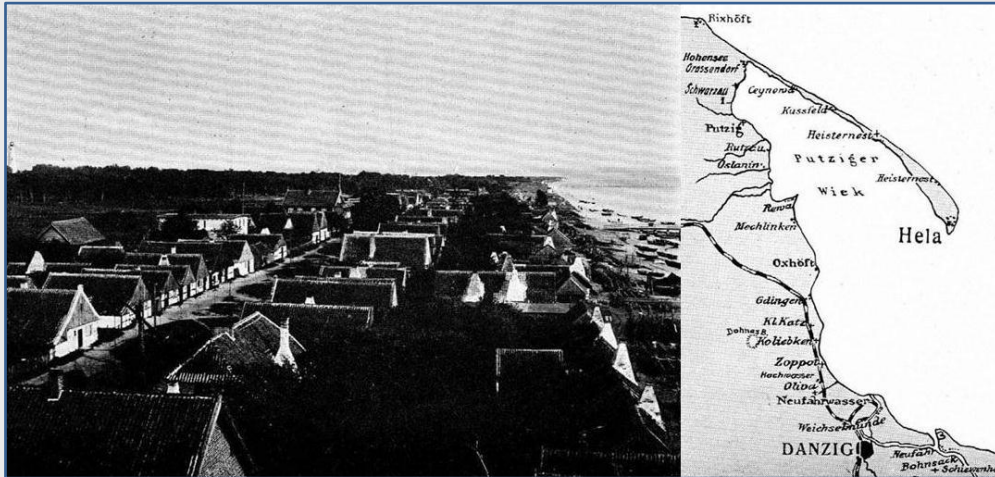


Hel – A Medieval Merchant Settlement?

by Gunnar Hallmann

The following text is about the history of the town of Hel (Ger. *Hela*) which is located at the southern, Polish coastline of the Baltic. Hel lies at the end of the peninsula of the same name which is enclosing the Gdansk Bay (Ger. *Danziger Bucht*) in the north.



Panoramic view of Hel and location map [1]

If you are visiting the holiday resort of the town of Hel today, you will find charming small half-timbered houses along the main road and a brick-lined church, rededicated to a museum. Houses and church were formerly a fishing village and have now become a tourist attraction. Nobody could and would have imagined that this fishing village, whose history stretches 750 years into the past, was in fact an up-and-coming merchant settlement – the germ cell of the medieval trading town Hel – rooted in the German town of Lübeck.

One of the earliest documents on Hel is the town charter of 1378. The Teutonic Order confirmed the already existing city rights and counted the duties to be paid. Merchants and fishermen, who were engaged in the herring catch in a medieval form of subcontracting system, had to pay as well as butchers, hawkers, shoemakers, tailors, bakers and innkeepers. In addition to two churches a town hall, a prison, a hospital, a cattle market, a school and 7 inns are mentioned. Therefore during the 14th and 15th century Hel was a center for herring catch, herring trade and fish oil production, which corresponded in its importance to that of Scania, the peninsula at the southernmost tip of Scandinavia. In addition, Hel was a gathering point for ships participating in long-distance trade between Gdansk, Lübeck and Novgorod. Possibly and with seasonal fluctuations up to 2,000 people might have been living on the Hel peninsula – a significant figure for the Middle Ages. Step by step, after the reconstruction of Gdansk from the middle of the 14th century and with the gradual migration of herring in the 15th century, Hel lost much of its importance. Finally, the merchants had to leave Hel at the middle of the fifteenth century, when Gdansk rulers absolutely banned competing trade in Hel. Mostly fishermen remained, who proudly described themselves as 'citizens & skippers' until the 19th century.

Over the centuries, Hel was constantly subjected to the rigors of the forces of nature and history. The city was devastated countless times, and the fishermen again and again rebuilt their city in a rough-and-ready way with what they still found. The houses of the merchants and craftsmen turned gradually to fishermen's houses. This did not detract from the spirit of the inhabitants; they preserved the history of the city in an oral tradition and kept its civic pride. Anyone who is inspired by the idea of the Leipzig geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who about 100 years ago recognized that one can read the time in space, will probably experience a different, not anticipated past.

