ENGLAND AND THE GERMAN HANSE, 1157–1611

A study of their trade and commercial diplomacy

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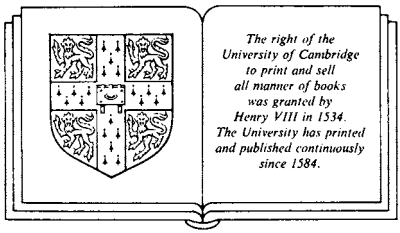

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Introduction

The German Hanse is probably more familiar in English historical literature as the Hanseatic League. The latter term has been eschewed for the reasons given by Philippe Dollinger in his general survey of the organisation, but the modern German spelling of Hanse has been used in preference to the Latinised form adopted by him.[1] German Hanse (*Hansa Teutonicorum, dudesche Hense*) was the name used by the members themselves for the greater part of its history. For the sake of convenience the title is generally shortened to Hanse, but the initial capital is retained, not least to prevent confusion with other hanses. Strangely, although the word hanse is Germanic or Scandinavian it seems to have been incorporated in the title of the German Hanse only around the middle of the thirteenth century, a hundred years or so after the birth of the organisation, at the very time it was becoming obsolete elsewhere. Originally, it described a fraternal association formed among travelling merchants, or their monetary contribution to a common fund. In England the nature of a hanse is well illustrated at York where a royal charter of 1154–8 confirmed the city's liberties, which included a gild merchant (*gilda mercatoria*) and 'hanses in England and Normandy'. The institutions themselves were clearly older than this and a charter granted to Beverley *c.* 1130 establishes that a hanse house (*hanshus*) already existed at York. At Leicester, another town with a Scandinavian past, members of the gild merchant still made a payment called hanse when they visited fairs in eastern England at the end of the twelfth century. Some other town charters, such as that of Ipswich (1200), also make a formal distinction between gild merchant and hanse.[2] This suggests that in the past there had been

[1] P. Dollinger, *The German Hansa* (London, 1964), p. xx.

[2] E. Miller, 'Medieval York', in P. M. Tillot (ed.), *The City of York* (The Victoria History of the Counties of England, London, 1961), p. 31. A. F. Leach (ed.), *Beverley Town Documents*

some degree of separation between the two, if only to the extent that one was an offshoot of the other. By this time the difference was becoming blurred, probably because it was less necessary for a town's merchants to travel together and make collective arrangements for security in their own country. Later forms of association among English merchants trading overseas were organised on a national basis and never incorporated the use of the word hanse. An example of a hanse as a national organisation of merchants in a foreign country is provided by the Hanse of London, a union (either real or planned) of Flemings who came to England to buy wool in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.[3] Members of the German Hanse may have been slow to adopt the word, or at least to leave evidence of it in their surviving written records, but the element of solidarity between merchants travelling in an alien environment was the essence of their organisation from its beginnings.

An organisation which survived for roughly half a millennium (from the middle of the twelfth century to the mid-seventeenth) was bound to see many changes, but when German historians began to investigate the Hanse in detail they soon began to emphasise one in particular. Traces of this change were detected in the late thirteenth century, but the decisive period was reckoned to be the second half of the fourteenth century. The thesis was that a Hanse of merchants gave way to a Hanse of towns. In the earlier period, membership of the Hanse and the use of its collective privileges appears to have been open to all German merchants who traded overseas. In the later phase, membership was confined to specific towns, indeed it was the towns themselves rather than individual merchants which were now the members of the Hanse. The change was put down to alterations in the economic climate of the later middle ages. On the one hand travelling merchants were superseded, or at least supplemented, by those who remained at home and operated their business by proxy. On the other hand greater collective effort and expense was needed to safeguard the trade and commercial privileges which had been established all over Europe. Only those willing to share the costs might reap the fruits. Later scholars modified the thesis in points of detail, but most accepted the distinction between the Hanse of merchants and the Hanse of towns. Dollinger's agreement is reflected in the structure of his book. The fourth chapter, entitled 'Towards

(Selden Soc., 14, London, 1900), p. 132. M. Bateson (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Leicester*, 1 (London, 1899), pp. xxviii–ix, 12–35. C. Gross, *The Gild Merchant* (London, 1890), 1, p. 7.

