

A COAT OF ARMS ON AN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FIREARM

by J.R. Alban

The *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg holds an extensive and magnificent collection of firearms from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Among them is the large handgun shown in *Fig. 1*, known as a *Doppelhakenbüchse*.(1) This was a double-sized version of the more common, smaller firearm known in German as a *Hakenbüchse*, in English as a hackbutt(t) or (h)arquebus, in Dutch as a *haakbus* and in French as an *arquebus*. The hackbutt first appeared in the fifteenth century and derived its name from the hook-like projection (known in English as a 'crochet') underneath it, which was used for steadying it against battlements or other objects when firing, the German term literally meaning 'hook gun'. Smooth bored, it was fired by the manual application of an ignited match to a touch hole, although, from the late 1470s onwards, some hackbutts were fitted with a matchlock mechanism operated by a trigger.(2)



Fig 1: Doppelhakenbüchse, c. 1520 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, W 3000).

This *Doppelhakenbüchse* has a copper alloy barrel, 920mm long, with a calibre of 24mm, mounted on full stock of blackened oak, 790mm in length. It was made in Nuremberg in around 1520 by the noted local gunmaker, Endres Pegnitzer, whose trademark letter 'P' is stamped on the outside of the barrel, at its top (*Fig. 2*).



Fig 2 Gunmaker's mark of Endres Pegnitzer of Nuremberg

Also embossed on the top of the barrel is a shield bearing as a charge a sword (*Fig. 3*).

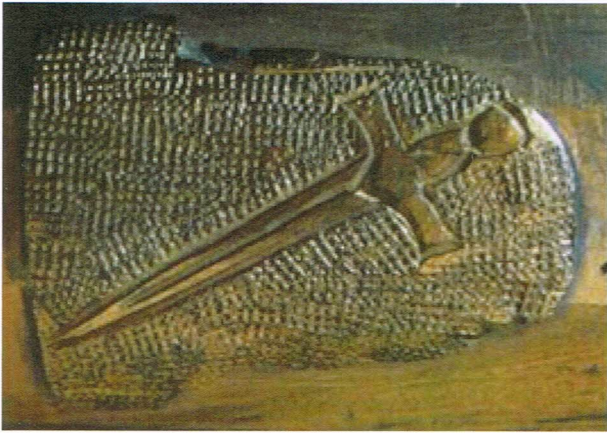


Fig. 3. Embossed shield of arms of Krefß von Kressenstein.

A coloured version of the same shield of arms is painted on the stock and is blazoned Gules, a sword, bendwise, its point in chief, Proper, hilted Or (the blazon in German is *In rot, ein schrägrechtsgelegtes Schwert mit goldenem Griff*). These are the well-known arms of the ancient family of Krefß von Kressenstein, a point reinforced by the fact that the shield is displayed between the forename and surname, *Cristoff Krefß* (*Fig. 4*), which appear on the stock, painted in gold lettering, in a Gothic script. The Krefß family was one of the oldest patrician families in Nuremberg and, over the centuries, its members have continued to play a significant role in many aspects of the history of Germany. Consequently, their arms are to be found in numerous places in that country and in Austria.(3)



Fig. 4. Painted shield of arms of Kreß von Kressenste in between the names Cristoff + Kreß.

The person named on the stock of the weapon was Christoph Kreß (or Kress) von Kressenstein (1484-1535), diplomat, war leader and councillor, who was a major figure in early sixteenth-century Germany, a warrior-statesman who played a central role, particularly in the realm of urban diplomacy.⁽⁴⁾ Born into a patrician family in Nuremberg, Bavaria in 1484, he was educated in Milan, Antwerp and London. In 1513, he was admitted to Nuremberg's city council as a junior *Bürgermeister* and, shortly afterwards, was sent on the first of many diplomatic missions, which, over the years, took him to the Imperial Diet and to royal and noble courts, both in Germany and beyond. He was heavily involved in the German Peasants' War of 1524-5, fighting in the bloody Battle of Böblingen, but also serving in the high-ranking position of war councillor to the Swabian League, the mutual defence and peace-keeping association of the Imperial Estates which, by 1525, had suppressed the revolt of the peasants and had also separately defeated an alliance of robber barons during the Franconian War of 1523. In 1530, Kreß attended the Diet of Augsburg, in a dual capacity, as an imperial councillor and as Nuremberg's emissary, acting as the city's most important negotiator during the debate over the adoption of the principles of the Reformation. In the same year he was one of the signatories to the so-called 'Augsburg Confession', presented by the Lutheran princes and the representatives of the 'Free Cities' in Germany. Kreß subsequently became chief councillor, then *Obrist*, or military commander, of Nuremberg, before his death in 1535.

An unfounded legend about this gun says that it was allegedly given to Christoph Kreß von Kressenstein by the Nuremberg authorities for supporting their campaign against the Franconian robber baron, Thomas von Absberg,⁽⁵⁾ in 1523, and this would appear, at first sight, to be borne out by the appearance of his arms and name on the stock. However, romantic though this story may be, experts in the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* have confirmed that there is, sadly, no evidence to support it. Moreover, they have also indicated that there is no absolute proof that the weapon was, in fact, actually owned by Christoph Kreß, since, in later centuries, the Kreß family declared several objects to be personal relics formerly owned by Christoph, without providing accompanying evidence.⁽⁶⁾ The inscription and the heraldic symbol on the stock may therefore possibly be a later addition, although the cast shield of arms on the barrel could be contemporary with the weapon. Many handguns of the early sixteenth century – in Germany and in other parts of Europe – were embellished with armorials, which were possible indicators of their ownership,⁽⁷⁾ so, while the heraldic decoration on this splendid *Doppelhakenbüchse* may perhaps have been added at a later date, marking up weapons in this way was a practice which would not have been out of place in the 1520s, when it was made.

