

## **‘Forces of the Hanseatic League, 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries’**

Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 494 (2014)

Text by David Nicolle; illustrated by Gerry and Sam Embleton

### **Review by Rob Morgan**

This is the first Osprey title I have waited for with any anticipation for a long while, and it has not disappointed me one bit! The Hanse, that omnipresent, complex and frequently misunderstood naval and military power spanning late medieval Europe has long deserved this form of consideration.

It is far from being purely a maritime warfare volume of course. The short, standard 48 pages of this Osprey deal with a wide range of matters of war in relation to this unusual medieval structure. Nicolle, always a competent writer, considers the historical background, and rapid evolution of what became a massive organisation, wielding influence and power from the Arctic to Africa, though the main Hanseatic sea routes were always in the Baltic, North Atlantic and North Sea, of course. There is a valuable chronological table at the start of the text to explain much of its complexity. A third of the book deals with land warfare, weapons and sieges, including gunpowder weapons which the prosperous Hanseatic League speedily embraced and employed. There is something worthwhile in these land warfare pages for the naval wargamer, of course, but the exploration of maritime warfare is the crucial part. It will, I think divide neatly into two parts for review purposes.

#### **Land Warfare c1250-c1425:**

That is how the author describes the land content of the title, and I have to say this aspect of Hanseatic warfare is less pronounced than the naval. In many ways, this account is a round-up of the problems of medieval warfare in Germany, dealt with in two other Osprey titles on German medieval armies, but, of course, the Hanse had its peculiarities! He considers, briefly, the urban militias, and the armies of the princes, as well as the importance of mercenaries to the League on land and at sea. He ends this section with a comment on the crossbow, one which will be familiar from other sources, but seems to fit neatly enough into the text here. Before the development of ordnance, the crossbow was important to the Hanse, and its role in siege warfare is mentioned in the section dealing with sieges and firearms.

I would have been interested in a little more information on Hanseatic siege craft, and on ordnance. The forces of the Hanse were quick to take up gunpowder (after all, they could afford it!) and this again is a matter explored in greater detail in other texts. Interesting that at the Siege of Cologne in 1174-75,

the Burgundians experience messages being fired over their heads to the relief forces, by the besiegers in, possibly, hollowed out incendiaries. Some wargame potential in that, I think! The only other land activity given significant treatment is the growing problems of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with Denmark especially.

Of the plates, which are sumptuous, only four specifically deal with land warfare, the others will be dealt with later. These, however, are useful. Details of the militia crossbowmen and their colourful mercenary comrades are attractive, and the cavalry in the service of the Hanse give a rather different figure possibility or two from the usual plated men-at-arms; the heraldry is useful too. Drab as the plate may appear, I took to B1, the quilted Frisian with a long dart, but I don't know of a suitable figure anywhere. Even in the land warfare plates, the sea isn't far away, only two don't have a ship in the background! The infantry, crossbowmen and the knights are not difficult to discover in many ranges and in many scales, naturally; the army commander, F1, could be taken from the 30 Years War, but I don't know of a mounted trumpeter like H1, or of a character like the musical *Dithmarscher* militiaman at G1.

### **Maritime Warfare:**

Some reading this will say that the Osprey's handling of the Hanse's many and lengthy, and frequently bitter naval campaigns, against competitors, rivals and more especially pirates (even all three rolled into one fleet!) is too short, and it is. How can it be otherwise in a mere 48 pages? What Nicolle manages to do, and exceedingly well, is bring the Hanse at sea to a much wider audience, and I suspect interest medieval land wargamers in naval matters. He considers the important, and often overlooked, role of the Hanseatic cities in ship design and development, from the basic open hulls of the late Viking era, to the Cogs and Hulks, a tale repeated elsewhere, but neatly dealt with here. The Hanse, of course, created the concept of the armed merchant cruiser, and actually stipulated by decree the weapons Hanseatic League vessels must carry on voyage.

Nicolle examines the complexities of fleet command and of convoys, dealing with outstanding commanders such as Simon of Utrecht, who captured the notorious pirate chief Stertebeker. He deals with the role and use of seamen and soldiers, including mercenaries, of which there were many, and then moves on to deal with sea battles and the problems of handling a fleet in action. He dips, fleetingly, into some actions like the 1143AD fight between the English and Hanse ships off Belle Isle. His mention of riverine operations is very short, and

centres on the well known 1474 AD Rhine fight between Burgundy and the Hanse, which involved an incendiary ship.

The book ends with the 15<sup>th</sup> century problems of the Hanse: piracy and privateering, and the internal and external conflicts, which were virtually impossible to avoid in such a large, loose-bound structure. There were wars with Castile and with England and the problem of short-lived, but highly troublesome Burgundy. The Hanse, of course, was involved in the Wars of the Roses, purely for financial reasons rather than dynastic, and Nicolle rather than tracing the steady decline of the business on land and at sea, ends with Ivan the Great's 1494 expulsion of the Hanse from Novgorod and all Russia. As good an historical point as any to end on.

The plates are, as mentioned earlier, mainly sea-linked, with marines and sea-soldiers and shipmen forming the subjects. Yet, only one plate, D, deals with "Ships & Flags," providing four examples of Hanse vessels and 11 emblems, mainly the well known red and white variants and designs, though Riga was a white Maltese cross on a black field.

He portrays four vessels, the *Early Kogge*, *Kogge*, *Holke* and *Kraweel*, all better known, of course, in the English form of the terms! The first of these can, I think, be represented on the table top in "war" format by the new 1/600<sup>th</sup> Peter Pig Norse vessel, with very little work on the hull. While the second, the Cog, clearly a trader here, might be created from one of the several manufacturers models, simply with the forecastle removed -- a feature frequently found, if only for variety, in many model fleets. The third, Hulk, looks like the Navwar Cog, though, of course, size varied significantly, the Danzig Hulk of the late 1400s was big. The last ship, the caravel type, is three masted. I made a number of these many years back from the old Airfix Santa Maria, the small one, not the larger one still on sale! There is a problem, at least for me, in the depiction of these ships. Their provision on the wargames table, with a little thought and effort is not hard, but their appearance is so *drab*! A little colour on the hulls, and we know that medieval ships were often painted, and an emblem on the sail, along with the compulsory Hanse streamer from the mast head might do much to impress the non-naval reader. My own Hanse fleets all have painted sails, or at least small city emblems. My Hamburg ships have red sails, my Lubeckers are white over red, and my Rostock and Wismar vessels are banded red and white. Streamers and shields abound. Nicolle gives ample examples of shield and pavise designs and emblems in the other plates to embellish "family" vessels.

Medieval warfare on land was colourful, and I've always held, as Tom Coveney did, though it might be criticised by a few, that war at sea was no less vivid. Why would it not be?

The book ends with a page of Further Reading, which is broadly general, and provides several articles and books of significant interest.

10/10. Well worth buying.