[3] T. H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 23–4.

the Hansa of Towns (*c.* 1250–*c.* 1350)' begins with the sentence 'As early as the mid-thirteenth century the cities tried to take over from the Gotland Community the protection of German merchants abroad.' The next, 'The Hansa of the Towns: A Great Power in Northern Europe (*c.* 1350–*c.* 1400)', outlines the significant events of this period, including the assembly of 1356, which Dollinger regards as the first full Hanse diet (*Hansetag*). He later refers back to this time with phrases such as 'the formation of the Hansa of towns' and 'from the beginning, that is, from about 1358'.[4] Ahasver von Brandt accepts that a transition was under way by the end of the thirteenth century but emphasises the slowness of change. He writes that even in the second half of the fourteenth century 'Hanse merchant is not someone who is a citizen of a Hanse town, but Hanse town is one whose citizens are engaged in overseas trade and share the privileges without opposition. The German Hanse is not yet personified in the towns.'[5] He regards it as significant that when the towns first identified themselves with the Hanse (in 1358) they did not use the term 'Hanse towns' but 'towns of the German Hanse' (*Stede van der dudeschen hense*). Only around the turn of the century did the older usage give way to 'Hanse towns' (*hense stede*), indicating that the transition was complete.

Most of this book is concerned with relations between England and the Hanse in the era of the Hanse of towns, but that is the consequence of bias in the survival of evidence. The earlier period is just as important, both in its own right and for an understanding of later developments. For details of the general development of the early Hanse, English readers are served most conveniently by Dollinger's book, but here a summary may usefully be provided of von Brandt's views expressed in the article already cited. The latter describes the rise of the Hanse of merchants in four stages, which are partly chronological and partly schematic. This analysis helps to elucidate the enigmatic statement of Fritz Rörig that 'the whole [of the Hanse] was earlier than the parts'.

The beginning of the German Hanse is firmly rooted in the Baltic. For several centuries in the early middle ages this sea was the

[4] Dollinger, *German Hansa*, pp. 45–82, 86, 89.

[5] A. von Brandt, 'Die Hanse als mittelalterliche Wirtschaftsorganisation – Entstehen, Daseinsformen, Aufgaben', in A. von Brandt and others, *Die Deutsche Hanse als Mittler zwischen Ost und West* (Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 27, Cologne and Opladen, 1963), 9–38, especially 25. Dollinger makes a different distinction between 'town of the Hanse' and 'Hanseatic town', *German Hansa*, p. 88.

principal trade route between eastern and western Europe. The west sent cloth, wine and whatever else was acceptable and in return received not only the native products of the north-east Baltic lands but also commodities which came via Russia from Byzantium. Much of the exchange took place in the province of Schleswig, the narrowest part of the Danish peninsula where a land journey of only fifteen kilometres separated the Baltic port of Schleswig from Hollingstedt, which was accessible via the river Eider from the North Sea. From the west came first Frisians and later men from other parts of the Low Countries and the Rhineland. They seldom sailed on the Baltic itself, since goods were brought to them by Scandinavian and Slav merchants. The situation was transformed in 1159, when the city of Lübeck was founded on the Trave estuary in the south-westernmost corner of the Baltic. It was settled chiefly by west-German merchants who immediately took to the sea in cogs, vessels recently developed in the North Sea which proved to be commercially superior to Scandinavian and Slav ships. This was the first of von Brandt's four stages of development. The second embraced the island of Gotland, which had long been a halting place on the route to the east. In 1161 Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony, made peace between Germans and Gotlanders and, in return for a confirmation of the latter's rights in Saxony, the former were allowed to trade in Gotland. Some Germans settled at Visby on the west coast of Gotland, but more importance is usually attached to the community formed among merchants who merely visited the place ('universi mercatores imperii Romani Gotlandiam frequentes'). Little is known about its origin and early constitution, but it bound together men from more than one home town. In the thirteenth century it was ruled by four aldermen, elected respectively by merchants of Visby, Lübeck, Soest and Dortmund. German historians have long stressed the significance of the Gotland community, but for von Brandt an integral part of stage two is the beginning of German involvement with Skania, in the south-west tip of modern Sweden. Each autumn this region provided the most prolific herring fishery in Europe and disposal of preserved fish formed the basis for more general fairs, which in time came to be dominated by Hanse merchants. Von Brandt's inclusion of Skania is a salutary reminder, for the point is often overlooked that, when English merchants flocked to the Baltic two centuries later, Skania was at first just as much an attraction to them as Prussia.

