

## An Eighteenth-Century Congolese Horn in the Shape of a Cornett

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An ivory horn in The Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium (no. MO.1967.63.884; see Figure 1) appears to offer a noteworthy example of significant European influence on the construction of an otherwise traditional African instrument. This hybrid horn has the typical features of African double-tone horns, i.e., one large side-hole allowing the production of a single sound, the resonant property frequency of the tube, and an end-hole allowing the modulation of this frequency.

Generally, African side-blown horns with a modulating hole at the proximal end allow the production of two distinct sounds at an interval of a minor third, or at a so-called equidistant interval of ca. 240 cents, as on a more conventional ivory horn of the Zande people in the same collection (inv. no. MO. 0.0.7406-14; see Figure 2). On horns of this type the side-hole is located at the  $\frac{1}{3}$  point relative to the total length. The modulation hole at the end is reinforced with a rim only a few millimeters thick. With age these horns typically become yellow-red as a result of their being treated with palm oil.



**Figure 1:** Ivory horn, from the RMCA Ethnomusicological Collection  
(inv. no. MO.1967.63.884).

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**Figure 2:** Ivory horn, Zande people, Congo RDC, from the RMCA Ethnomusicological Collection (inv. no. MO. 0.0.7406-14). Typical African side-blown horn with a modulating hole at the proximal end allowing the production of two distinct sounds.

Photo Jo Van de Vyver © 2010 by KMMA, Tervuren.

The first horn, however, has some remarkable characteristics that are unusual for African side-blown horns:

1. the rim that normally reinforces the modulating hole at the proximal end is carved, as far as its exterior form is concerned, in the shape of a Western-type mouthpiece (Figure 3);
2. the section between the modulating hole and the side-blown hole is a twisted decoration (Figure 3);
3. the body of the horn is carved in an octagonal shape;

4. parts of it are stained black, and apparently this feature is original: only those parts that have been in contact with the player's hand of the player have lost the black stain;
5. the mouthpiece (which is actually a blow-hole in African side-blown horn style) is situated at the  $\frac{2}{3}$  point relative to its overall length.



**Figure 3:** Proximal end of RMCA ivory horn RMCA inv. no. MO.1967.63.884.  
Photo Jo Van de Vyver © 2010 by KMMA, Tervuren.

Ivory specialists consider this instrument to be some 300 years old, which places its date of manufacture at approximately the period of the first Portuguese conquests of the Congo/Angola region and the first European contacts with the Congo Kingdom (1483–1665).<sup>1</sup>

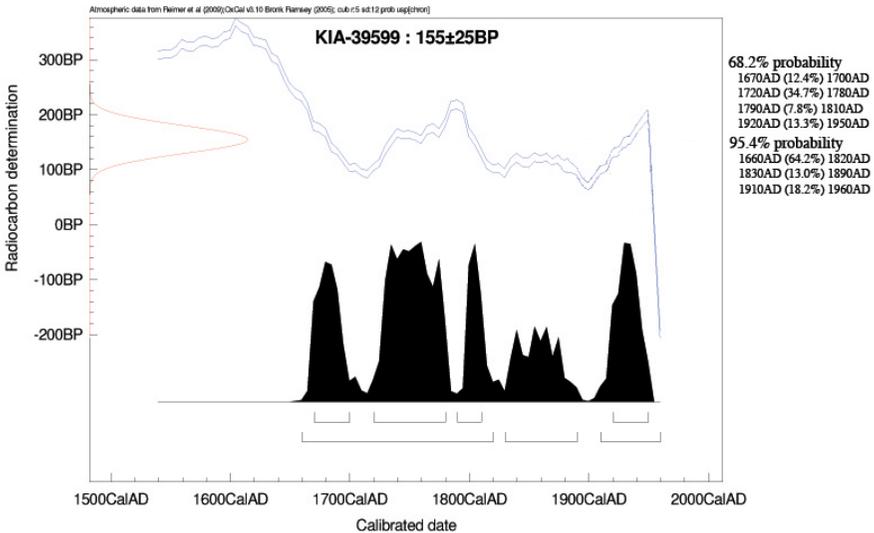
A  $C_{14}$  analysis of the ivory, performed in July 2009 at the Brussels Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium, yielded the following results:

with 95.4% probability, the horn can be dated within the following margins:

