

SOURCE: *Nance, R. Morton. "A Hanseatic Bergentrader of 1489." The Mariner's Mirror 3 (June 1913): 161-167.*

A HANSEATIC BERGENTRADER OF 1489

By R. Morton Nance

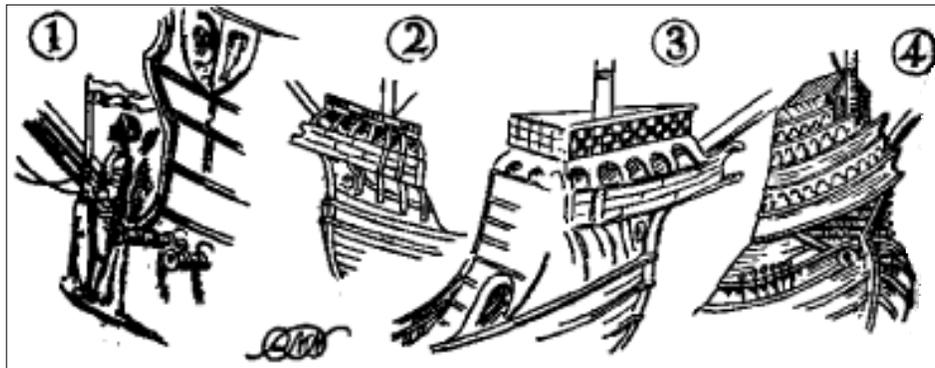
Just as in the seventeenth century the fine merchant-ships of the Dutch, and in the nineteenth those of the British and American shipbuilders, showed examples of masterly ship-construction that were so widely copied as to make their style well-nigh universal, so in the fifteenth century, while the Hansa ports of North Germany were sending forth the greatest and best found fleets of merchant ships in North Europe, the influence of German fashions must have been felt by the shipbuilders of all countries that came within their range, and the absence of any

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trustworthy model or picture of a German ship of this time would leave a sad gap in ship history.

Failing such a record of these vessels amongst the treasures of the *Schiffergesellschaft* of Lübeck, or of the Bremen Rathaus, one might well despair of finding it; but the fates that preside over nautical relics have in this matter been kinder than we had any right to expect, for in the Marienkirche at Lübeck is to be seen a painted panel dating from the fifteenth century that shows us several ships flying the white-and-red of Lübeck.

The principal amongst these ships, as an inscription tells us, came to her end by shipwreck in the year 1489; but fortunately for us the gratitude to Heaven of a survivor took the happy form of this *ex-voto* painting, which preserves for us not merely his own sentiments, but the scene of his danger and the ship herself, as yet showing, beyond some losses in masts and rigging, no signs of her impending dissolution.



The hull of this ship, though intact, shows us between the water-line and the castles very little detail; we see, indeed, the mighty curve with which her stem sweeps up from her keel beneath the break of the forecastle, answered by the bold sheer of the wales as they run fore and aft along her sides; but her stern is so blurred that only from her age, and from the sterns of other ships painted in the background can one infer that it is round. Above this meagre hull, however, there is much interesting detail in the "cage-work" of the fore and after castles. There are, of course, no lidded port-holes cut for guns in the hull, a round dozen of years must pass before this could be possible if Decharges of Brest right has the credit for inventing them in

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1501 (Jal disputes this, p. 1302, of his *Glossaire Nautique*), nor do we see any guns mounted in the waist, where perhaps they would be carried by warships only; but each castle has its tier of round-headed, lidless ports, and from each port runs out a long, many banded cannon, so that, without counting the half-dozen or more of them that might be in the cowbridge-heads and right astern, we can bring their tale up to thirty-eight. The arrangement of these port-holes seems to show a marked advance upon that in some other ships of supposedly similar dates, and from these less developed vessels we seem to see how such rows of round-headed ports came into being. Two of these, the kraeck of W.A. and a Mediterranean carrack, already illustrated in THE MARRINER'S MIRROR, have the light superstructure of their poops and forecastles supported on curved stanchions that, standing quite bare, are obviously but a development from tilt-frames such as we see in these and older boats, a light deck with bulwarks, and in turn defended by nettings, taking the place of the earlier netting or tilt. The Warwick MS. (B.M. Julius E IV.) shows some ships with cage-work of this type (Fig. 2), but another type is also shown there, one that is even better exhibited in the pictures of Carpaccio, and is probably the Genoese carrack, and in this (Fig. 3) we can see the next stage in the development of these round-headed ports; for here, by the addition of spandrels at their upper corners, the free spaces between the curved stanchions have become arched openings that need only to be a little reduced in size, by planking that still further covers the original stanchions, to become a tier of round-headed ports arranged like those of our Lübecker. Through the sixteenth century, and until the beak-headed galleon had finally prevailed over the ship of medieval tradition, we see in the "cage-work" of high-carged sea-castles, like those of Peter Bruegel (Fig. 4), tier over tier of these round-headed ports; and even when their origin was long forgotten they remained as a favorite form of decoration.

