

# **The Early German Settlement of North Eastern Moravia: and What the Pied Piper of Hamelin Had to Do with It**

**by Frank Soural**

Long ago, primordial forests, dark and impenetrable, surrounded the mountainous frontier, which today separates northeastern Bohemia from large parts of northern Moravia in the Czech Republic. This area was situated north of the sparsely populated flatlands of the March (Morava) River. The stillness of the forests remained largely undisturbed by man.

More than two thousand years ago, the Celts and other Germanic tribes had their settlements there. They built their longhouses in the valleys. Most, however, moved on leaving little evidence except a few shards and burial urns and perhaps a few remnants of human existence in the early villages.

During this period, the ancient “Amber Road”, dating back to antiquity, was the primary trade route linking the eastern Baltic Sea with the Danube in Vienna and the port of Trieste in Italy. This road - a trail would be a more apt description - wound its way through the Moravian heartland near where the cities of Olmütz and Mährisch Trübau stand today. Except for the sparse trading traffic and a few way stations between the odd monastery and baronial estate, the land remained essentially pristine and silent.

The first attempts at colonization may have been orchestrated during the late middle ages by Heinrich Zdík (1126-1150). Zdík was the seventh in a long line of bishops of Olmütz. Surviving documents indicate that, around the seat of Zdík’s Bishopric, several villages were established. Nimlau, Meedl, Bladowitz, Habicht and Müglitz were among these villages. It is possible that Müglitz may be much older than that. The name appears to originate from the Celtic word “mogul” meaning “burial mound”. This is reflected in the German name Müglitz, as well as its Czech equivalent Mohelnice.

In the middle of the thirteenth century the royal line of Přemyslid Kings in Prag, closely allied with their Bavarian neighbors, hoped to populate the vacant land in the outlying areas of the kingdom. Their aim was to supplement the royal coffers by exacting sums of cash through lease and rental income from the colonized land.

Although the settlements were sporadic at first, the crown soon discovered their value. Colonization was supported by every possible means, simply because it provided increased land defense along with providing economic benefits. By allowing the land to be developed, a permanent tax base, the so-called perpetual land tax, was assured.

Besides the crown, other landowners held vast tracts of unoccupied Moravian land. Among the other landowners were secular landed gentry who received land as a royal stipend for military services rendered or special favors performed. The Holy See in Rome, represented by the

Diocese of Olmütz, also owned large tracts. Each owner, for his own purpose, was interested in populating his fiefdom with young tenant farmers from the west, particularly Germany.

The local landowners soon followed the example set by their royal masters. After all, the virgin forests, aside from the occasional booty extracted from a successful hunt, provided no tangible income.

## **Upheaval and a new beginning**

The year 1241 brought total devastation to many of the villages whose inhabitants managed to cling to the soil and eke out a living. Some historians blame the destruction on the Tartar hordes that swept in from the eastern plain. Others maintain it was the result of a power struggle between the feuding brothers Wenzel and Premysl, sons of King Ottokar I, in their battle for dominance.

Meanwhile, the gently rolling hills of the local Schönhengst, Adler and Altvater mountain ranges provided excellent watershed that drained into the Zohse, Tess and the mighty March (Morava) rivers and kept the plains fertile, ready and waiting for human habitation.

This fact was not lost on Wenzel’s brother the Bohemian King Ottokar II. In an effort to enhance western influence and culture in his kingdom (and perhaps as a matter of convenience) Ottokar charged Bruno von Schaumburg and Holstein with the responsibility of colonizing the vacant vistas in northern Moravia with German settlers. Bruno was appointed Bishop of Olmütz in 1247. Ottokar soon developed a fondness for him and Bruno became a favored churchman in Ottokar’s court. In 1253, the King appointed him Chancellor. In this capacity Bruno acted as the king’s ambassador abroad and colonizer of the Moravian Markgrafschaft. (Margrave). Bruno maintained this position until his death in 1281.

