

THE USE OF HERALDRY IN ENGLISH MEDIEVAL GENEALOGY¹

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ABSTRACT

Heraldry, the study of coats of arms, can be of assistance to the medieval genealogist. The major sources of seals, rolls of arms, and sepulchral monuments are here considered, with reference to their use in corroborating the genealogical evidence disclosed by conventional documents.

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In the Middle Ages literacy was a gradually emerging phenomenon and, in England at least, grew out of bureaucracy.³ Only over time were documents produced in large quantities with a high level of personal detail. Consequently, research in the field of medieval genealogy is particularly difficult; the situation is made worse by the wide dispersal and patchy survival of historical records, compared with the centralised record keeping of later periods.

Heraldry is a tool that can be used to corroborate findings in the attempt to reconstruct medieval families. The use of coats of arms was at its height in this period, a very real and practical means of identification when levels of literacy were still relatively low. However, many historians do not have a clear understanding of how heraldry operated as a visual language, how it was administered, and what sources may be consulted to uncover such evidence.

For the avoidance of doubt, this paper will address English heraldry; different systems operated in other parts of the British Isles and in Europe. The sources described will not be exhaustive, comprising the major types that may be encountered: seals, rolls of arms, and tombs. With these, evidence exists in large quantities and is of most direct assistance to the heraldic researcher. There are, however, many other record sources which may be of use: chronicles as well as record sources. Material evidence of heraldry in stained glass and architecture will not be considered here as they do not survive in such significant quantities from the Middle Ages. Before approaching the sources of medieval heraldry, a brief explanation will be offered of the purpose and emergence of heraldry in medieval England.

Heraldry as Identification

The popular view of heraldry as an effective visual means of identification on the battlefield has been doubted for some time, on the grounds that only the most senior lords needed visible banners to serve as a rallying point for their lesser knights and followers.⁴ More recently, it has been suggested that the widespread use of designs on shields was 'a form of individual "vanity"' of little military importance.⁵ Nevertheless,

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³ M T Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (1993), 19.

⁴ John Horace Round, *Peerage and Pedigree* (1910), II, 327.

⁵ Thomas Woodcock & John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (1990), 3.

there is evidence to suggest that coats of arms were seriously regarded as important identifiers in the Middle Ages. Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (d.1439), was lieutenant of France on behalf of the infant king, Henry VI. An anecdote told about him, though dating from a later source, recalls that:

The last time he went over into Normandy, he was tossed with a hideous tempest; so that, despairing of life, he caused himself to be bound ... with his lady and infant son, to the main mast, on this design, that, having his armour and coat of arms upon him, he might thereby be known, that such who should light on his corpse, if either noble or charitable, might afford him a Christian burial.⁶

The correct identification of heraldic banners on the battlefield could mean the difference between life and death. A notable incidence of this is provided from an episode in the dynastic wars of the fifteenth century, the Wars of the Roses.

In the thirteenth century the de Vere family had adopted a shield divided into alternate red and gold quarters, with a silver star in the upper left part; this is shown illustrated in a manuscript of c.1244.⁷ The de Veres in time adopted the star as a badge which was worn by their followers.⁸ In 1471, the rival claimants to the throne of England were fighting fiercely with one another. King Edward IV, who had adopted the sun in splendour as his badge, met the supporters of Henry VI in battle at Barnet, north of London. The commanders of Henry's army included the Earl of Warwick, 'the kingmaker', and the Earl of Oxford. John Warkworth, a contemporary, tells the story:

But it hapenede so, that the Erle of Oxenfordes men hade uppon them ther lordes livery, bothe before and behynde, which was a sterre withe stremys, wiche [was] myche lyke Kynge Edwardes livery, the sunne with stremys; and the myste was so thicke, that a manne myghte not profyately juge one thyng from anothere; so the Erle of Warwikes menne schott and faughte ayens the Erle of Oxenfordes menne, wetyng and supposyng that thei hade bene Kynge Edwardes menne; and anone the Erle of Oxenforde and his menne cryed 'treasoune! treasoune!' and fledde away from the felde withe viij. c. menne.⁹

The Origins of Heraldry

The generally accepted definition of heraldry is that of Sir Anthony Wagner, Garter King of Arms 1961-1978. He defined heraldry as 'a system of personal and family devices which was developed in western Europe by the heralds in and after the twelfth century'.¹⁰ While acknowledging that other cultures had used visual systems of identification, Wagner ascribes responsibility to the feudal system for the growth and development of heraldry in medieval Europe. The Crusades had brought together knights from different kingdoms, while identification became essential in the tournaments which soon appeared; ultimately it was 'the flowering and swarming of the Normans' that was at the heart of the growth of heraldry.¹¹ The important distinction for European heraldry was that the marks of identification used were no longer personal, but hereditary.¹²

⁶ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, ed. P. A. Nuttall (1840), Vol.3, p.368.

⁷ Sir Anthony Wagner, ed., *Aspilogia II: Rolls of Arms, Henry III* (1967), 39 (No. 15).

⁸ Michael Powell Siddons, *Heraldic Badges in England and Wales* (2009), II, Part 2, 301.