- 1660 –1820 C.E. (64.2%)
- 1830 –1890 C.E. (13.0%)
- 1910 –1960 C.E. (18.2%)

with 68.2% probability, the horn can be dated within the following margins:

- 1670 –1700 C.E. (12.4%)
- 1720 –1780 C.E. (34.7%)
- 1790 –1810 C.E. (7.8%)
- 1920 –1950 C.E. (13.3%)



**Table 1:** Results of the  $C_{14}$  analysis of the ivory horn RMCA inv. no. MO.1967.63.884 performed in July 2009 at the Brussels *Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium*.

The horn was acquired by E. Darteville in May 1938 and originally kept at the Brussels Royal Museum for Art and History before it entered the RMCA collections in 1967. Given this data and the instrument's external appearance, twentieth- or even nineteenth-century fabrication seems unlikely. Any other reasonable hypothesis points to a period after 1670 C.E. but before 1820 C.E., and perhaps more specifically between 1720 C.E. and 1780 C.E. (see Table 1).

With this chronology in mind, the horn can be compared with other African horns made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A number of them have been described by Ezio Bassani. They fall into two groups: side-blown horns without decoration or decorated only with linear and geometrical patterns;<sup>2</sup> and horns with an end-blown hole similar to the mouthpiece of our study object.<sup>3</sup> The latter category includes richly decorated horns made by Sapi artists from Sierra Leone between 1490–1530 and commissioned by the Portuguese. In 1988 Ezio Bassani and William Fagg counted more than two dozen of these,<sup>4</sup> mostly in public collections:

1. A horn in Madrid, Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas (inv. no. 21348), formerly in Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional (inv. no. 3439);
2. A horn in Canberra, Australian National Museum (inv. no. 79.2148);
3. A horn in Los Angeles, The Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection of African Art, Walt Disney Co., dated 1492–1516 and bearing the arms of the House of Aviz and Ferdinand V of Castile and Aragon, as well as Ferdinand's motto, *Tanto Monta*.
4. A horn in Turin, Armeria Reale (inv. no. Q.10);
5. A horn in the British Museum (registration no. Af1979.01.3156—add. IDs: NN. 25), dated 1490–1530 and bearing the coat of arms of the Portuguese Royal House;
6. Two horns in St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum (inv. no. F.635 and F576);
7. A horn that once belonged to the royal collection of France, formerly Musée de l'Homme, currently Paris, Musée du Quai Branly (inv. no. 71.1933.6.1D);
8. A horn in Tübingen, Städtische Sammlungen (inv. no. 3895);
9. A horn kept in Écouen (France), Musée de la Renaissance (inv. no. CL. 1859);
10. A horn in Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum, (inv. no. KK 124);
11. A horn kept in Rome at the Museo Etnografico "Luigi Pigorino" (inv. no. 108828), from Athanasius Kircher's collection at the Collegio Romano, depicted in P. Filippo Bonanni's *Musaeum Kircherianum* (Rome, 1709), p. 235, table 299;
12. Two horns in Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (inv. no. 987 and 988);
13. A horn in Dresden, Historisches Museum (inv. no. X497);
14. A horn in Liverpool, Merseyside County Museum (inv. no. 1304);
15. A horn in the British Museum (registration no. Af.7009—Add. IDs Af1870C1.7009), and bearing the coat of arms of the Portuguese Royal House;
16. A horn in Prague, National Museum, Department of Historical Archaeology (inv. no. 3623);
17. A horn in Rome, Museo Etnografico "Luigi Pigorino" (inv. no. 63112).

Typically, all these horns are richly decorated with fantastic, heraldic, or mythological animals and vegetal motifs. All these horns have the same “Western”-type mouthpiece at the proximal end (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Sapi olifant, Sierra Leone, sixteenth or seventeenth century. Écouen (France), Musée de la Renaissance (Inv. no. ECL1859).  
Courtesy Réunion des musées nationaux, France.