Stage three of von Brandt's plan, which began *c.* 1200 and lasted until *c.* 1250/70, saw the establishment of the far outposts of the Hanse. It consisted partly of the foundation of new towns such as Riga (1201), Reval (1219) and Dorpat (1224), which accompanied the crusade to subjugate the heathen tribes of the north-east Baltic. The other element was a build-up of trade and the acquisition of commercial privileges in regions where there was no question of conquest and mass settlement, at Novgorod in Russia, Bergen in Norway, in Sweden, Flanders and England. Stage four consisted of the foundation of the towns on the southern shore of the Baltic, from Wismar to Königsberg in the provinces of Mecklenburg, Pomerania and Prussia, Slav lands which became thoroughly Germanised. Chronologically this stage was concurrent with the third, but it is conceptually separate. Unlike the towns of the north-east Baltic these were not founded with overseas trade specifically in mind. In the course of time, however, they built up a thriving trade in the products of their hinterlands, often embellished by their own citizens. Among them were some of the leading members of the Hanse. Only by the terminal date of stages three and four were all the 'parts' of the Hanse in place, yet in Rörig's words the 'whole' had long been in existence.

Before leaving this discussion of the early development of the Hanse, mention must be made of an important contribution by Detlev Ellmers, the purpose of which seems to be to remove any doubts about the leading role of Lübeck at all times in the organisation's history. He states unequivocally 'Lübeck did not at some time or other become the head of the Hanse, but was from the beginning the point of departure and basis of the Hanse.'[6] Ellmers challenges certain long-accepted ideas such as the novelty of the cog to the Baltic in the twelfth century and the view that the Gotland community was the first to embrace German merchants from different towns, but this is peripheral to his main thesis. He accepts that the Gotland community was the core of the Hanse but claims that it was not conceived in Gotland some time after 1161 (von Brandt's stage two), but was part and parcel of the foundation of Lübeck. The community was formed between two groups of settlers – those from Westphalian towns such as Soest and Dort-

[6] D. Ellmers, 'Die Entstehung der Hanse', *HG*, 103 (1985), 2–40. Contrast this with Dollinger's statement that Lübeck was not officially recognised as leader of the Hanse until 1418 (*German Hansa*, p. 107).

mund, who had hitherto traded merely on land, and seafarers who came from Schleswig. Now they combined forces to trade on the Baltic. Ellmer's argument depends on iconographic interpretation of the thirteenth century civic seal of Lübeck. This depicts two men in a ship, one steering (a seafarer) and the other (a merchant) swearing an oath, that is they are forming a partnership. Details of the ship were already obsolete when the first seal was cut in 1223, but the whole design was carefully copied when it was renewed in 1256 and 1281. The archaism is seen as a deliberate piece of propaganda, intended to demonstrate that Lübeck had been the birth place of the Hanse and remained its leader. The organisation was and remained for a century or so a Hanse of Eastlanders. Westphalian merchants were an integral part of it, but those of Cologne and the Rhineland towns were not. The former traded overland to Lübeck, but the latter were seafarers. Sea-borne trade with the north-east continued on the old route via Hollingstedt and Schleswig, for at first there was no advantage in shipping to Hamburg and crossing thence to Lübeck. The sea journey was as long in the second case as the first and the land crossing much longer. Cologne merchants continued to have little direct contact with the Baltic until the end of the thirteenth century and it was probably for this reason that they played no part in the election of the aldermen of the Gotland community. After fusion of the latter with Cologne and the western towns the westerners increased their Baltic trade. Fusion itself took place in the west – in Norway, Flanders and England, into which areas the Eastlanders expanded their activities in the thirteenth century. At first they were opposed by the merchants of Cologne, but from about the middle of the century it began to be realised that cooperation would improve the position of all *vis-à-vis* local interests. For Ellmers, events in England in 1282 marked the final recognition by Cologne of Lübeck's leadership of the Hanse and the point at which the Hanse of Eastland became a true German Hanse. These matters will be discussed fully in the next chapter. The last point about Ellmer's paper which needs to be noted is that it does not challenge the traditional thesis of a Hanse of merchants giving way to a Hanse of towns. Indeed he explicitly endorses the dichotomy.[7] On the other hand, if his argument about Lübeck finds general acceptance it may necessitate some reappraisal of the formal role of towns in the earlier phase of the Hanse's history.

