

Johann Rode (d.1477) and his brass at St. Petri Dom, Bremen, Germany



*Johann Rode, provost, 1477, Bremen, Germany (HKC.1).
(photo: © Henrike Weyh, curator of Bremen Cathedral Museum)*

The fine brass to Provost Rode is now mounted on a wall in St. Peter's Cathedral Museum, having been expertly conserved and rebated into an inert hardwood.¹ It measures 1860 x 560 mm and was originally set in a slate slab (*schieferplatte*) 3000 x 1900 mm, located near a font in the western part of the nave of the cathedral. The burial place of Rode is generally considered to be tomb 11, discovered in December 1973 in the centre of the western part of the nave between the 2nd and 3rd pairs of pillars. The grave itself was opened in 1974 revealing the remains of a clergyman wearing a rich chasuble but with no episcopal regalia. A scientific investigation concluded that the remnants of textiles probably came from the second half of the 15th century. Rode's nephew, Prince Archbishop Johann Rode III (Johann d. Jüngere) was buried to the east of his uncle and recorded in the *Ratsdenkelbuch* on 7th December 1511. The slab relating to Provost Rode's brass originally included a marginal inscription, long since lost. In 1766 Cassel asked his readers if anyone knew of the inscription. The text is not recorded and none of the German sources mention whether there were evangelical symbols in the corners. The slab itself was probably moved either prior to, or during, a major 19th century restoration of the cathedral and put in storage, with its whereabouts, if it still exists, unknown.²

The provost is attired in mass vestments including a very full chasuble, which together with a cushion as a headrest, is exquisitely, almost excessively designed, with pomegranate and pineapple motifs. The 'Y' shaped orphrey, amice and ends of the stole depict saints including SS. Peter and Paul on the shoulders, and below the hands what appears to be part of St. Thomas with a spear as his attribute and St. Bartholomew with his flaying knife. On the ends of the stole, probably St. Matthew with an axe, and St. Jude(?) holding a book and carpenter's square. Unusually his tonsure is stippled. He gazes downwards with a chalice on his breast with crossed hands below.³ The principal lines of the engraving are boldly incised. A shield blazoned with the Rode arms (*Azure, a winged jousting helm sinister Or*) is centrally

positioned just above the feet which rest on two playful lions.

The engraving displays clear Flemish influence but the relative heaviness of the features (a portrait brass (?)), treatment of the lions, the lack of a regular bottom border, and positioning of the shield are typically German. The obvious skill in the engraving is reminiscent of the high quality brass to Johannes Luneborch (or Lüneburg) (d.1461) in the Katharinenkirche at Lübeck; a Hanseatic city like Bremen and not far away, with established brass production, much of it from bell and cannon foundries.⁴ Dr. Cameron considers it difficult to recognise any other brass as being by the same hand whereas Malcolm Norris in the first instance groups Rode's brass with those to Bishop Andrzej Bniński (d.1479) at Poznan Cathedral, Poland (HKC.1A) and St. Henry of Finland at Nousiainen, Finland.⁵ Both these brasses are of later Flemish origin, heavily influenced by the Flemish School of a century earlier. Saints populate the side shafts of canopies and above the figures, there are Lombardic inscriptions with rose motif borders, and evangelical symbols and shields set in quadrilobes in the corners and sides. It is difficult to place Rode's brass with these two since it lacks so much of what makes these distinctive, especially the elaborate canopies. In addition both brasses have standardised 'Flemish' facial features, whereas Rode's are indicative of a portrait brass. In a later work the position of Malcolm Norris is modified rather than changed. He considers Rode's brass as based on 14th-century Flemish design but stops short of it being undoubtedly Flemish, instead inviting the possibility of a Lübeck imitation alongside his preferred Flemish provenance by conceding to uncertainty.⁶ Apart from this uncertainty of school, if indeed there was one, there is no clue as to the actual workshop or identity of the artist responsible for its design.

Rode has traditionally been considered to be from a patrician family by earlier German sources. Ellwanger has reviewed the evidence, and is unable to establish a pedigree with the identity of his parents and siblings uncertain.⁷ There are records of several Rode families (de Rode, Rode *alias* Wale and Roding). He considers these sources as too keen to refute Renner's claim that his nephew, the Prince Archbishop had a grandfather who was a shoemaker, and regarding that ancestry as too

lowly for someone in high office. If anything, the opportunities for the family's ecclesiastical and secular advancement in Bremen arose through the elder Rode's roles at the Curia in Rome. What is known is that Councillor Heinrich Rode was the Prince Archbishop's brother and therefore nephew of Provost Rode, who gave his children a residence in Borgfeld. Heinrich had married Beke von Gröpelingen and they had six children. At one stage Provost Rode was her guardian. Margarete Rode was the Prince Archbishop's sister, married to Heinrich Stenouw, mayor of Bremen from 1486-1508.