Notes

- (1) Catalogue no. W 3000. I am grateful to Dr Thomas Eser, Collections Manager for Scientific Instruments and Medical History, Weapons and Hunting Culture at the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum*, for his advice and for supplying me with images of the weapon, and to the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* for permission to reproduce those images.
- (2) See J.M. van den Brink, 'A Late Medieval Hackbut', *Journal of the Arms and Armour Society*, vi (1970), 241-3; R.T.W. Kempers, 'Haakbussen uit Nederlands Beziit', *Armamentaria*, xi (1976), 75-97; translated as 'Haquebuts in Dutch Collections', *Journal of the Arms and Armour Society*, xi (1983-5), 56-89; R. Coltman Clephan, *An Outline of the History and Development of Hand Firearms, from the Earliest Period to about the End of the Fifteenth Century* (London and Felling-on-Tyne, 1906).

HERALDIC RUE

By Ron Fiske.

The Herb, Rue (*Ruta graveolens*) fills an important space in ancient medicine and local folklore. The leaves and seeds were used sparingly in infusions and decoctions in order to cure a myriad of complaints but were dangerous taken in large doses. It is bitter in taste and when handled can cause severe reaction in some people (1).

Rue was particularly noted by the Norwich Elizabethan, Robert Green, who has been described as ‘an excellent lyric singer, a fairly good dramatist, a first-rate novelist and a splendid delineator of manners.’ He was also a man who ‘dreamed dreams’ one of which took him on a journey through a flowered vale until he -

‘stumbled on a bed of Rue, that grewe at the bottome of the banke where the Time was planted; which fall upon the dew of so bitter an herbe, taught them that such proud peacocks as over hastily run out of their fortunes at last so speedily fall to repentance; and yet some of them smild & said Rue was called herbe grace, which though they scorned in their youth, they might weare in their age, it was never too late to say *Miserere.*’ (2).

The overall meaning is quite clear but some of his expressions will be returned to when we hear what his contemporary, William Shakespeare has to say. In *Hamlet* Ophelia says:-

‘There’s rue for you; and here’s some for me:

we may call it herb-grace on Sundays;

O, you must wear your rue with a difference.’

(3) No account of them has been written in English, but the standard work of reference is K.F. von Frank zu Döfering, *Die Kressen. Eine Familiengeschichte* (Senftenegg, 1936).

(4) For a biography in English, see J.W. Zophy, *Patriarchal Politics and Christoph Kress (1484–1535) of Nuremberg. Studies in German Thought and History*, 14 (Lampeter, 1992); see also E. Mummenhoff, ‘Kreß von Kressenstein, Christoph’, in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (56 vols, Leipzig, 1875-1912), li. 376-88, online version at [<https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/gnd119107767.html#adbcontent>].

(5) Thomas von Absberg (1477-1531) was a Franconian knight who made his fortune by kidnapping wealthy travellers and holding them for ransom. In 1523, the Swabian League destroyed his family castle, where he had held his prisoners, although he himself escaped, only to be murdered by one of his accomplices in 1531 (R. Schmalz, *Der Fränkische Krieg, 1523, und die Schuld der Sparnecker* (Bayreuth, 2005)).

(6) Items later attributed to him *via* the family include his feathered hat (*Barrett*), his sword and his memorial shield. See the relevant entries in the online catalogue of the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* at [<http://objektcatalog.gnm.de/objekt/T3784>] and [<http://objektcatalog.gnm.de/objekt/KG1091>].

(7) See, e.g., C. Blair, ‘Scottish Firearms’, *Bulletin of the American Society of Arms Collectors*, xxxi (1975), 61-101.

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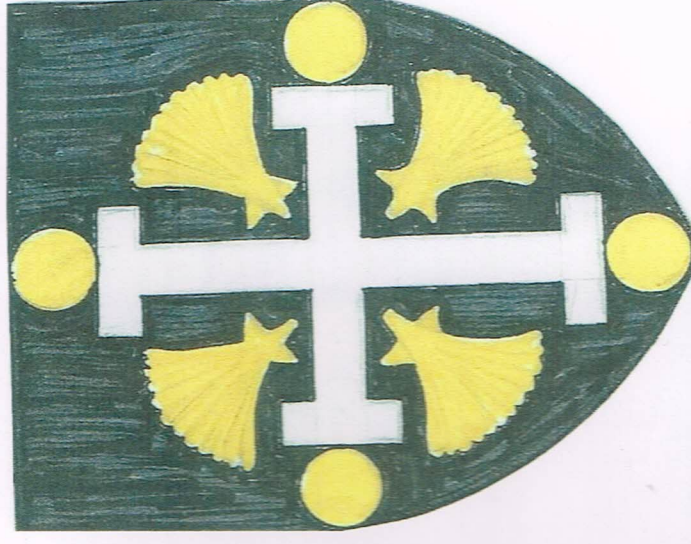
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