Ezio Bassani considers these horns to be *olifanti*, and indeed, just like the richly decorated charter horns that were made in medieval Europe, they were symbols of power and served as witnesses of territorial property transactions. So in fact they were not really used as musical instruments, except to be blown on the day a contract was concluded.

According to Bassani, these richly decorated African horns were commissioned by the Portuguese. They must date to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, when the Portuguese, after having completed their exploration of the African coast, established commercial bases and commissioned works of art, mainly in ivory, from local craftsmen in Sierra Leone, Benin, and the Congo. In this respect these horns, just like pyxides, spoons,

forks, knife-handles, and *saliera* (salt-cellars), should be considered objects of commercial exchange between Portuguese colonists and Africans.<sup>5</sup> This is not unusual: many African artifacts show influences from abroad, and anthropologists insist that this hybridization is typical, not only for African cultures, but for cultures everywhere in the world.

However, no example of an undecorated horn from this region with an octagonal shape has ever been mentioned. The shape of our study's horn (Figure 1) is totally unusual and apparently was never used in the manufacture of highly decorated commercial exchange objects. In fact, this horn closely resembles a type of musical instrument that is well known to Western organologists as a cornett, *cornetto*, or *Gemeine Zinck*, which is usually covered with black leather and has six fingerholes and a thumbhole, an octagonal section, and a detachable mouthpiece (Figure 5).



**Figure 5:** Cornett, Italy, seventeenth century.  
Rome, Museo degli strumenti musicali (Inv. no. 870).

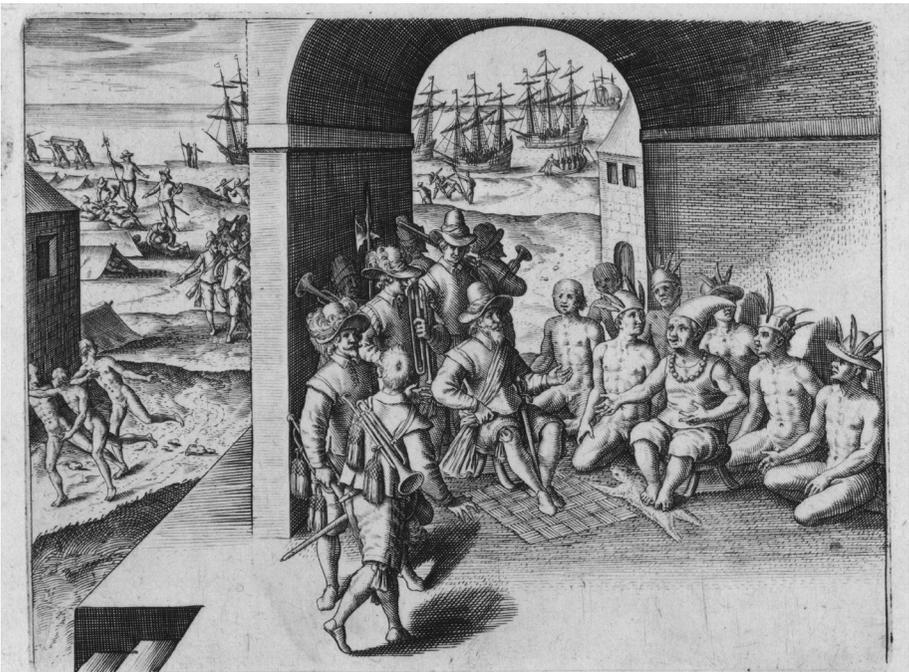
The presence of a lateral “mouthpiece” can easily be understood in an African context, and the absence of fingerholes is logical: they are never found on horns in sub-Saharan Africa. It is remarkable that European cornett makers, when using ivory, either simply followed the original shape of an elephant tusk or carved the cornett in an octagonal shape.<sup>6</sup>

Our study's horn originates from Magne (in the present-day Republic of the Congo), a village on the Kwilu (Kouilou) River that flows into the Atlantic Ocean. It is not more than sixty kilometers from the river's mouth. The region is known as Loango and was an independent “kingdom” in 1587. Even though it lost its hegemony over both of its neighbors, the Kakango and the Angoï, it remained the strongest entity between Cap Lopez (to the north) and the Congo River (to the south). The Portuguese began trading with Loango around 1575, as did the Dutch in the early seventeenth century. In 1637

the Dutch initiated the slave trade. In 1663 the Loango king accepted baptism by a Capuchin monk, Father Bernardo Unghero, and another campaign to Christianize the Loango people was undertaken by French missionaries between 1766 and 1776.<sup>7</sup> It is thus evident that cultural exchanges between the Portuguese, Dutch, and French on the one hand, and indigenous Africans on the other, had ample opportunity to develop in the period of interest to us, i.e., the mid-eighteenth century.

