

# Seals and Coat of Arms of the Town of Hel

by Gunnar Hallmann

The present-day city arms of Hel (Ger. *Hela*) is a yellow standing key, flanked on the right and left by two yellow stars on a blue background. On earlier representations the stars were painted silver and the ground light blue. It is the only city arms on the Hel peninsula and has a very old age and can be traced back to the medieval seals used by the town council of Hel.



City arms of Hel [ 1 ]

In the past, many documents with seal imprints were found and also the two seal stamps were still kept by the town principal until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Both of these are round seals used by the town council of Hel.

## The grand seal of the town council of Hel



Grand seal of the town council of Hel [ 2 ]

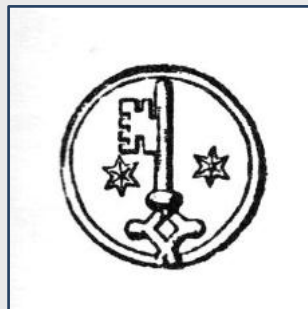
The grand seal of the town of Hel clearly represents the apostle Peter holding the key to paradise in his right hand and a crown in his left hand. St Peter is flanked by two vines, which may symbolize the Garden of Eden. This scene is enclosed by a gothic four-pass ornament and a circulating script with a cross. Undoubtedly reference was made to the largest and most important building in the city, the Church of St Peter, whose patron saint was St Peter. Apostle Peter is marked with a key as an attribute according to

**1** HUPP, Otto (1913-1918): *Kaffee HAG* collection stamp.

**2** Image: VOSSBERG, Friedrich August (1843): *Geschichte der preußischen Münzen und Siege*, Berlin, G. Fincke. Tablet XVIII.

the Christian iconography. The key is also a symbol for the pope as the successor of Peter and representative of God on earth. The crown in his hand is presumably a Christian martyr's crown since Peter found martyrdom in Rome. The gothic four-pass is a symbol of the unity of the four Gospels in each of which one characteristic of Jesus is highlighted: humanity, royal power, priesthood and divine nature. The inscription on the seal reads: " + • S • CONSULIS • TERAE • HELENSIS " (*Seal of the council of the country of Hel* whereby *S* is the usual abbreviation for Lat. *Sigillum* which means seal). The writing is made of Gothic majuscules which suggest a manufacture before the middle of the 14th century. [3] For the first time its imprint can be seen on a document from 1414. At the time of the creation of this seal, the church of St. Peter must already have been consecrated. The construction period for a church is difficult to estimate since it depends on many factors, such as weather and natural events, epidemics, space on the construction site, accessibility of the place and the financial resources of the donors. The construction of the larger Doberan Minster lasted for 74 years (from 1294 to 1368) so that it can be assumed that the construction of the Church of St Peter in Hel needed approximately 50 years. The Brick Gothic spread in northern Germany and the Baltic Sea from the middle of the twelfth century, so that the period between 1260-1300 appears to be plausible as the beginning of construction of the Church of St Peter in Hel. Consequently as well, the age of the grand seal would have to fall into this period.

## The counter-seal



Counter-seal of the town of Hel [ 4 ]

The second more rarely found seal, also called *Counter-seal*, is also circular and became the basis for the today's coat of arms of the city of Hel. It appears for the first time on a document from the year 1500 and shows a standing key in the center, which has a six-pointed star on either side. The key is a symbol of the patron saint Peter and the Church of St Peter. The six-pointed star is a so-called *Stella Maris*, a *sea star*. This star symbol often occurs in heraldry and is a symbol for the Virgin Mary. For example, such stars are also to be seen on the city arms of Hamburg, on which the Dome of St Mary is depicted and is marked by the two stars as consecrated to Virgin Mary. *Stella Maris* is an invocation of Virgin Mary under which she is patron of the sailors. It symbolizes the salvation star which directs sailors as well as all Christians on the *sea of life*. The *Stellae Mari* could also point to a worship of Virgin Mary in Hel since the miraculous image of Virgin Mary, which is today in Swarzewo (Ger. *Schwarzau*), was at times probably located in Hel. An additional reference to a possible beacon would also be conceivable. Why two stars are represented here can only be imagined; perhaps merely for reasons of symmetry or as an allusion to the twin city of Hel. After Gdansk (Ger. *Danzig*) attained the possession of Hel in 1454 the Gdansk magistrate established that Hel was to receive a reeve and twelve counselors, probably six from Old Hel and six from New Hel. This seal must also have been created before 1482 since the Church of St Peter was renamed before St. Peter and Paul and a symbol for the apostle Paul is missing on the seal (Paul was often depicted with the attributes book and sword). In this simple seal, therefore, Old Hel and New Hel, the Churches of St Mary and of St Peter, the patron saints Virgin Mary and St. Peter are symbolically depicted so that the citizens of both cities are represented.

3 ANSORGE, Jörg: *Mittelalterliche Siegelstempel aus dem Fürstentum Werle* [online], URL: [www.academia.edu/1959220/Mittelalterliche\\_Siegelstempel\\_aus\\_dem\\_F%C3%BCrstentum\\_Werle](http://www.academia.edu/1959220/Mittelalterliche_Siegelstempel_aus_dem_F%C3%BCrstentum_Werle). [14.05.2015]

4 Image: VOSSBERG, Friedrich August (1843): *Geschichte der preußischen Münzen und Siegel*, Berlin, G. Fincke. P.49.

## A medieval bracteate



Bracteate (presumably Hel, 13th-14th Century) [ 5 ]

In his book on the Prussian coins and seals, published in 1843, Friedrich August Vossberg might not believe that this bracteate came from the town of Hel. Bracteates are medieval pennies made of thin sheet metal and embossed on one side only. There is, as Vossberg rightly states, no indication that the town of Hel once possessed the right to mint. Nevertheless, there are occasional examples of medieval coins that were minted in places that had no right to mint. Since the late 13th and 14th century were the heyday of the town of Hel and the town began to develop into a place of pilgrimage, this bracteate probably came from Hel and was coined there.

## Civic pride and religion

The two seals of the town council of Hel are a time-typical expression of the urban bourgeoisie developing in the Middle Ages and emancipating from the noble rulers. The merchants and artisans in Hel were presumably to a large extent of Lübeck origin. On the one hand the seals of the town council stands for civic pride and a legal status which must be achieved and preserved and which was confirmed by the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order in 1378. On the other hand, they also show how inextricably the medieval man was connected with religion in his world-view and his everyday actions. The church buildings were donated by the citizens. They were not used solely for religious cults but were also the meeting place for the merchants organized in the guilds. They were the repository for contracts, jointly managed cash funds and the storage yard for trading goods. The church buildings were probably used for meetings of the city council. Even after the construction of a town hall, the city council convened in front of every assembly in the church for worship. As expressed in the council seals, citizens, church and patron saints formed an inseparable unity.

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**5** Image: VOSSBERG, Friedrich August (1843): *Geschichte der preußischen Münzen und Siegel*, Berlin, G. Fincke. Tablet III.