It is evident that Bruno played a key role in opening Moravia to western settlers. He was the most prolific and successful bishop in Moravia. Not only do we know much about his origins, a wealth of information is known of his accomplishments. He has been given credit for creating a new and vigorous culture in Moravia.

Bruno founded over 200 villages and 12 cities under German city laws. Among these are Kremsier, Müglitz and Zwittau (known more recently as the hometown of Oskar Schindler). Each of these cities spawned dependent villages accountable to the city clergy, who in turn was accountable to Bruno’s Diocese in Olmütz. Zwittau was settled around 1250 and furnished with a parish. The first villages founded were Hermesdorf in 1266 and Heinzendorf four years later in 1270. The founding documents for both villages survive to this day.

### Settling of the Schönhengst district

Bruno's German birth, possibly in 1205, in the area of today's Lower Saxony put him in an excellent position to convince his own countrymen to follow him to the Moravian Promised Land. He brought with him tradesmen, farmers and laborers, their wives, children and animals. Judging by his accomplishments, Bruno von Schaumburg was no slouch. He was an ambitious organizer who learned his métier well during his 12 years as Governor of Luebek and Hamburg. Documents discovered during the 1920's state that he sometimes "rolled up his sleeves" and accompanied the settlers on their treks to the intended villages.

### The Lokator and his responsibilities

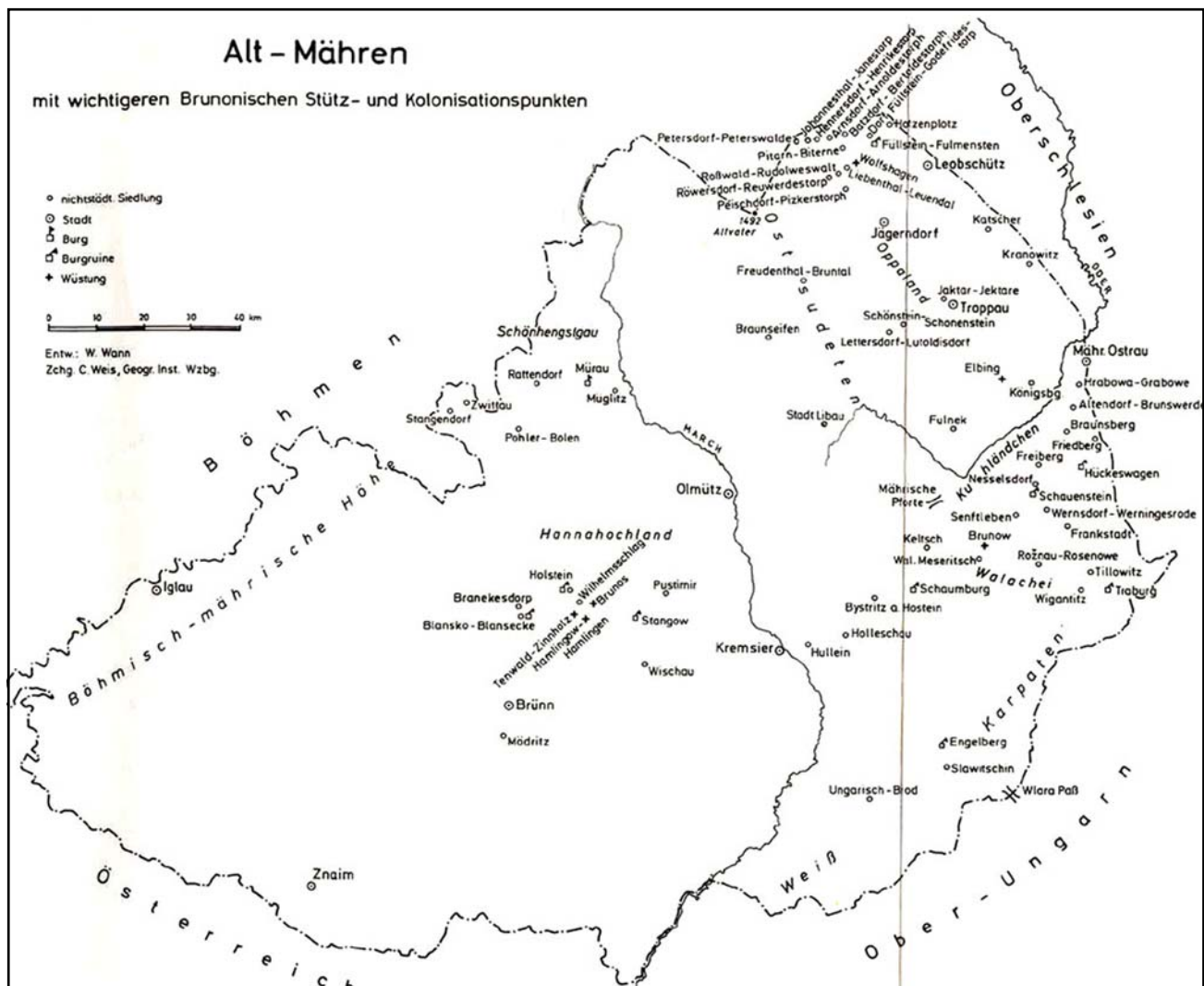
Bruno would charge an agent, known as a "Lokator" - usually some trustworthy acquaintance from his German Weser homeland - on his own behalf with the responsibility of recruiting people for colonization. The lokator sought those of good farming stock, who were suited for the hard work that lay before them, as well as assorted tradesmen to support a thriving farming community. To attract new