### Trumpets and cornetts on ships traveling to Africa or passing along its coasts

As Ian Woodfield points out, “the first musicians to take part in long-distance voyages were almost certainly trumpeters. Ships of the medieval navies of Europe traditionally carried trumpeters and other musicians for military and ceremonial purposes, and the practice was continued by the Portuguese [and Italians] in their early voyages down the coast of Africa.”<sup>8</sup> In England commercial ships were equipped trumpeters in compliance



**Figure 6:** Dutch Admiral Jacques (Jacob) Mahu landing on the West African coast in 1598, accompanied by his five trumpeters. Theodor de Bry, *Americae nona & postrema pars...*

(Frankfurt: Matthaeus Becker, 1602), pl. XVIII,

*Quomodo Hollandi regulum quendam littoralis tractus Guineae inserint.*

Courtesy of the Universiteitsbibliotheek Ghent (Belgium).

with their classifications. According to *The Wages for the Officers of the Queen's Ships at Sea*, compiled in 1582, it was recommended that ships of 800 tons and upwards (Class I) hire four trumpeters, ships between 500 and 800 tons (Class II), two trumpeters, and ships of lower tonnage, one trumpeter.<sup>9</sup> Their duties were to give signals when visibility became difficult, “also when they hail a ship, or when they charge, board or enter her,”<sup>10</sup> and to accompany worship services and morning and evening prayers. Trumpeters were required to stay at the captain's side at all times. A good example is given in an engraving by Theodor de Bry (1602), which shows the Dutch admiral Jacques Mahu, landing on the West African coast on his voyage to the Americas (Figure 6).