[7] Ellmers, 'Entstehung der Hanse', 8.

The metamorphosis of the Hanse of merchants into the Hanse of towns should not be misconstrued. The organisation remained essentially what it had always been – a community of commercial interest. On the occasion of a major crisis in 1469 the Hanse sought to instruct the English crown about its own true nature. It explained that it was 'a firm *confederatio* of many cities, towns and communities for the purpose of ensuring that business enterprises by land and sea should have a desired and favourable outcome and that there should be effective protection against piracies and highwaymen, so that their ambushes should not rob merchants of their goods and valuables'.[8] It might have been added, though on this occasion it would have been impolitic to do so, that the Hanse also existed to ensure that princes did not burden trade with new taxes or embroil merchants unwillingly in their wars. The greater part of the document in question was taken up by an explanation of what the Hanse was not and what it lacked, and it has frequently been remarked that it is easier to do this than to explain what it was. Though a confederation or 'a kind of alliance', to use another phrase of the 1469 elucidation, the Hanse possessed no common property, no treasury, no seal, no permanent officials (until the mid-sixteenth century) and no navy. Expenditure on a common enterprise had to be financed by loans from individual towns, the common purses of the *Kontore* or private merchants, and attempts made afterwards to recover the costs by the most equitable means. The only common institution was the diet, but full assemblies met comparatively infrequently and often were poorly attended. They were generally convened to discuss specific matters, and towns which did not have a direct interest in the current business resented the expense of representation and either ignored summonses or delegated authority to a neighbouring town which did bother to attend. Regional diets, comprising groups of neighbouring towns, met more frequently. Many ordinances (*Rezesse*) of the diet were of a negative kind, such as a prohibition of trade with a certain party or for a period of time. Ultimately, the matter of obedience lay with individual merchants, but dissidents could be dealt with at *Kontor* level or cited to answer to a future diet. Penalties included fines and the expulsion of individuals, but little could be done about large-scale disobedience condoned by the home town of rebels. Expulsion of a town itself from the Hanse was a sanction of the final resort and rarely used. The

[8] Dollinger, *German Hansa*, document 26, pp. 411–13.

main purpose of such action was to deny the use of any Hanseatic privileges in any place to all merchants of the town in question. The most famous case was the expulsion of Cologne in 1474, because of its refusal to stand by the other towns in their recent struggle with England. The size of the Hanse fluctuated in its later years as new members were admitted and others dropped out, often as a result of sheer inactivity on their part, but sometimes for more sinister reasons. It is impossible now to state how many, or which, towns were members at any particular time. This is because the Hanse itself seldom drew up lists of members and resolutely set its face against supplying details to outsiders, who usually wanted them for a restrictive purpose. Dollinger estimates that there were generally about seventy active members and a hundred or so others, whom he terms passive.[9] Only a very small proportion of these ever engaged in direct trade with England.

The Hanse was not a sovereign body and could never become one, since its members owed allegiance to many different territorial princes, ecclesiastical and lay. Some of the latter had aspirations of their own to sovereign status, which made them particularly jealous of the autonomy which had been acquired by the more important towns. The Margraves of Brandenburg were especially notorious and at some time or other forced almost all of the Hanse towns in Brandenburg and Pomerania to withdraw from the organisation.[10] Straslund alone was able to withstand them, though it too was much weakened in the struggle and by concessions made to the prince. But Hanse towns were not singled out for attack by their overlords either in Brandenburg-Pomerania or elsewhere. Attempts by princes to bring towns to heel were widespread in late medieval Germany. Lacking in sovereignty, the Hanse was also without a place in the constitution of the Empire. Towns such as Lübeck and Dortmund, which enjoyed the status of free imperial cities, occupied seats in the imperial diet, but they were there in their own right not as representatives of the Hanse. For most of its history the Hanse simply ignored the Empire and in return was ignored by the Emperors. Only in the late sixteenth century did the Hanse turn to the Empire for help in its struggle with the English Merchant Adventurers. It claimed that English commercial policy and practice were harmful not merely to the Hanse but to the interests of the Empire as a whole.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 88. [10] F. L. Carsten, *The Origins of Prussia* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 136–48.