In the after castle of the Lübeck ship we have a great advance upon the arrangements seen in the above-mentioned carracks, such a simpler and heavier poop would hardly seem out of place on a ship of even fifty years later; but although the pavesade runs unbroken along the bulwarks above, we seem to have, in the disposal of the portholes, a hint that, below and within, this stern castle may still be divided, like those of the carnoks, into halves that are differently decked or fitted, for, abaft and forward of a solitary shield, we have, respectively, three large ports and

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five smaller, the smaller ones coming just where one might expect to find the lighter transversely planked "half deck" that would necessitate guns of smaller calibre. The space in which the smaller gun ports are cut, like the corresponding part of the forecastle and all the shields that defend and decorate the after-castle, is painted in the white-over-red colors of Lübeck: the chanwale, with its tangle of shrouds and deadeyes, would probably have come immediately below it, but this has been left out, an omission which allows one to suppose that the single skid in that position, looking alone so unequal to its harbor duties of warding off the bumpings and raspings of wharf-piles and dangling freight, may stand as representative of a cluster, like that fixed below the chains of W.A.'s carrack.

The waist of this ship, owing partly to the over-sized figures that sliding to safety along the mainyard, hide from sight what might be there, shows us neither guns, *Kubrugge*, nor any other detail, and the forecastle cowbridge-head hides itself entirely. This lack of interest in the waist is, however, well made up to us by the forecastle, where we have, all painted with care, a paveside, forechains, and a remarkable figurehead. The shields of this paveside are painted with the arms of the Bergen traders, who, remembering in their pride the humble foundation of their fortunes, chose as their arms, dividing the honors with half of the imperial eagle that we saw on the *Adler* ("M.M." Vol. II., p. 153) a silver stockfish that, actually, they crowned with gold, although on this paveside the crowns seem to be missing. It was, then, upon a Bergen voyage, after the savory stockfish, that this unlucky ship was engaged when she got among the rocks.

The modern-looking, round deadeyes, each with its chainplate of iron held by a single bolt to the ship's side, are not, as they stand, sufficient to set up the rigging; either the shrouds should have passed through them to be again made fast to their own standing part; or, and this seems more probable, the upper of two deadeyes with the connecting lanyard has in each case been left out here, as in other instances, (see illustration "M.M." Vol. II., p. 284, Figs. 3 and 4) but no holes are shown in them.

The figure head takes the form of a warrior, armed cap-a-pie. (Fig. I). He seems at first glance as swarthy as a Saracen, and what is probably a wreath around his helm might well be a turban; but these suggestions are belied by the Lübeck colors of his lance-pennon and even more strongly by the eight-pointed (St. John's?) cross upon his shield. He stands between us and the bowsprit, upon the other side of which some brush-marks may

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faintly indicate a second figure. Were this the case, we should have a purely decorative anticipation of the more utilitarian "Knighthead" that were to take up a similar position in eighteenth century ships: against the probability of twin figure heads, however, is the fact that the bowsprit would not at this time have been stepped in line with the keel, but would have had its heel abaft and beside the mast, and passing beside the stemhead would have come out just where the second figurehead should stand, in the lop-sided fashion, shown in Figs. 2, 3 and 4, that was only abandoned in the early seventeenth century, upon the removal further aft of the step of the foremast. Behind this figure head the sides of the forecastle meet at a sharp angle, the timber that forms their profile showing a series of well-contrasted curves.

Coming now to the rigging, it is clear that the artist was in too great haste to paint that of the foremast, perhaps because the foresail that flaps its parted sheet into a figure-of-eight knot gave him another opportunity to display in its folds the knack of painting floating draperies that he had acquired by long practice at sacred subjects such as form the chief motive of this picture. He has, at all events, covered, in painting the upper part of the forecastle, a considerable part of this sail and also obliterated part of each shroud. His haste, perhaps, has prevented us from finding here any detail beyond the commonplace. We note, though, that, in contrast with the carrack's bare shrouds and jacob's-ladders, the shrouds here are rattled, and that the usual halliards are present at the bowsprit end.