¹ Image: SEEGER, Pfarrer: *Hela – Geschichtliches und Kulturgeschichtliches*. In: *Mitteilungen des deutschen Seefischerei-Vereins* No. 4. Moeser. Berlin 1910.



Panorama of (New-)Hel – seen from the peninsula [2]

The historical interest in Hel arose in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Gdansk's rulers, who had partly kinship relations with the inhabitants of Hel, began to deal with the town of Hel and its past. It was not until the end of the 19th century that interest reappeared, but this time in all scientific fields. There are still inaccurate traditions and theories about the origin of the city of Hel, especially since Hel has never made it easy for its admirers. The first assured written reference to Hel is on a document dating from 1351. [3] During the Middle Ages Hel was a twin town consisting of the old town (Old-Hel) – which seems to have completely disappeared from the ground – and the new town (New-Hel), the still existing small town. This new town, however, is also very old. It was probably founded around 1250, [4] consisting only of a single street, on which the houses were arranged on both sides in uniformly divided tracts of land. The road between the houses is very wide, and later was a lane of lime trees, two draw-fountains, and a bell-tower. At the north-western end of this road on the quayside the church and the parsonage were situated. According to Karlheinz Blaschke and Uwe Ulrich Jäschke, who examined the urban structure in the vicinity of 500 St Nicholas churches in all of Europe, this form of settlement corresponds precisely to the settling-form of merchants operating in long-distance trade in Western Europe since the Carolingian period:

It's consistently about street-shaped sites, which consist of two rows of houses running parallel to one another ... One can see in the complete integration of the church into the row of houses the idea of creating no inequality, and also of not elevating the priest's house ... over the community of the 'village-companions'. [5]

This type of settlement of the merchants was already called in the 12th century 'merchant settlement' (Lat. *colonia mercatorum*). The customarily used patronages (choice of the patron saint) for the merchant settlements changed over the course of time, but the form of housing schemes of the merchants remained unchanged. The St Nicholas patronage was popular from 1087 [6] until the middle of the 13th century. Subsequently the St Peter's patronage dominated in addition to the universal patronage of the Virgin Mary. The merchant church in Hel, which still exists today, originally had a St Peter's patronage, which was extended to St Peter and Paul in the fifteenth century.

2 Image: SCHULZ, Karl: *Tutti Frutti in malerischen Original-Radirungen mit Text*. Approx. 1871. ULB Düsseldorf.

3 This is the founding charter of the confraternity of St Catherine (*Katharinenbruderschaft*). According to a later document, this brotherhood was already founded in 1311 and 1333 respectively.

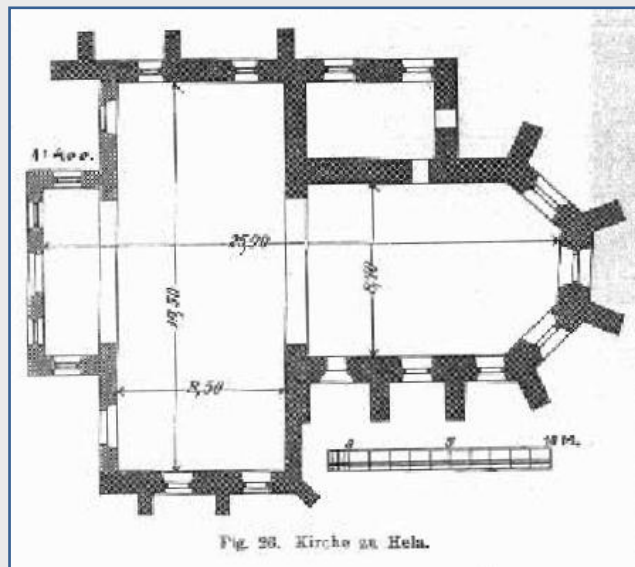
4 For example, the city of Memel was founded in 1253 by merchants from the German city of Dortmund, so that the New Town of Hel was probably founded in the same time.