Although the Hanse won the support of the imperial estates, the Emperor was not won over and for a time he declined to enforce a ban on English trade within the Empire. By then the Hanse was a mere rump of its former self and quite unable to prevent its rivals from first evading the ban and very soon getting it rescinded.

Among many anomalies in the history of the Hanse not the least is the presence of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, the only territorial prince admitted to membership. Moreover, he was not just any prince but ruler of the sovereign state of Prussia-Livonia. It is not clear exactly how the Order came to be represented so directly in the Hanse, but its claim might have been justified on either of two grounds. On the one hand it had played a decisive part in the foundation of towns in the eastern Baltic; on the other it possessed vast landed estates, much of whose production was marketed in western Europe through Hanse channels. Because of the key role played by Prussia-Livonia in the unravelling of English interest in the Baltic it is necessary to describe briefly its historical geography.[11] The Teutonic Order of St Mary's Hospital in Jerusalem (known more colloquially as the Teutonic Knights) was founded in the Holy Land in the late twelfth century, but soon transferred its energies to eastern Europe. In the 1220s the Knights were enlisted to help the Christian, Polish, Duke of Masovia against the heathen Prussians and installed at Kulm on the eastern bank of the river Vistula. Instead of merely supporting the Poles, the Knights, with the sanction of papal bulls, conquered the whole of Prussia for themselves, though it took them until 1283 to do so. In 1294 died the last Slav Duke of Pomerelia, the coastal province to the west of the Vistula, which included Danzig at the mouth of the river. After a struggle which lasted until 1308, the Knights won control of the whole country and incorporated it in their state. Poland was now cut off entirely from the sea and its considerable trade with the west was conducted through Prussian ports. These were members of the Hanse in their own right, even though their ruler was also a member. Nevertheless, the Grand Master kept an exceptionally tight control over all the towns, and their freedom of action, both within and without the Hanse, was limited. They chafed under this restraint, none more so than Danzig, which from the mid-fourteenth century rapidly became one of the major ports in the Baltic. More than once

[11] The following paragraphs are based chiefly on E. Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* (London, 1980).

they flirted with Poland and after a bitter war and civil war lasting from 1454 to 1466, western Prussia, which included most of the towns, was ceded to Poland. The towns remained in the Hanse and, under the suzerainty of the King of Poland, enjoyed greater autonomy than in the past. Only Königsberg and Memel were left to a truncated Prussia, which remained nominally a theocratic state until 1525. Then, Albert of Hohenzollern, the current Grand Master, converted to Lutheranism, secularised the province and made himself an hereditary duke under Polish suzerainty.

Even before Prussia fell to the Teutonic Knights, the Baltic tribes living between the Gulf of Finland and the river Dvina had been partially subjugated, again under the guise of a crusade, for these people too were still heathens. The more northerly area, occupied by Estonians, was made subject to the King of Denmark, though its only substantial town, Reval (now Tallinn), was a German foundation of 1219 and a member of the Hanse. A larger area, then known as Livonia, was centred on the modern state of Latvia and conquest proceeded from Riga, founded in 1201. Pacification was committed to a specially created military order, the Knights of the Sword, but after initial successes it was virtually destroyed in 1236 by the neighbouring Lithuanians. The survivors were then absorbed into the Teutonic Order, which acquired the suzerainty of Livonia, though it was governed as a separate province under a provincial master. In 1343 the native Estonians revolted against their overlords and the Teutonic Order was called in to subdue them. In 1347 the Order bought Estonia from the King of Denmark and it was added to Livonia, which continued to be ruled by the Knights until 1562. The region was then divided up between Russia, Poland, Sweden and Denmark. Livonia was physically separated from Prussia for the greater part of the history of the Teutonic state. A small stretch of coastline between the two was inhabited by the Samogitians, who were subjected to the Knights for only a few years in the early fifteenth century. Inland a much bigger wedge was provided by the Lithuanians, who retained their heathenism and independence, in the form of a grand duchy, until 1385, when the union of Poland-Lithuania was created, a power bloc which ultimately defeated the Teutonic knights.

