

From The Reading Room of *Stein Collectors International*

~ Student Association Steins ~ by Master Steinologist Walt Vogdes

This article uses an amber glass stein enameled with the emblems of Corps Bavaria to introduce the topic of student association steins. More commonly made in porcelain or stoneware, these colorful, historical and somewhat mysterious steins are very collectible.

A student association stein is one which displays the insignia for the German student society. These steins were frequently given as gifts, in commemoration of friendships, or in honor of the special relationship between a mentor and a student. At one time there were over 4,000 student associations in the universities of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia and other nearby regions. Today, approximately 1,000 are still active.

Universities have always been hotbeds of strong debate and political expression, but never more so than in Germany, where during the early part of the 19th century the student associations encouraged nationalism and resistance to Napoleon's domination. The members of these societies took inspiration from the early Germanic tribes which fought the Romans over German rule. Many of the associations engaged in the practice of dueling, although not all of them, by any means. Those that did required their members to engage in at least one duel before they were granted full membership status.

Dueling with sabers was a means by which the students were able to demonstrate their manhood, courage and willingness to take up arms in the interests of Germany. Duels, fought between "brothers" of the same fraternity, were held as a ritual, and the participants were judged on the way they conducted themselves during the duel. Duelists were to be combative and strike fierce blows at their opponents, but when struck themselves, were to stand firm without flinching. Cuts were frequent, probably more so because they were a badge of honor. So much was this the case that salt or another substance to retard healing would frequently be rubbed into the wound to promote scarring. A facial scar, or Schmiss, was an important symbol of belonging. Fencing, on the other hand, did not involve cutting your opponent, and was practiced as a sport.



The German student associations surrounded themselves with the symbols, trappings and emblems of their particular association. We now look at the Zirkel, shield and coats-of-arms with which their steins were typically decorated.



What is a Zirkel? This is the term for a symbol or cypher which was especially designed for each student association. These symbols are based on letters of the alphabet, but they are combined in a unique flowing script, with the letters intertwined. In many cases the Zirkel is made from one unbroken pen stroke, although that is not the case with the Zirkel shown to the right. The first letter of the association name (e.g., Bavaria) may be used as the basis for the symbol, or the University name may be used (e.g., RC for Ruprecht-Carls-Universität of Heidelberg). The letters c, v and f are always included, sometimes in obvious fashion (like the f and the v in the Zirkel to the right),

other times only by suggestion or visual suggestion, as the c-shape in the vertical stroke to form the B. These letters stand for the Latin words *crescat, vivat and floreat*, or grow, live and flourish. An exclamation point also frequently appears, representing the Latin symbol for eternity, expressing the enduring bonds of brotherhood and fraternity.



Student associations also developed their own coats-of-arms which, in keeping with heraldic tradition, had as their basic element the shield. The shields were typically quartered and sometimes contained a smaller additional shield super-imposed at the center (the fess point in heraldry, the "heart-shield" in German terminology). The shields almost always displayed the Zirkel, but included other symbols pertaining to the origin, location and interests of the particular chapter, as well as the colors they displayed on their clothing and all other paraphernalia of their student life. The associations which engaged in dueling competition displayed crossed swords on their shields. Other

interests which may be incorporated into these shields include singing and athletic competition (4F). The shield also commonly includes the date the association was founded, along with a wide variety of additional letters and symbols.

The entire coat-of-arms, called a Wappen, is much more elaborate. The beautiful enameled coat of arms appearing to the right appears on the amber glass stein illustrating this article.

The Zirkel, shield, and colors seen here belong to the dueling association *Corps Bavaria* of Munich. In keeping with traditions of heraldry, the shield was normally surmounted with a jousting or knight's helm, surrounded with tattered mantling, and topped with a crest. The crest is typically comprised of two to four feathered plumes, and both it and the mantling display the colors of the association (appropriately in this case, white, blue and white for Bavaria).

This glass stein also shows the phrase "Bavaria sei's Panier!" above the coat-of-arms. This phrase simply means "Bavaria is our banner!" (Note: this expression refers specifically to the name of this association, not to the state of Bavaria.)

There is no complete record of the Wappen and Zirkels which these associations used, and they are frequently difficult to identify.

All aspects of these insignia were a source of pride and brotherhood, and the Zirkel was frequently used as part of a student's signature, especially on anything related to student life and friendships.

Steins were frequently inscribed as a gift from one association member to another. These gifts may have been between student "brothers", or between a mentor and a student, or between members of two different associations who had formed a special bond, perhaps as a result of a duel. These inscriptions may be handpainted on the sides of a stein, or on the inside of a porcelain inlaid lid, or may simply be engraved in the pewter rim of the lid. Inscriptions normally include the date, the names and the Zirkels of the parties.

It is also common to find the pewter rim of a student stein has been deliberately cut or nicked, sometimes to both the right and left of the tang. Popular speculation interprets these marks as indicating the number of duels fought, or the number of cuts given or received in a duel, but no specific rules for these marks are known.

References:

- * German Fraternity Steins, Ron Heiligenstein, Prosit, March 1987.
- * Student Association Steins, The Beer Stein Journal, February 1995.

Revised April 2002 to use correct terminology for the separate parts of the coat-of-arms, or Wappen.