settlers the lokator had to look and be credible and offer incentives of free land and a tax holiday for several years. He also prepared them for their journey. Once they reached their farm allotments, the land had to be cleared and prepared for the new agricultural pursuits, stables and barns constructed and houses built for the families. The first years were filled with backbreaking work.

In payment for his work, the lokator received special pecuniary and legal rights in the newly established village. In most cases the locator was given jurisdiction to settle local disputes as "advocatus es iudex" becoming the "Erbrichter" (the village judge). He was also given the right to pass the responsibility on to his oldest son. Sometimes the new village would be named after the lokator. Petersdorf and Johnsdorf are two examples of this.

The founding of a village was documented in a brief issued by Bruno himself. The founding document for the village of Hermersdorf, one of the most noteworthy surviving documents of the German settlements in Moravia, exists today and remains in the hands of the family of the

*Fig. 1 - Map of Old Moravia by Dr Wolfgang Wann, showing names and locations of the early villages, some bearing their original names as vestiges of Bishop Bruno von Schaumburg's influence*



“Erbrichters” who had been the village judges for many centuries.

In this document Bruno proclaimed the name of the appointed individual, the benefits that came with the job and outlined his responsibilities. Here is an excerpt:

*I, Bruno, of Gods grace Bishop of Olmütz, to all who will read this brief, or will hear it being read, for all times. Because that, what happens in time, and often is forgotten in the passage of time, carefully through the writing of authentic documentation is preserved for the contemporary as well as future world. It is attested, that we have given the layperson Ulrich the right to development and jurisdiction of the village of Hermersdorf. A list of the locators rights follows and finishes with: So that the above allotted matter remains in memory for all times we are affixing our seal to render it effective. Given at our castle residence at Müräu on the fourth day of the Holy Trivirgine octave in the year of our Lord 1266.*

The villages of Hermersdorf, Glaselsdorf, Mohren, Rippau, Heinzendorf and Greifendorf are only a few in a long list of villages founded by Bruno von Schaumburg.

Bruno died in the year 1281 and was laid to rest in St. Mauritz church in Kremsier, a church he was instrumental in building years earlier. With the death of Bruno, colonizing of northeastern Moravia did not end. It is the subsequent history that takes a curious turn.

### The Pied Piper of Hamelin’s role

Nearly every child in the western culture has heard the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Masterfully crafted by storytellers in the 1600’s, it was later presented to us as the mysterious story spun by the Brothers Grimm.

