On Monday 11th August 1511 at the halfinsel Hela on the northside of the Bay of Danzig an event took place that has been called de grootste ramp in én eeuw tijd als gevolg van oorlogsgeweld in de Oostzee. (Sicking). Or stronger yet, the worst catastrophe ever suffered by Western European shipping in the Baltic. (Glete)

Background

The political situation in the area was rather unstable or maybe better characterized as chaotic. Ten years earlier a Swedish rebellion had broken up the Union of Kalmar, (Denmark, Norway and Sweden under one king,) and war and peace had followed each other in rapid succession.

The leading Hansecity Lübeck from the beginning claimed its right to trade with Denmark as well as Sweden, but then for some years supported the Danish king Hans, and therefore had to discontinue the Swedish trade.

In 1509 then Lübeck resumed the trade with Sweden. In the resulting war Lübeck had the support of only a few fellow-Hansecities. The Danish king had support from among others the Dutch provinces whose merchants he had supported as useful competitors to the Hansecities.

Lübeck had good reasons to change side in 1509. Early that year the German emperor had issued a decree banning all trade with Denmark for all his subjects.
Because of Dutch protests the emperor lifted the ban a year later. Lübeck, however, took no notice of this and informed the merchant-towns in the provinces of Holland, Friesland and Zeeland that any sailing through the Sound would involve the risk of losing ship and goods.

And it did. Warships and privateers from Lübeck took Dutch as well as Danish ships passing through the Sound. They even bombarded Elsinore; but the only casualty is said to have been a cat's broken leg.

Danish King Hans in return issued letters of marque to anybody who as kapers would give him 25% of the value of ships taken in return.

"To a large extent the sea had the character of a violent and lawless frontier zone." This conclusion from a book on warfare at sea in the 16th and 17th century describes well the situation in the Baltic Sea during these years.

The catastrophe

Once or twice every year a convoy of 2-300 Dutch ships came to the Baltic to buy grain. - It was such a convoy that suffered the disaster at the Bay of Danzig in 1511 on its return voyage.

The convoy had arrived to the Baltic in spring as at least two separate convoys.

In May a big convoy arrived at the Sound and was escorted from there by a squadron of Danish warships into the Baltic. The agreement seems to have been that the convoy should gather again at Danzig to be escorted from there by the Danish warships through the Sound.
In the meantime the Danish squadron during June raided along the Baltic coast.

In that same month then another convoy came from Holland through The Sound to The Baltic, this one protected by four Dutch warships, which had been equipped in Amsterdam, Zierikzee, Hoorn and Edam, paid for by a lasttoll.

The four warships followed the convoy to the Baltic where they left the merchantships to go to their different destinations, while the warships probably spent their wait until return as privateers. At least a source says that Dutch udliggere (warships/kapers) caused great damage in the Baltic.

Late July the merchantships began to gather for the return voyage. In a letter dated 24 July a merchant from Lübeck writes to a fellow-merchant in Stockholm that 130 ships were gathered at Danzig still waiting for ships from Riga and Reval. It was thus common knowledge in Lübeck that a big convoy was gathering near Danzig.

Just two days later 18 warships set sail in Lübeck with a twofold purpose 1) to destroy the Danish fleet and Lübeck thus be permanent master of the Baltic Sea, and 2) to take or destroy the Dutch convoy and thus regain the full superiority of trade in the Baltic.

A report from the Lübecker admirals of the fleet tells the story: The fleet first went for the Danish fleet, but was delayed at Rugen waiting for three ships from Stralsund which did not show up, so after four days the fleet set sail without them, sending three ships as scouts to the Sound to find out where the Danish fleet was. A storm forced the Lübecker fleet to go to
Bornholm and hereto the scouts returned on Friday August 8 with the news that the Danish Fleet was at anchor in Copenhagen.

But early the next day the Lübecker fleet at anchor near Sandvig on the northeastern coast of Bornholm saw the Danish fleet coming around the Island and a battle took place all day with no clear victor. The Danish fleet stayed at Bornholm, the Lübecker fleet gathered on high seas expecting the battle to go on the following day.

The weather would, however, not allow a continued battle, so the Lübecker fleet sailed for its second goal.