⁹ John Warkworth, *A Chronicle of the first thirteen years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth*, ed. J O Halliwell (1839), 16.

¹⁰ A R Wagner, *Heralds and Ancestors* (1978), 7.

¹¹ Wagner, *Heralds and Ancestors* (1978), 14.

¹² A R Wagner, *Heraldry in England* (1946), 5.

The Bayeux Tapestry, produced shortly after the Battle of Hastings, depicts what appear to be heraldic banners and individual shield designs. However, even the most sympathetic commentators conclude that these are likely to have had 'a partisan rather than a personal significance'.¹³

The clearest indication that the Normans did not use personal marks of identification, such as recognizable coats of arms, comes from a contemporary historian. William of Poitiers, writing only a few years after the invasion, describes the battle in detail. He recalls that at one point in the battle, the Normans believed that Duke William had been killed, and they accordingly began to flee, pursued by the English. This account states that he placed himself in the way of his retreating troops: '*staying their retreat, he took off his helmet, and standing before them bareheaded he cried: "Look at me well. I am still alive and by the grace of God I shall yet prove victor. What is this madness which makes you fly, and what way is open for your retreat?"*'¹⁴

The act of exposing the head in battle, aside from rhetorical effect, would have been highly dangerous. Although the work of William of Poitiers and the Bayeux Tapestry are both accounts of the battle presented by the victors, their consistency supports the idea that this may have reflected the reality of the situation. Such a bold gesture would clearly have been unnecessary had Duke William been identifiable by a shield or banner.

The earliest attested use of hereditary arms is generally agreed to have occurred in the early twelfth century. In the year 1127 Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou, was knighted by his father-in-law, king Henry I of England. This shield of golden lions on a blue background was reproduced on his tomb after his death in 1151, and was used by his grandson William Longspée (an illegitimate son of Henry II).

Regulation of Arms

A number of problems face the researcher of medieval heraldry. There was no central authority in England controlling the use of coats of arms until the incorporation of the College of Arms in 1484 by Richard III. Before then a number of heralds had existed, but to a large extent they were responsible for cataloguing heraldic designs already in existence, rather than administering a system.¹⁵

In the Middle Ages, coats of arms could be granted by the Sovereign directly. There is evidence for such grants from the reign of Edward III.¹⁶ Over time the Kings of Arms, the senior heralds, began to grant coats of arms and to confirm the use of existing ones; this they began to do in the 1430s.¹⁷ Once the College of Arms was established the heralds took an active role in ensuring the correct use of arms. From the 1530s the Kings of Arms received commissions to make visitations of the counties of England, confirming that arms were only being used by gentlemen, and that there was no duplication of design. It was in this period that the Kings of Arms established a monopoly over the granting and confirming of arms.

¹³ C W Scott-Giles, *The Romance of Heraldry* (1929), 36.

¹⁴ William of Poitiers, 'The Deeds of William, Duke of the Normans and King of the English', in *English Historical Documents: II – 1042-1189*, eds. D C Douglas & G W Greenaway, 2nd Edn. (1981), 240.

¹⁵ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (1984), 134.

¹⁶ Adrian Ailes, 'Royal Grants of Arms in England before 1484' in P. Coss and C. Tyerman (eds.), *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen: Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen* (2009), p. 86.

¹⁷ Ailes *op. cit.* (2009), 85.

However, in earlier times the origins of heraldic designs are far more shrouded in mystery. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries almost nothing is known about how arms were assumed and how heralds regulated the use of heraldry.¹⁸ Sir Anthony Wagner admitted that little was known about the devising and assignment of coats of arms, but that by the fourteenth century, magnates were granting arms to their knightly followers.¹⁹ The *Book of St Albans* (1486) gave four grounds for the use of arms. They may be borne if they are inherited, if they are associated with the holding of a certain office, if they have been granted by a lord or prince, or if they have been captured from an enemy in battle.²⁰

In the fourteenth century, the Court of Chivalry emerged. One of its functions was to rule on disputes involving the design of arms; the first such cases are found in the reign of Edward III.²¹ Causes of arms formed only a small part of the Court's work – a greater part of its business concerned matters of war, such as the unjust detention of prisoners and the payment of ransoms.²² An early and famous case was that of *Scrope v Grosvenor*, where two families claimed the right to use the design *Azure a Bend Or* – a gold diagonal band on a blue shield. Beginning in 1385, depositions were collected from a vast array of witnesses, including Geoffrey Chaucer and John of Gaunt. Judgment was finally given by the court in 1389, when Sir Richard Scrope was found to have the superior claim. Sir Robert Grosvenor was permitted to use the arms within a border, though neither party was content with this solution. King Richard II gave his view in May 1390, and declared that the designs were too similar for unrelated families to use.²³ Grosvenor consequently adopted the arms *Azure a Garb Or*, still used by his descendants, the Dukes of Westminster.