5 BLASCHKE Karlheinz, JÄSCHKE, Uwe Ulrich: *Nikolaikirchen und Stadtentstehung in Europa – Von der Kaufmannssiedlung zur Stadt*. Berlin 2013.

6 In 1087, the bones of St. Nicholas were taken from Myra to Bari, Italy, whereupon a cult of St Nicholas spread throughout Europe.



St Peter and Paul Church in (New-)Hel [7]



Floor plan of St Peter and Paul Church in (New-)Hel [8]

The merchants at first joined together in guilds, since individuals were not yet equipped with sufficient capital to cope with a risky enterprise such as the long distance trade. They often went with a clergyman to ask for the assistance of God but also because the clerics were literate:

The wandering priest as a companion of the merchants on their trading journeys is a familiar phenomenon in the Baltic region beginning with the figure of Saint Ansgar who accompanied Christian merchants to Sweden around 830 and ending with Meinhard from Segeberg who has been sailing across the years as a merchant priest before he decided to evangelise the Livonians around the year 1170. Additionally Helmold von Bosau mentions in his Slavonic chronicle that a priest Gottschalk joined the merchants to the herring fishing to Rügen around the year 1170. It is certain that here the model of the Novgorod merchant priest, who also had to perform scribe services, took effect. It may be supposed that many of these clergymen have emerged from the ranks of the merchants themselves . . . [9]

7 Image: SCHULZ, Karl: *Tutti Frutti in malerischen Original-Radirungen mit Text*. Approx. 1871. ULB Düsseldorf.

8 Image: HEISE, Johannes: *Die Bau- und Kunstdenkmäler der Provinz Westpreussen*. 1st Vol.: Pomerellen mit Ausnahme der Stadt Danzig. Danzig 1884.

9 JOHANSEN, Paul: *Die Kaufmannskirche im Ostseegebiet*. In: *Studien zu den Anfängen des europäischen Städtewesens*. Reichenau-Vorträge (1955-56). P. 499-525. Vorträge und Forschungen Vol. IV. Sigmaringen 1958.

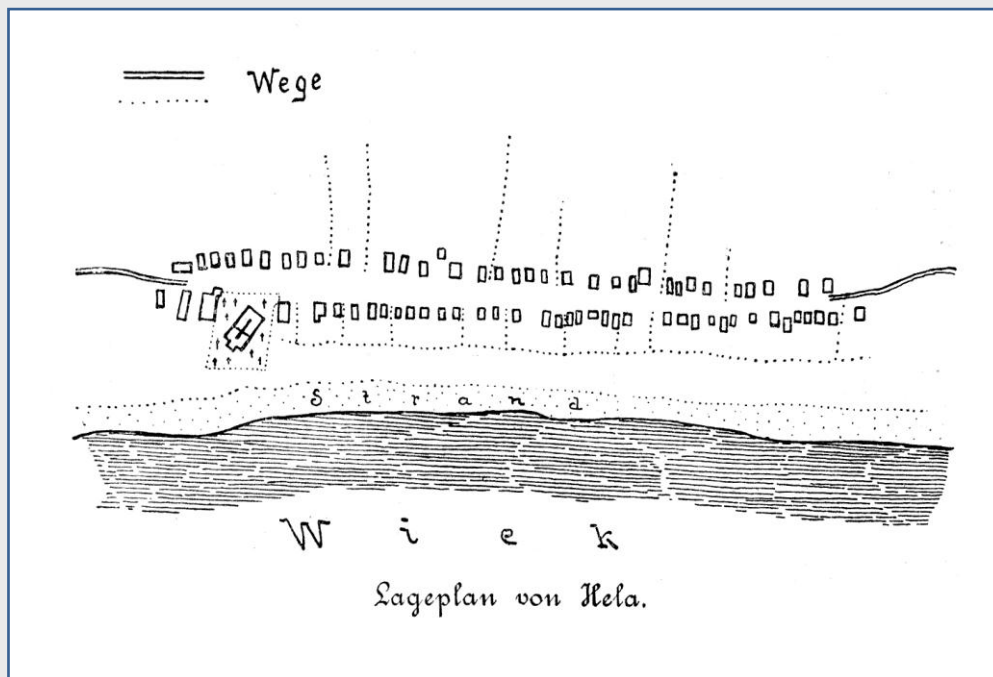
Founding a merchant settlement the merchants negotiated privileges with the corresponding sovereign which was partly agreed simply verbally. The merchant settlement was a pre-democratic community in its beginnings, before it developed to the city and received city rights:

The merchant settlement is not village, but not yet city. ... In the merchant settlement there are no differences of rank, no mayor, no city council and no outstanding jurymen but only coequal members of the community who gather in the church community under the roof of the co-operative's own church. [10]

The size of the Hel settlement also corresponds to the general size of merchant settlements in the Middle Ages. Blaschke and Jäschke assume an average size of 50 houses and about 250 inhabitants. At the time of the Prussian occupation in 1793, Hel had 66 fire places and 296 inhabitants. [11] Even though in 1793 Hel was only a fishing village with a town charter, the resemblance to the merchant settlement in form and size is nevertheless astonishing. According to Blaschke and Jäschke the city of Bergen in Norway is also a prototype of the German merchant settlement of the Middle Ages:

The houses are situated there along the quayside, which makes them resemble the midland merchant settlements. The 'Bryggen', which lie in front of the coastline, is to be understood as originally built in the water terminals ... The St Mary's church was built further westwards with the growth of the settlement to a chartered town ... With the temporal juxtaposition of the St Nicholas and St Mary's church in the urban outline, the city of Bergen embodies a prototype of German trading cities of the High Middle Ages. [12]

The similarity with Hel is surprising. It may also be that the coastal line in Hel served as well as a wharf for the ships.



Location plan of (New-)Hel of 1904 [13]

10 BLASCHKE Karlheinz, JÄSCHKE, Uwe Ulrich: *Nikolaikirchen und Stadtentstehung in Europa – Von der Kaufmannssiedlung zur Stadt*. Berlin 2013. P.26, P.28.

11 BAHR, Ernst: *Das Territorium der Stadt Danzig und die Danziger Hospitalgüter bei der Preußischen Landesaufnahme 1793*. 2nd Vol. In: *Sonderschriften des Vereins für Familienforschung in Ost- und Westpreußen e. V. Nr. 57*. Selbstverlag. Hamburg 1987.

12 BLASCHKE Karlheinz, JÄSCHKE, Uwe Ulrich: *Nikolaikirchen und Stadtentstehung in Europa – Von der Kaufmannssiedlung zur Stadt*. Berlin 2013. P.54.

13 Image: WÜNSCHE, Ernst: *Studien auf der Halbinsel Hela*. C. Heinrich. Dresden 1904. P. 28.



Panorama of (New-)Hel – seen off shore [14]

The old town of Hel, which has disappeared, was certainly already present, when the German traders came to Hel and settled there. This settlement of Old-Hel can hardly have possessed a town charter. The settlement of new, competing merchants, almost within a stone's throw away from the existing settlement that is inside of the possible town boundaries, required the consent of the landlord, and if the old town had possessed city rights, it would have required the breach of the town's charter. [15] At the beginning even the new settlement probably had no town charter, but the merchants, must have received certain privileges from the sovereign together with the permission to settle. As seen in so many other towns along the Baltic seaside, the merchants from Lübeck were able to surpass the local traders within a short time. So it is to be assumed that the new town overtook the old town of Hel quickly. Old town and new town, however, were not completely separated from each other. In 1378 the Grandmaster of the Teutonic Order awarded the town's charter. [16] Hel had a standing council with 12 members, presumably from both districts, old town and new town. The Church of St Peter in the new town was the main church while the Church of our Lady in the old town was subsidiary. There was a market, a town hall and a hospital. Where these were situated is unknown. The new town of Hel probably had the leading role quickly as it is to be assumed that the merchants living there were financially stronger. Hel was granted Lübeck law opposed to the custom of the Teutonic Order. [17]