Although the admirals say that it was a dangerous storm that sent the fleet away from Bornholm to the coast north of Danzig, so that almost by accident on Monday August 11 they found the convoy waiting there, protected only by the the four Dutch warships and a long (Danish) bardse, the information seems doubtful, taking into consideration that the existence of the convoy was known in Lübeck, before the warships left the city.

The expected ships from Riga and Reval had in the meantime arrived and also ships from Denmark, England and Hamburg had joined the convoy, so that more than 250 ships were gathered.

The protecting warships at first seemed ready to attack the Lübecker fleet, but then fled for the superior power together with some of the merchant ships. And then the rest of the huge convoy was left to the mercy of the Lübecker fleet.
The sources differ considerably as to what happened then. The admirals say that some ships ran ashore and was set on fire, others were abandoned by their crew and just ready to be taken and man by the Lübeckers who manned more than thirty ships. - A letter written a fortnight later from Lübeck says that 50 ships were taken, some set on fire and the rest escaped. - A local chronicler says that 40 ships sunk, 60 was set on fire, at least 20 fled, and the rest was taken, but also talks about only 18 Prize ships. All later sources build on these contemporary witnesses, but whatever the number was it was a real catastrophe for the Dutch trade in the Baltic.

The value of destroyed or taken ships from Amsterdam and Horn alone is said to have been 120,000 ponds/gyldens. The material loss was thus huge. Ship's owners and merchants lost at lot of money. There was, however, also an extensive loss of human life.

If we imagine that half of the convoy was taken or destroyed and their crews killed or drowned in their futile attempt to escape or were taken as prisoners, and that these ships had an average crew of 15 men, we are talking about more than 1500 Dutch homes which was affected by the loss of husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.

One could ask then, why the Danish fleet did not follow the Lübecker fleet from Bornholm, at once? The reason could be the three ships from Stralsund which did not show up in time to join the Lübecker fleet. They arrived at Bornholm the day after the battle. Two of them was taken by the Danish fleet, one escaped; but this situation could well have delayed the Danish
fleet by a day, so that in the end the ships from Stralsund might have been of greater help to Lübeck than if they had joined the fleet in time.

At any rate the Danish fleet first came to Hela on August 14. The Lübecker fleet and their prizeships had not yet left, so it came to a renewed battle, during which the Danish admiral's ship got its rudder destroyed and had to stop fighting, and the rest of the fleet took it as a signal to do the same, so the Lübecker fleet got away with their prize-ships.

What followed?

The disaster added to already existing tensions between the two hanseatic cities, Lübeck and Danzig. A month or so before the disaster Danzig who did not support Lübeck in the war against Denmark had made an agreement with Lübeck. Danzig must not allow hostile warships to operate in Danzig's waters. In return privateers/warships from Lübeck must not take ships in the waters of the city. It was important for the city to stay neutral as it was the main grain-exporter to Holland.

Only one day after the disaster the city therefore with reference to this agreement demanded the Dutch ships to be returned as they were taken in Danzig's waters. - A month later Lübeck just answered that they were taken in open waters (in der wylden Ze).

Lübeck, however, had also another and even worse problem. Quite generally because the emperor as already mentioned had ordered free trade in the Baltic for his subjects. But then also specifically, as some of the ships taken were carrying copper belonging to the Fugger
bankiers in Augsburg, whom the emperor owed so much money that they could declare him broke if they wanted. He therefore demanded full and immediate compensation to the Fuggers for these ships.

In The Netherlands, of course, the disaster created a shortage in grainsupplies for some time, and the council of Amsterdam subsequently issued a ban on trade through the Sound.

In Lübeck an annual thanksgiving-service was instituted on the day of the battle at Bornholm August 9; but even before the first anniversary of the victory was celebrated, Lübeck on 23 April 1512 had to make peace with Denmark. In the peace-treaty Lübeck as well as the Dutch provinces had their privileges confirmed. Both parts were allowed to sail freely in Danish waters, but must not fight therein, and Lübeck had to pay a huge sum over the next 12 years to the Danish king in war reparations.

Conclusion

The disaster for the Dutch convoy thus was a pyrrhic victory for Lübeck and contributed to the ongoing decline of the power of Lübeck and the incline of Dutch trade in The Baltic.

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