The story tells of poor sanitary conditions that existed during this medieval period and of the rat infestation that occurred as a result. It tells of a mysterious piper, dressed in a multi-colored suit, who appeared from nowhere one day in 1284. This magical piper “piped” the resident rat population into the Weser River. The story tells of human greed and the shirking of payment for the good man’s trouble. The story goes on to tell us of the piper’s reappearance. This time he appeared as a grim-looking hunter wearing a wondrous red cap. He arrived through the Weser gate at 7 in the morning (some say it was at noon) on the 26th of June, on the day of Johannis and Pauli. Again he played his silver whistle. All over the city children who heard him play began to follow him. When he had gathered a large number of the children he led them through the Oster Gate out of the city. A young housemaid holding a baby watched them as the little band disappeared into Calvary (Koppen) Mountain, never to be seen again. There were 130 in all, including the mayor’s adolescent daughter. So much for the sad tale.

It is interesting to note that the fairytale does not begin with “once upon a time” but instead cites a year, month, day and time of the event. Many inquisitive historians noted this

curious aberration. Among them was the illustrious German Polyhistorian Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. In 1719, Leibnitz was approached by a colleague who claimed to have come across a handwritten fifteenth century document, describing “the abduction”, while rummaging through an archival Kodex in the city library of Luenenburg. Repeated attempts to locate the document were fruitless. And once again the story sank into the shrouding mists of time.

In August 1936, two historians, driven by personal interest and curiosity, riffled through the Kodex. This time the search was successful. One of the historians was Wolfgang Wann, archivist of the Sudetengerman town of Troppau. Wann was interested in locating the origins of his earliest ancestors and made it the subject of the thesis of his doctoral dissertation. The other was Heinrich Spanuth, historian and citizen of the city of Hamelin. On the very last page of the Kodex, written in 1460, they found the entry that describes the children’s departure.



Fig. 2 - Woodcut of Bishop Bruno von Schaumburg

*Notandum miraculum valde rarum, quod accidit in epido Hamelen...* it begins. “Listen up, a rare miracle, happened in the city of Hamelin, in the year of our lord 1284 exactly on the day of Johannis and Pauli. A beautifully accoutered young man of 30, whose posture and clothing engrossed everyone who saw him. Well, we know the rest “*Et mater domini Johannis de Lude decani vidit pueros recedentes*” And the mother of the Pastor Johannis de Lude saw the children leave.” This is what we know about the origins of the fable.