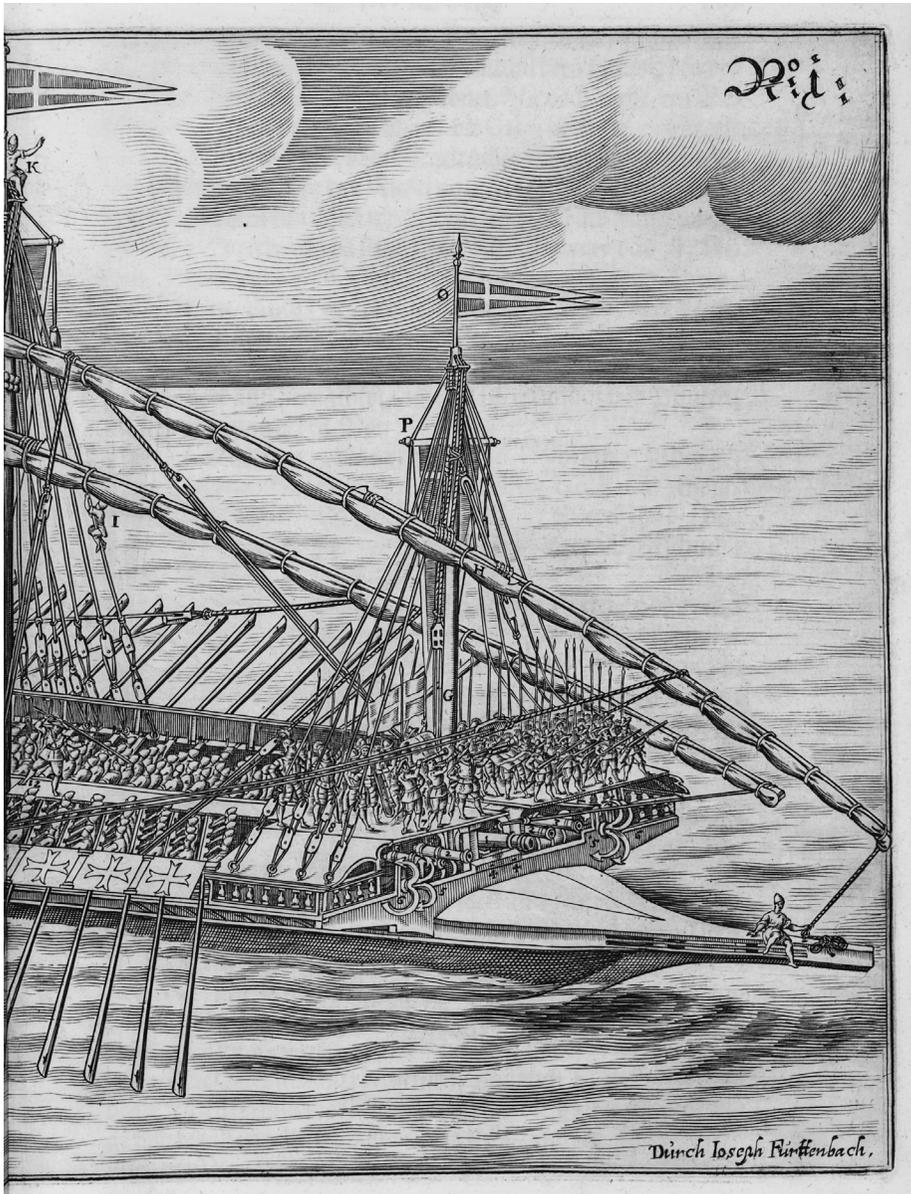
Cornetts, on the other hand, were used as well, in broken consorts that accompanied wealthy or aristocratic captains on their voyages or in combination with trumpets and trombones—just as the waits did on land.<sup>11</sup> That they were also used for long-distance voyages can be deduced from an incident that occurred to Sir Henry Middleton: he lost his musical instruments, among them a cornett, when he and his crew were captured in May 1611 in Mocha (*Mokha*, i.e., present-day Yemen). Middleton writes about this loss in his correspondence, saying that the consort is no longer complete, as the cornett (*cornute*) and the treble viol (*treble vyall*) are missing. He also indicates the place where the cornett was left:

If yow heere of the Cornute or treble vyall hereafter yow may send them; lay waite of them for the Consort is spoyled w<sup>h</sup>out them; the Cornute was left standinge in a Corner of the howse where J<sup>no</sup> Cooke dyed.<sup>12</sup>

Cornetts were rarely heard after about 1750, but before that date they were certainly used on ships traveling to or passing along the African coast. In his book on ship construction, *Architectura Navalis* (1629), Joseph Furtenbach not only includes an engraving showing a group of musicians playing cornett, trumpet, and trombone, but he explicitly mentions their duties as well (Figures 7 and 8):

7. Here are the trumpeters, the cornett and trombone players / who every morning / at noon and at eve / but especially when a Gentlemen comes on board the Galea / play splendidly exalted to everyone's great pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is impossible to identify any specific European musician who might have brought a cornett in the Loango region, it is clear that some musicians had the opportunity to meet with local craftsmen, since commercial contacts with this region and the presence of cornett (and trumpet) players on ships traveling to West Africa or landing on the West African coast can be established by means of archival evidence.



**Figure 7:** Trumpet, cornett, and trombone players on a ship, seventeenth century.

Pl. 1 from Joseph Furtenbach, *Architectura Navalis* (Ulm, 1629).

Courtesy of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek Brussels (Belgium).



Figure 8: Detail of Figure 7.