The disorder of the main rigging is left to our imagination; but we see, circling the main mast where its rapidly tapering girth is greatest, the parrel of the main-yard, and we can almost hear the crash of the heavy main-top as it tumbles into the midst of the aftercastle.

The main-mizen snapped off just above its lateen yard by the falling wreckage of the mainmast, bears a small round-top with a short topmast and white-and-red vale like those of the foremast; besides the slackened shrouds there are some ropes that fly off into calligraphic flourishes, one of which, starting beneath the top, may be a parted stay.

Right aft is the bonaventure-mizen, headless, and without visible means of support, in the shape of shroud or stay; its yard, like that of the main-mizen, has depending ropes that may be brails or vang. The bonaventure sheet runs down to a long, low-placed outlegger, around which winds some gear that gives

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handhold to one of the shipwrecked crew. All the yards, like those of W.A.'s carrack, are painted as single sticks.

In the mind of the painter the figures, of course, provided the chief interest, and of these the ships company were of secondary importance. We reverse his process and, putting the ship first, come now to the sailors. The chief amongst these seems to be the person having a bonnet upon his head and around his neck a chain, perhaps the golden chain by which the whistle of command should hang, a lighter weight than that of the mariner who is seen clinging to it with the grip of one who has but one hope of life. Behind and supporting this be-capped officer is a man who also has round his neck what may be a chain, by which we seem to see that the old rule – captain last to leave the ship – was adhered to by the Easterlings of 1489. It is remarkable that no boat appears in the picture. Ship boats, when not towed astern may have been practically useless in an emergency, with such tackle as they then had, for they would probably lie deep down in the waist, covered with gratings that might become in turn cumbered with a jumble of gear and merchandise; the vessel, too, is so closely beset by the rocks of the shore, that the mainyard dropped a portlast makes a bridge to one of them; yet many of the crew, including the ship's dog, are afloat on boxes, barrels or hatches, while many more are swimming or drowning unaided. One wonders if a law such as those by which sixteenth century Spanish and Portuguese Indiamen were forbidden to carry boats, as an incentive to greater care of the ships, was in force in the Hansa fleets of the fifteenth century.

Although the air-borne figures furnish, with the shipwreck and escaping crew over which they hover, the main interest of this panel, no part of it is allowed to remain empty. The painted, following the convention of his day, seen at its best perhaps in the tapestries that it produced, has, without any attempt to delude the spectator into the belief that he is looking at an actual scene, tried rather to fill as pleasantly as he could the space allotted him. To avoid great sky-spaces he has placed his horizon very high, and has distributed the interest as evenly as possibly over his panel without care for exact perspective. The small space of sky is here reduced still further by the two scrolls that bear legends descriptive of the wreck and the pious conclusions to be drawn therefrom. The sea with its high set horizon gives room for more ships, of which we have several in various postures. Of these lesser ships none would seem to be a sister ship to the wreck, which with her bonaventure-mast seems to be

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the most important of the fleet, but they are of some value as giving a few of the details that are wanting in the great ship ashore, one, stern-on, showing not only the rudder and the full-length of the outlegger, but also a glimpse of the forecastle arch, while others supply such missing parts as the main rigging with its chainwale, the mainstay (in one ship having a stay-tackle upon it), and some braces and lifts that are not shown in the wreck. The mizzen lifts are led to their own mast heads and seem to be used in conjunction with vang, an arrangement that in the light of other evidence seems improbable; but we have a bit of correct detail that is warranted by other pictures in the short staves, fixed at the fore part of the tops, from which float the great white-and-red streamers.

In all these Bergen traders we see nothing that at once distinguishes them as merchant vessels, and in the larger class of traders at this time there would probably be no such distinction. If they are "hulkes of the Easterlings" they in no way resemble Bruegel's "Flemish hulks," unless, indeed, the heavy build of their poops would be thought enough to give them a common name; for all have forecastles and are rigged in the height of the fashion of their day. That ships of such size should be engaged in a coasting voyage of no great length seems strange; but the rocks, shoals and storms were not the only foes that they might meet between Lübeck and Bergen, and the stock-fish trade was one well worth guarding. If an early seventeenth century model in the Church of St. Mary at Bergen is, as there is every likelihood of its being, a Hanseatic Bergen trader, our *Bergenfarher* of the fifteenth century is neither greater nor more warlike; for this model, in a wonderful state of restoration ahead and aloft, has two tiers of guns and upper and lower quarter galleries with side turrets, the latter being decorations rarely found on any but the largest ships (Fig. 5).