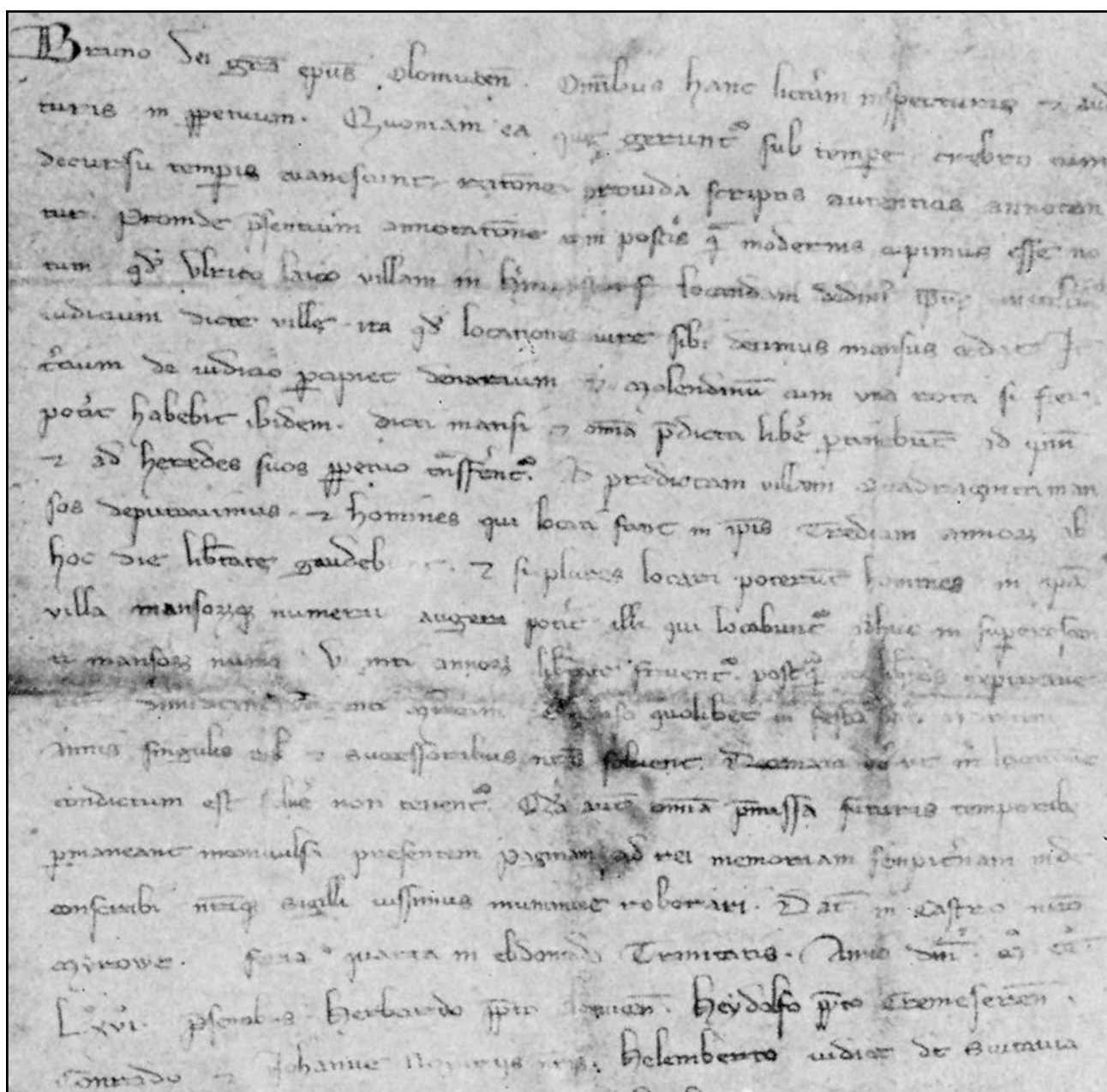
### **“Kaemmerlinge” servants of two masters**

Reality, however, paints a different picture. There existed at the time, in the city of Hamelin, a centuries old tradition of unlimited robot imposed on the lowest levels of Hamelian society. Robot was a form of taxation placed on insolvent peasants, in other words, free labor. The smallest farmers, described in the annals of Hamelin as “Kaemmerlinge”, had their tiny farms outside the city walls but lived in the city. They were obliged to provide robot to the Monastery St Bonifaz in Hamelin. When Hamelin became a city at the end of the twelfth century, the monastery feared that their own source of free and convenient labor would vanish. In a desperate move, the monastery retained the “robot” for itself, while the city of Hamelin also imposed

their own “robot” right. As a result, the Kaemmerlinge became servants of two masters and the workload became unbearable.

In the year 1284, the same year as the abduction, a group of overworked and defiant youths and young adults refused to comply with the monastery’s and the city’s demands for free labor during the spring field preparation. For this offense they were hauled before the city judge. The judge gave them a choice: either recant and resume the neglected duties or be excommunicated and banished from the region. None relented. One hundred thirty young people were excommunicated on the 3rd of May 1284. When a further period for atonement expired without response, the judge had no recourse but to declare them outlaws. This took place

Fig. 3 - Original founding document of the village of Hermersdorf, issued by Bishop Bruno, circa 1266



on the 17th of June. The pronouncement would have resulted in their banishment on that fateful day, nine days later, on the 26 of June 1284. The timeline fits and is confirmed to us in the following surviving passage:

*Post duo centos mille; post octogina quaterque Annus hic est ille, quo languet sexus uterque. Orbantis pueros centumque triginta Johannis Et Pauli. Caros Hamelenses, non sine damnis. Fantur, ut omnes eos vivos Calvaria sorpsit.*

“In the year 1284. This is the year in which people of both sexes grew weak and languished. The day of Johannis and Pauli, that has robbed us of 130 dear Hamelin children, not without judicial verdict, as it is said, swallowed by (mount) Calvaria”

### Then, who was the piper?

The most common belief is that there may have been two individuals responsible for coordinating the abduction: The piper, a commoner, decked out in a multi-colored suit, who accompanied them on their journey and a nobleman by the name of Achilles von Heimsen, the younger, from an old Lower Saxon noble family. He would have been qualified and in a position to negotiate the expulsion with the governor of the monastery. Historians speculate that his father Achilles, the elder, was already a close acquaintance of Bruno von Schaumburg who, years earlier, had cut all ties with his Weser homeland to settle in Moravia. It appears that the younger Heimsen was in town that year. It is recorded that his noble friends urged him to reclaim his father's abandoned estate. History suggests that he politely refused. That in itself lends credibility to the assumption that he was indeed a recruiting agent working for the Olmuetz diocese.

If we can believe historians, it appears obvious that the successor of Bishop Bruno must have had a hand in it. It would have been under his aegis that his agent organized and led the trek of the condemned to Moravia. The jury is still out on who this person was. One thing is certain; it could not have been Bruno himself, as he died in 1281, three years earlier.

In popular memory it was the piper who was remembered in the saga, as it was he that the good people of Hamelin saw leading the small band heading east towards Moravia.

### The Hamelin connection

In recent times, Wolfgang Wann's doctoral thesis is given credit for being the first attempt to relate the Pied Piper saga to the German colonization of the east. The documentary evidence Wann collected right up to his expulsion in 1945 from his homeland, and afterwards in Germany, has convinced many historians that he has uncovered the facts behind the fable. Today there is no longer any doubt that the abduction of the 130 children of Hamelin on that day in June of 1284 has its basis in historical fact. The abducted children, in reality, were young families, all children of the city. That this event was real is supported

by another tale that tells of common people in the city of Hamelin had started to count subsequent years in reference to 1284 as years after the abduction. This habit appears to not have carried over into the next Century.

### The villages

Bruno's legacy survived in the old village names, or variations thereof, right up to 1945 when they were converted to czech sounding names. According to Dr. Wann's research some relate back to the homeland of Bishop Bruno and the city of Hamelin. The map shown above, drawn by Dr. Wann, bears witness. In the Hannah highlands there is a Hamlingen (Hamlingow) an obvious reference to the city of Hamelin. Although, Wann does not say if the 130 Hamelin expatriates founded that village. Then there are villages that bear Bruno's name or that of his vassals. In Vallachia and the Hannah highlands there are Schaumburg, Schauenstein, Schonenstein, Schoenberg, Bruntal, Bruno, Brunow, Braunsberg, Braunseifen and Brunswerde, among others, all testifying to Bruno von Schauenburgs influence. Old established noble families who followed Brunos call also had their names preserved for posterity, like Grabowe now incorporated in the city of Ostrau and the city and fortress of Rosenowe, later known as Roschnau.

### Author's note

Researching the background for this story convinced me that Bruno von Schaumburg's accomplishments were truly astounding. And yet, all this remarkable history and colonial development was destroyed with the stroke of a pen. A decision, sanctioned by the allies of WWII, allowed the Czech Benesch Government of the time to disenfranchise the German population, many of them descendants of those that followed Bishop Brunos call, and expel them from their homeland of 800 years back to Germany. Indeed a strange twist of fate.



Fig. 4 - The Bishops seal, showing a youthful Bruno