### Conclusions

1. The ivory horn inv. no. MO.1967.63.884 (acquired by E. Darteville in 1938) in the ethnomusicological collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa is a product of hybridization between an African side-blown horn with modulating hole at the proximal end and a European cornett. Elements of imitation with regard to a European cornett are the “mouthpiece,” the twisted decoration between the “mouthpiece” and lateral mouth-hole, the black color, and the octagonal shape.
2. As a consequence, the most striking feature of this instrument in comparison with typical African horns is the displaced position of the mouth-hole at the  $\frac{2}{3}$  point relative to the horn’s length, instead of at the usual  $\frac{1}{3}$  point.
3. The horn can be dated between 1670 and 1760 and originates from Magne on the Kwilu River, which at the time of the instrument’s manufacture was part of the independent Loango Kingdom, located in the present-day Republic of the Congo.
4. A European—i.e., Portuguese, Dutch, and French—presence in Loango is documented from 1575 onwards.
5. Direct contact between a European musician playing or demonstrating a cornett in the presence of African musicians and/or craftsmen is very likely, since cornetts were used on ships traveling to Africa from the sixteenth century onwards.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Julien Volper, scientific assistant at the Service of Cultural Anthropology of Tervuren's Royal Museum of Central Africa, for his dating of the instrument.

<sup>2</sup> Bassani considers them "horns from the ancient Kongo kingdom." They probably date to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Examples are located in Florence at the Museo degli Argenti (inv. nos. 1, 2, and 3), in Rome at the Museo Etnografico "Luigi Pigorino" (inv. no. 5290), in Stuttgart at the Linden Museum (inv. no. 18359), and in Paris at the Musée de Cluny (inv. CL. 428). See Ezio Bassani, "Antichi Avori Africani nelle Collezioni Medicee," *Critica d'Arte*, no. 143 (1975): 69–80; no. 144 (1975): 8–23. Other comparable old horns are in the RMCA collections in Tervuren (inv. nos. 1971.1.2 and 1996.30.1).

<sup>3</sup> See Enzo Bassani, "Due olifanti afro-portoghesi nelle collezione pubbliche italiane," *Rassegna di studi musicali* (1975): 97–103; and idem, "Raphael at the Tropics? A Carved Ivory Oliphant in the Musée de l'Homme," *Journal of the History of Collections* 10, no. 1 (1998): 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> See Ezio Bassani & William B. Fagg, *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory*, ed. Susan Vogel, assisted by Carol Thompson (New York: Center for African Art / Munich: Prestel, 1988): 234–38.

<sup>5</sup> See Bassani, "Due olifanti afro-portoghesi," and idem, "Raphael at the Tropics?"

<sup>6</sup> See Sabine K. Klaus, "Ivory Cornetto, Probably from South Germany, Late 16th or Early 17th Century," in "Historical Instrument Window," *International Trumpet Guild Journal* 32 (March 2008): 34; idem, "Persistent 'Detective Work' Sheds New Light on Two Precious Ivory Cornetti in the Utley Collection," in *America's Shrine to Music Museum Newsletter* 28, no. 1 (February 2001): 4–5; and idem, "Zwei Elfenbein-Zinken aus Süddeutschland?," in *Zur Geschichte von Cornetto und Clarine, Symposium im Rahmen der 25. Tage Alter Musik in Herne 2000*, ed. Christian Ahrens and Gregor Klinke (Munich/Salzburg: Musikverlag Katzbichler, 2001), 35–50. See also Eszter Fontana, "The Manufacture of Ivory Cornetti," *Galpin Society Journal* 36 (1983): 29–36.

<sup>7</sup> See W. G. L. Randles, *L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris/The Hague: Mouton, 1968): 197–98. See also Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and J. Cuvelier, "Documents sur une mission française au Kakongo (1766–1776)," *Mémoire de l'Institut Colonial Belge* 30, no. 1 (1953): *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See Ian Woodfield, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1995): 1.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, 33–34.

<sup>10</sup> From the *Naval Tracts* of Sir William Monson (1569–1643), quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Woodfield cites thirteen references to the presence of consorts of more than four musicians (probably including cornetts as well) between 1567 and 1595, on ships of such legendary captains as Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish. See Woodfield, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>13</sup> "7. Hier stehen die Trommetter / Zincken und Posaunenblaser / welche dann alle Morgen frühe / zu Mittag und Abend / Fürnemblich aber : wenn ein grosser Herr auf die Galea steigt / trefflich heroisch aufblasen: so allem Volk ein grosse Erquickung bringt." See Joseph Furtenbach, *Architectura Navalis* (Ulm, 1629), 18.