

Stein Collectors International, Inc.

German Student Societies, History and Traditions A Bibliography by Walter B. Vogdes



There are many reasons why stein collectors may be attracted to steins decorated with the coats of arms of German student societies. The complicated *Wappen* (coats of arms) are colorful and somewhat mysterious. They may include the 4F symbol of the Turners, or a harp to signify music, or the crossed oars of a rowing association. The Munich Child and the Berlin bear are among the many civic emblems that sometimes appear in the *Wappen*. Many display crossed swords reminding us of the student custom of sword fighting to prove one's courage. Most student steins also include a dedication, either on the body or inscribed in the pewter of the lid. Beer was an important part of German student life and ritual, and the exchange of beer steins between two *Bierbruder* was a high honor.

Whether made of stoneware, porcelain or glass, steins displaying a student association coat of arms (fig. 1) are commonly hand-painted and of quite high quality. This makes sense when we realize that they were commissioned by affluent students to be exchanged with someone with whom they had forged a lifelong bond. No mere souvenirs, these beautiful steins!

The origins of the German student societies stretch back to the 12th century, when the first European universities were formed in Bologna and Paris. Young men who spoke the same language and perhaps shared some family ties found protection by banding together. The first "German" university was founded in Prague in 1348, and it included four student organizations, at that time called *Nationes*. Still reflecting ties to a shared homeland, these groups were named for Bohemia, Bavaria, Saxony and Poland. Since those early days the societies have diversified quite a bit, but they still cling to centuries of tradition and ritual.

So how is a stein collector to learn about these beer steins and the student societies which have provided them for us? "The Beer Stein Book" includes some illustrations, but no narrative. Surprisingly little has been written on this topic in *Prosit*. And while there is a wealth of information available about German student traditions, customs, ritual and history, almost all of it is in German, frustrating the American collector. This article is intended to serve as a guide to available literature for those who wish to do some further investigation in this field.

One word of caution before we begin: like most complex subjects where we depend upon observation to develop insights, generalities are subject to being proven incorrect. Different associations followed different practices, and what was true for one society might not follow for another. If you keep an open mind and an observant eye you will be amply rewarded in your study of German student associations and their steins.

English Language Articles. SCI Master Steinologist Ron Heiligenstein wrote an excellent introductory article about student steins which appeared in the March 1987 issue of *Prosit*. The subject then went largely untouched in *Prosit* until my article in June 2003 ("What does Panier mean and what can you tell me about my student stein?", p. 1456). Both of those articles discuss the Wappen and the *Zirkel* (special insignia), as well as some of the practices of student societies.

"The Beer Stein Journal" contained two excellent articles by SCI member Andreas Hofferek, himself a lifelong member of one of the student associations. In "Student Association Steins" (Feb. 1995, Third Issue) he writes about the *Zirkel*, the Wappen and some of the practices and history of these associations. In a second article ("Deciphering Student Association Symbols", August 1995, Fifth Issue) Hofferek explains how to read and interpret the sometimes cryptic dedications we find on student steins.

Books. "Howitt's Student-Life of Germany" is a narrative description of German universities, student life and history, translated to English "from the unpublished MS of Dr. Cornelius". First published in 1842, it was penned during a period of struggle for personal freedom and political unity following the German victory over the French in 1815, but prior to the German Revolution of 1848 and the Franco-Prussian war which ultimately led to unification in 1870. In its 468 pages the book touches on virtually every topic associated with universities and student life. It includes the lyrics for almost 40 of the most popular student songs, and translates "The General Biercomment of Heidelberg" (30 pages of instruction on how one is to conduct oneself at a student beer bash!). This book is hard to find, and expensive, but worth searching for.

"German Universities" by James Morgan Hart was published in 1874. In it the American author provides a first person account of his attendance at German university (Göttingen). Although not a member of a student society, Hart does relate observations of their traditions, including sword fighting, in it 398 pages. This book is also hard to find and expensive.

The last English language book which I mention is "Dueling, The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany" by Kevin McAleer. Dueling, in this book, means the act of two parties seeking to resolve a difference by means of weapons. While this is not an accurate description of student sword fights, the student readiness to take up the sword in fierce combat contributed in no small way to the culture of dueling in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Although not written in English, the determined collector will not let language get in the way of using any of three auction catalogs focusing on *Studentica* (the artifacts, including beer steins, with which students surrounded themselves). These hard-cover catalogs are loaded with illustrations of beer steins and related items, each with a description. The first is titled "162. Auktion Studentica" and was published by Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer in 1991. Two years later Hubert Kampik published "Studentische Antiquitäten", to be followed in 1995 by another catalog with the same title. These

are excellent pictorial reference works, and can occasionally be found in a used book store in Germany, or on eBay.

Hofferek points out in one of his articles in "The Beer Stein Journal" that "it is very difficult to determine the association and the location of the university on most of the student steins because there is no complete reference guide" to the 4,000 different associations which at one time existed. While this remains true, there is a work which depicts over 1,600 student *Wappen*. "*Das Akademische Deutschland*", volume 4, published in 1930/31, is extremely hard to find and very expensive. (One sold in Gary Kirsner's auction at the SCI convention in July of 2003 for more than \$2,000!) Most of us will not be adding one to our personal library any time soon, and you are unlikely to find it at your local library, but there is an alternative—the 1993 Kampik catalog mentioned above includes a reproduction of the entire set of illustrations from this book. That catalog usually sells for over \$100.

Peter Krause has authored at least two editions of "*O alte Burschenherrlichkeit*". This well illustrated book offers a historical treatment of student societies, from their beginning to modern times. I mention both editions because although they contain much of the same material, they are also quite different, and I have decided to keep both of them in my own library.

"*Gaudeamus igitur, Die studentischen Verbindungen einst und jetzt*" by Paulgehard Gladen is another well-illustrated historical treatment of student associations.

"...*Weiland Bursch zu Heidelberg...*" edited by Gerhart Berger and Detlev Aurand deals exclusively with Heidelberg. In addition to a broad historical treatment, each society in Heidelberg is treated separately.

Student Writings. The German student associations do an excellent job of preserving their own historical records. Because membership in these societies is for life, and the ties of brotherhood remain active, they celebrate anniversaries of important events with large get-togethers. At these times they publish *Festschrift* documenting the history of the association, including historical information about its members. It is therefore sometimes possible to find the name and some biographical information about a student who is named on a particular stein! One caution - if you are tempted to start to acquire some of these things, be warned - there are hundreds if not thousands of them!

Postcards. Another excellent source of information about the associations and about student life is postcards. A *Coleurkarte* is a postcard whose primary illustration is the association *Wappen*. Many times these cards are signed by all of the current members of the association. Some *Coleurkarten* show all of the *Wappen* from a particular university, while others show typical idyllic student life, silhouette portraits, drinking, or sword fighting scenes. Each provides just one more glimpse into German student traditions.

Internet. Finally, although there are not many sites on the Internet offering a broad treatment of student societies, most of the associations which exist today have their own web site. This is sometimes a means of identifying an association by matching their *Wappen*, or if you have a specific question to ask, you may be able to initiate an email correspondence with a current member of the association.