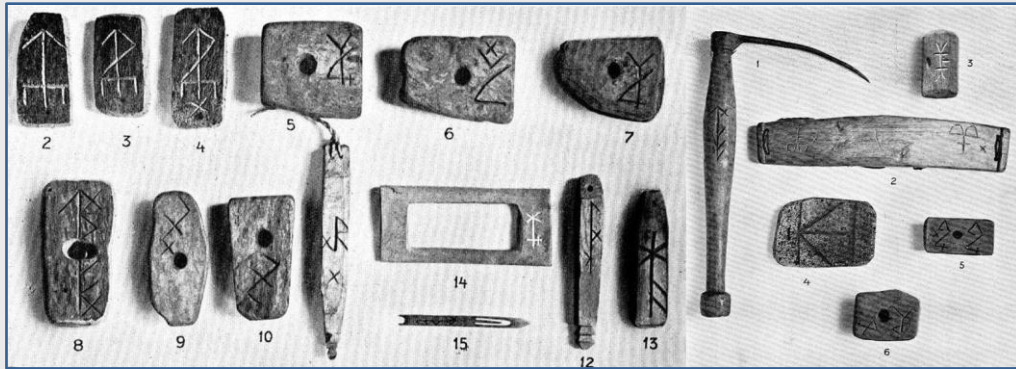
In addition to this fact, however, further indications are pointing to a Lübeck origin of the Hel merchant settlement. The primal St Peter's patronage of the church in Hel probably originated from the patronage of St Peter's Church in Lübeck. In addition, until the beginning of the twentieth century the fisher families of Hel – who spoke a unique Low German which was similar to the Mennonite Low German – used so-called fisher marks to characterize their equipment and their goods. These fisher marks are also probably originating from the Lübeck law. Moreover, the cooperative organization of the fishermen of Hel, which continued to the twentieth century, probably dates back to the self-organization of the medieval guilds of the merchant settlement of Hel.

[14] Image: SCHULZ, Karl: *Tutti Frutti in malerischen Original-Radirungen mit Text*. Approx. 1871. ULB Düsseldorf.

[15] The emergence of new settlements in the neighborhood of existing settlements was not unusual in the Middle Ages. So there were also merchant settlements, which emerged adjacent to villages with Slavonic population.

[16] From the founding charter of the confraternity of St Catherine of 1351 it is clear that Hel already had a city council at that time and therefore must have possessed municipal rights.

[17] The Teutonic Order usually granted Kulm law (Kulm = pol. Chelmno).



Hel fisher marks [18]

The citizens of Hel - skippers and fishermen - were able to defend their town charter until the end of the 19th century and thus held a lonely record: From 1793 to 1872 Hel was the smallest city in the Kingdom of Prussia! In 1872 the last mayor, Jakob Eller, died whereupon the Prussian government decided that Hel was a "rightly existing rural commune" [19]

About the author:

Gunnar Hallmann is 51 years old and lives in Düsseldorf, Germany. His main occupation is architect. He dedicates himself to the history of the Hel peninsula and operates the webpage www.halbinsel-hela.de together with other amateur historians.

18 Picture: SEEGER, Pfarrer: *Hela – Geschichtliches und Kulturgeschichtliches*. In: *Mitteilungen des deutschen Seefischerei-Vereins* No. 4. Moeser. Berlin 1910.

19 SEEGER, Pfarrer: *Hela – Geschichtliches und Kulturgeschichtliches*. In: *Mitteilungen des deutschen Seefischerei-Vereins* No. 4. Moeser. Berlin 1910.