A valuable source of information about Rode's life and career comes from the Vatican's annual Register of Supplications or Supplicas.⁸ In the case of potential appointments to clerical offices there would have been a petition to the pontiff for the appropriate commission. Each application would contain some information about the petitioner and offices already held. For example in his early career Rode appears for the first time in an approved Supplication of 11th May 1419 in which he describes himself as a cleric from Bremen and writer of the Register of Supplicas (he appears to have been in Rome from around this time, where he spent a large part of his adult life).⁹ He asks Pope Martin V for a commission to become canon and prebendary of St. Angarii church in Bremen following the death of Burchard de Bersen. The post was not taken up immediately, apparently due to disputed claims. Not until a further supplication of 6th May 1422 concerning the deanery of St. Angarii, did Rode describe himself as a canon and prebendary. During Pope Martin V's papacy up to 1430, there were twelve supplications from Rode including the following:

- 7th July 1423: Canon and Prebendary of St. Angarii, Bremen;
- 16th September 1421: Vicarium of Ramesloh;
- 11th July 1424: Canon and Prebendary of St. Willehadi, Bremen;
- 4th December 1427: Provost of St. Willehadi, Bremen, relinquished in 1430;
- 7th September 1430: Canon and Prebendary of Bremen Cathedral.
- 20th March 1431: Canon and Prebendary of St. Marien Cathedral, Hamburg, available by exchange for the Vicarium of Ramesloh in 1430.¹⁰



Johann Rode, provost, 1477, Bremen, Germany (HKC.1).
(rubbing: © M.B.S. Portfolio, pt.3, V (June 1937), pl.14)

In the Supplication Register of 22nd January 1420, he describes himself as 24 years old, meaning he was born in 1396. In another Supplication of 18th June 1425 he refers to himself for the first time as Magister and Abbreviator.¹¹ He was probably not a Decretorum Doctor (D.C.L.) but a Magister in Artibus (M.A.) and possibly a Theologiae Baccalaureus (S.T.B.) as well as a priest. When he received his degree and was ordained is unknown. During the pontificate of Eugen IV (1431-37) Rode's Supplications reduce to three. He spends time in Rome, apart from a brief period in 1432 when he returned to Bremen after a twelve-year absence. He appears to be back in Rome again by 1433, again based on Supplication evidence, then from 1440-48 back in Bremen. In 1452 he is promoted by the Pope from Corrector Bullarius (Proof Reader of Papal Bulls) to Protonotary and by 1453 has the title 'Camerarius protonotarionis participantium'.¹²

Rode was then given a challenging role by Pope Calixtus III to try and settle 'The Prelates' War', an historical dispute between the Council of Lüneburg and the clerical supremos of the saltworks in this Hanseatic city, whose pans

produced about eighty per cent of the town salt. The Council was in debt and demanded half of their income. The clerics relied on a contract of 1388-91 which set a ceiling of 1,000 marks per annum, which the Pope supported. The dispute escalated and in March 1453 the city was placed under interdict. The old Council was replaced and its assets used to address the debt. Pope Calixtus III recognised the new Council but the Emperor and Hanseatic League helped the old Council to return and the new members were imprisoned, prompting reprisals from the Papacy in a Bull in 1457 which Rode was accused of forging. King Christian I of Denmark became involved as another arbitrator alongside Rode, by this time described as a Provost, and the Bishops of Schwerin and Lübeck. Agreement was eventually reached in December 1461 and reprisals were lifted.¹³

Rode remained in Bremen as Provost of St. Peter's Cathedral until his death, the date of which is generally considered to be 9th December 1477, as recorded in the *Necrologia et Obituarium* of St. Angarii church in Bremen.¹⁴

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- 1 Museum Inventory no.133. In room 7 of the museum extension. Illustrated in *Das Dom Museum in Bremen*, fig.4, p.27; *Hospitium Ecclesiae Band 21*, p.109; *M.B.S. Portfolio*, pt.3, V (June 1937), pl.14; *Norris, Memorials*, fig.117; and *Monumental Brasses: The Portfolio Plates of the Monumental Brass Society 1894-1984* (1988), pl.211.
- 2 Prior to the major cathedral restoration of 1888-1901 the brass was lifted from its slab and mounted for decorative purposes on the door of a safe in the sacristy.
- 3 *M.B.S. Trans.*, pt.5, VII (1938), p.213. Rode's posture is to be found on the Flemish brasses to Sir Simon of Wensley, engraved c.1375, at Wensley, Yorkshire (N.R.); to an unknown priest in mass vestments, engraved c.1350, at St. Severin, Köln; and the brass to Bishops Gottfried and Friedrich von Bülow, 1375, at Schwerin, Germany (HKC.2).
- 4 *M.B.S. Trans.*, pt.6, XVII (2008), figs.1-2, pp.550-559
- 5 *M.B.S. Trans.*, pt.5, VII (1938), pp.213-4; and M.W. Norris, 'The Schools of Brasses in Germany' in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, XIX (1956), pp.34-52..
- 6 M. Norris, *Monumental Brasses: The Memorials* (London, 1977), I, p.101.
- 7 W. Ellwanger, 'Johannes Rode (d.1477)' in *Blätter der Maus Heft 34* (April 2010), pp.31-2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 9 *Repertorium Germanica Online*, IV 08994.
- 10 *Ibid.* IV, 1743, 2754, 2295, 3458; V, 8560.
- 11 *Ellwanger*, p.11.
- 12 W. Von Hoffmann, 'Forschungen zur Geschichte', Band 2 (1914); chapter II, no.14, p.77 in reprint (Turin, 1971).
- 13 *Ellwanger*, pp.24-5.
- 14 The entry in St. Angarii *Necrologia et Obituarium* V id. XII reads: 'Memoria magistri Johannis Roden litterarum apostolicarum corrector ecclesieque bremensis prepositi peragetur cum tractu "dies ire" procurator ministrabit I marca campanario grossum'. In the margin is the date Anno domini M IIII c LXX VII. St. Angarii's church was destroyed in World War II.