered as a fish merchant, Gerhard van Wesel appears to have been well informed about herring. He was, for instance, involved in enforcing the edict of 1481: *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, p. 631, no. 1030.

By presenting the controls within its walls as a profitable quality filter for the Upper Germans, Cologne sought to reinforce both its distributor status and its tax revenues. The promotion of food quality controls can thus be considered a pillar of the city's commercial policy, especially after the dramatic events of 1489–1491.<sup>148</sup>

With the exception of wine, no other commodity was subject to the same diplomatic and regulatory attention as herring in the late Middle Ages.<sup>149</sup> Herring, moreover, stood out among over twenty varieties of fish typically found on Cologne's market stalls, including salted cod and plaice, which were also caught in the North Sea. The same conservation techniques were used for these fish as for herring and similar controls applied.<sup>150</sup> Yet these other North Sea fish were traded in smaller quantities and no special edicts were put in place to ensure their quality. Freshwater fish (such as minnow or gudgeon), by contrast, were subject to specific regulations, but they were fished near the city and were hence controlled locally, in the marketplace itself.<sup>151</sup> Meat was another highly perishable part of the diet and was subject to the strictest hygiene regulations.<sup>152</sup> But meat was mainly slaughtered locally and also did not require interregional supervision.<sup>153</sup> Finally, butter and cheese imports from the Low Countries were the subject of complaints by Cologne, mostly regarding the excessive weight of the butter barrels and the mixing of rancid and fresh butter. Although some exporting cities reacted to the complaints by passing local legislation, no coordinated interregional control was ever put in place.<sup>154</sup>

## VI. Conclusions

This article advances three main findings. First, herring quality was a key issue for the city of Cologne and significant in parts of the Holy Roman Empire during the fifteenth century. This fish became the object of a system of interregional control that culminated in the edicts of 1481 and 1494, which dealt specifically with quality control and created a comprehensive series of norms for the main producers in the Low Countries to adopt. The promulgation of the edicts necessitated the agreement

<sup>148</sup>The other side of this policy consisted in extending its herring staple, partly by preventing fish from being unloaded and sold in Lower Rhine towns like Neuss before it reached Cologne: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, p. 295, no. 590, and pp. 569–70, no. 1132.

<sup>149</sup>Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels', pp. 93–4; Clemens and Matheus, 'Weinfälschung im Mittelalter'.

<sup>150</sup>A complaint of 1467 demanded that all other salted fish should be subject to the same control criteria as herring: *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 2, pp. 189–90, no. 431.

<sup>151</sup>As in the edicts of 1469 and 1482: *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 220–1, no. 499, and p. 462, no. 879.

<sup>152</sup>Ferrières, *L'histoire des peurs alimentaires*, pp. 17–66.

<sup>153</sup>Conserved meat such as ham was never sold in large volumes: Houtte, *Die Beziehungen*, p. 12. When meat was transported in larger quantities, it was mostly in the form of live cattle, such as the Hungarian beef brought to Cologne's annual fairs: F. Irsigler, 'Der Kölner Viehhandel und Viehmarkt im Spätmittelalter', in E. Westermann (ed.), *Internationaler Ochsenhandel (1350–1750): Akten des 7th International Economic History Congress, Edinburgh 1978* (Stuttgart, 1979), pp. 219–34.

<sup>154</sup>Deventer was the main target of complaints, as in 1444 and 1456. *Quellen Kölner Handels*, vol. 1, pp. 358–9, no. 1036; *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 10, pp. 570–4, no. 916. The edict Deventer issued in 1463 concerned only the butter barrels and not the quality of the butter itself: Strauch, 'Rechtsfragen des Handels', p. 94; J. A. Weststrate, 'Rotte vis en zure wijn. Houdbaarheid, bederf en manipulatie van voedsel in de late Middeleeuwen', *Madoc*, 20 (2006), p. 276.

and support of all major stakeholders in the herring trade. Among the importing cities, Cologne played a decisive role. By urging its Upper German partners to agree a common position before sending formal requests to the exporting cities, Cologne was able to gain influence and a tacit mandate in its exchanges with the Low Countries authorities. Complaints about rotten or poor-quality fish had been accumulating since the start of the fifteenth century, as the long-distance trade rapidly grew in volume, and were often accompanied by demands for improved quality standards. As a result, many fishing towns had taken steps to meet Cologne's expectations. Eventually, however, it became clear that local edicts would not suffice. Cologne had reached this conclusion by 1480, when it invited Dordrecht and Zierikzee to initiate the talks of

1480/81. The ensuing regulation of the herring trade was unique in that no other foodstuff in the Middle Ages had ever been subject to this kind of interregional supervision, which reflects the significance of herring in the Empire's food supply and trade.

Secondly, economic and political interests motivated the control of herring. Herring quality regulation was integral to Cologne's economic strategy, helping the city justify its staple right and secure its substantial income. The taxes imposed under the staple right irritated the Upper German cities and periodically sparked open trade conflict with the Rhineland prince-electors. Yet their reliance on Cologne as distributor and controller of goods meant that they had no real leverage against the city. Alongside herring exporters and importers, quality regulations also interested actors who were less or only indirectly involved in the trade. The readiness of Lübeck and the Wendish cities to back the edict on quality control, despite their focus on Baltic herring and their fierce competition with Holland's merchants, seems to have been part of a strategic retreat prompted by rising uncertainties in the Scanian herring trade. The Wendish cities needed to diversify their supply, which meant that they had to start importing Low Countries herring as a temporary solution. For the Bruges Kontor, the negotiations of 1480/81 were a good occasion to return to the centre of diplomatic events. The town's economic decline had seriously endangered Hanseatic business there. By acting as a key mediator, the Kontor may have sought to safeguard its position in European trade and to secure its merchants' interests. As for Archduke Maximilian, the opportunity to present himself as the sponsor of a regulatory system that bound his three realms was a way of reinforcing his regional authority during the Burgundian succession crisis.

Thirdly, the events leading to the creation of the interregional edicts, especially the edict of 1481, offer valuable insights into power relations in the late fifteenth-century Holy Roman Empire. The feat of establishing a coordinated quality control system and creating the framework for later regulation highlights Cologne's growing soft power in the Rhenish lands. The negotiations in Antwerp and the constant mediation of the Bruges Kontor underlined the continuing relevance of the Hanse in the Empire's economic affairs. Lastly, the role of Archduke Maximilian stresses the importance of the emperor's representative, whose consent had proved indispensable for the edict's publication.

## Abstract

The importance of herring to Cologne's medieval economy is well-known and the need to control the quality of this long-distance and perishable product has also been widely recognized. The interregional quality norms that Cologne negotiated with Low Countries fishing towns in 1481 have been neglected, however. This article offers the first reconstruction of the diplomatic process that led to the edict and an analysis of the motives that impelled the diverse stakeholders to reach an agreement. The article demonstrates that in addition to herring's commercial significance, its quality control was a major issue and was used as an instrument of influence by Cologne and other powers in the politically decentralized Holy Roman Empire. Comprehensive analysis of Cologne's abundant sources shows how exchanges of letters and complaints gradually fed into formal negotiations, culminating in the publication of a crucial edict that established an interregional quality control system and took account of the interests of the different stakeholders in the herring trade. The article suggests that this push for regulation was also an element of Cologne's economic strategy since it helped justify the taxes the city levied on goods in transit at the expense of competing actors in the Rhine region. In short, the example of quality controls on herring shows how food trade studies can shed light on power relations in the Empire during the late Middle Ages.

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