It was emphasised earlier that the Hanse was from first to last a community of commercial interest. It existed solely to promote and protect the trade of its members, who initially were individual

merchants and later citizenships of towns. This meant that as a body it had no concern with political programmes or policies which were not wholly or largely commercial or economic in character. Even in this limited field the Hanse was reluctant to cooperate with outsiders. Naturally, individual towns also had non-commercial interests and therefore occasionally combined with others, within or without the Hanse, to achieve other ends. The circumscribed nature and concerns of the Hanse meant that its relationship with England was limited to commercial matters. England could not look to the Hanse, as it did to the Count of Flanders and the princes of the Rhine (and later the Duke of Burgundy or the Emperor), for a political-military alliance against France. Not until the reign of Henry VIII will we see a purely political engagement between England and Lübeck. Moreover, the latter was then acting independently, not as leader of the Hanse. Later, England tried to get cooperation, though not active military support, from Hamburg in respect of campaigns in Scotland and Ireland. Again this was not something which involved the Hanse as a whole. In stressing that the relationship between England and the Hanse was merely commercial, one does not disregard the fact that this involved much more than the simple exchange of commodities. Trade was supported by constant bargaining of a diplomatic nature and the disruption of trade sometimes gave rise to armed conflict. But only one dispute (1468–74) is generally described as a war. Since the conflicts were commercially motivated they are not in the same category as the power struggles between England and France, which were largely about control of territory. But nor can they be classed with the Anglo-Dutch wars of the seventeenth century. The latter were rooted in commercial rivalry which resulted from conflicting national policies espoused by governments. The former were more pragmatic – the by-product of localised acts of piracy. This is not to deny the very real rivalry which existed between Hanseatics and Englishmen in the middle ages. But one must be careful in trying to equate this, on the English side, with government policy. The Hanse diet was concerned only with commercial matters. But the English government, responsible for a large nation-state, had a much wider range of concerns. Economic matters were low down in its list of priorities, and even when considered often had to be subordinated to other interests. The prime example was the manipulation of the wool trade to support foreign policy from the twelfth century onwards.

Edward Miller, contrasting England with France, believed that in the former 'something like a national economic policy could develop from these dealings with the wool trade and the cloth trade'.[12] This may be so, but not until the reign of Edward IV can one begin to assert with some conviction that a national economic policy was emerging. Nor did this yet include hostility to the Hanse as one of its principal tenets. For that we must wait until 1517, when Cardinal Wolsey began to regard the Hanse as a force which was not conducive to the economic welfare of his country. On the other hand, interaction between the English government and the Hanse long preceded anything which can be termed economic policy. Contact between German merchants and the crown began as soon as the former began to visit England, and the relationship gradually became more complex. Much later, when Englishmen began to venture to regions controlled by the Hanse, it became even more intricate. Englishmen asked for privileges similar to those enjoyed by Hanseatics in their country, and when these were denied they looked to their government to support the demand. The procedure which developed was for the government to negotiate with, rather than on behalf of, the English merchants. It depended upon the merchants for intelligence, but was the senior partner in so far as it alone had the power to impose sanctions on the Hanse. England had no non-economic expectations of the Hanse, so the interests of the merchants did not have to be subordinated to foreign policy, though occasionally they might have to be weighed against those of others among the king's lieges. Some government ministers might be indifferent to matters of trade (and occasionally some might even be susceptible to bribery by the opposition), but on the whole the crown would naturally side with its own subjects, even though this was not yet part of a national economic policy. These engagements began as the Hanse of towns assumed its final form, and from then on we are concerned not simply with merchant against merchant, but with the English government against the Hanse diet.

[12] E. Miller, 'The Economic Policies of Governments: France and England', in M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich and E. Miller (eds.), *Economic Organisation and Policies in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge Economic History of Europe, 3, Cambridge, 1963), p. 291.