Seals

Seals provide one of the earliest sources for heraldry in England. Their ultimate function was, and is, to authenticate documents. They first appear in the eleventh century, though shields of arms do not appear upon them until much later. The earliest surviving English documents with seals are letters of Edward the Confessor in the years before the Norman Conquest.²⁴ It is, however, possible that they were used as early as the ninth century. The earliest use of an armorial seal by an English monarch is the first Great Seal of Richard I in 1189.²⁵ This features a shield, held by the king, on which is a lion rampant combatant; since only half the shield is shown, it has been thought that another symmetrical lion would appear on the other side. Following Richard's return from the Crusades, his Second Great Seal shows the three leopards of England, which have represented the kingdom of England ever since. The seal has been dated to c.1195. Heraldic seals began to be used by the aristocracy in

¹⁸ Noel Denholm-Young, *History and Heraldry, 1254-1310: A Study of the Historical Value of the Rolls of Arms* (1965), 6.

¹⁹ Wagner, *Heralds and Ancestors* (1978), p. 29.

²⁰ Keen, *op. cit.*, 129-30.

²¹ G D Squibb, *The High Court of Chivalry* (1959), 14.

²² Squibb, *op. cit.*, 16-17.

²³ *The Scrope and Grosvenor Controversy*, ed. Nicholas Harris Nicolas (1832), I, 362.

²⁴ B Bedas-Rezak, 'The King Enthroned, a New Theme in Anglo-Saxon Royal Iconography' in *Kings and Kingship*, ed. J T Rosenthal (1986), 61-62.

²⁵ J H Pinches & R V Pinches, *The Royal Heraldry of England* (1974), 24.

the 1190s; by the middle of the thirteenth century knights and even those of lower status were using coats of arms on their seals.²⁶

The Victorian antiquary John Cussans considered that seals afforded the best evidence of the use of a Coat of Arms, 'for the devices thereon represented must always be those actually borne by their possessors at the time of their employments'.²⁷ This is to a large extent true, though it must be remembered that the arms on a seal did not always correspond to the individual entitled to the arms. The sixteenth-century herald William Camden noted that in the Middle Ages followers often adopted their lord's arms out of respect.²⁸ Indeed, according to the Statute of Arms 1292 squires were required to use the Arms of their masters rather than a design particular to themselves. Nonetheless, seals provide good evidence of the use of Arms by a named individual, since a legend usually appears around the edge of the seal, identifying the owner. This identification can then be corroborated by reference to the document to which the seal is appended, assuming that both survive. The evidence of an heraldic seal may in some cases be the only surviving evidence for a particular individual, and so the coat of arms may be used to check Visitation pedigrees made by the heralds in later centuries.²⁹

A highly useful collection of seals attached to the documents they attest is that of Sir Christopher Hatton, a published edition of which has been produced. This comprised facsimiles of deeds, preserving the text and illustrating the seals; the collection is particularly useful as many of the original deeds are no longer in existence. Since the texts of charters frequently record genealogical relationships, the combination of a grant with an heraldic seal can help to confirm a pedigree. An example of this, taken from the Hatton collection, is a Yorkshire charter made in the early-thirteenth century. This was a grant made by Ralf, son of Robert de Ecclesall, the text of which also refers to Robert, Ralf's son. The seal, featuring a coat of arms, is identified as Ralf's seal, confirming the association of that individual and his arms with the family described in the charter.³⁰

Rolls of Arms

Evidence of a regulated system of heraldry first appears in England in the thirteenth century. The works of the great medieval chronicler, Matthew Paris, were illustrated with shields depicting the Arms of the protagonists. He was also responsible for attributing Arms to historical figures living before the establishment of heraldry; these included the lion rampant of King Harold, and the three lions of England, which he assigns to the Anglo-Norman kings from William I onwards.³¹

Out of these chronicles developed the roll of arms, a document collecting together the Arms of knights and nobles with a particular connection to each other. These documents have been categorized as working rolls, general rolls, and local rolls.³² The working, or occasional rolls, were those produced either for or after a particular

²⁶ P D A Harvey & Andrew McGuinness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (1996), 52-54.

²⁷ John E Cussans, *Handbook of Heraldry*, 4th Edn. (1893), 263.

²⁸ William Camden, *Remaines Concerning Britaine*, ed. J. Philpot, 5th Edn. (1636), 209.

²⁹ J Harvey Bloom, *English Seals* (1906), 162.

³⁰ *Sir Christopher Hatton's Book of Seals*, ed. L C Loyd and D M Stenton (1950), 1 (No. 2).

³¹ Wagner, *Aspilogia II* (1967), 11-16.

³² Wagner, *Aspilogia I* (1950), xiv; Wagner, *Heralds and Ancestors* (1978), 27.

event. Amongst the most famous of these are the rolls produced during Edward I's Scottish campaigns, recording the Arms of the military leaders.

More ambitious were the general rolls, which sought to record the Arms of all those individuals of note known to the compiler: kings, princes, lords, knights, and even esquires.³³ One use of the roll of arms is in assessing the social standing of members of parliament and royal officials in the reigns of Edward I and his son; at that period the use of a coat of arms was a positive indicator of gentility, and not all office holders would have necessarily been armigerous.³⁴

The direct genealogical value of most rolls of Arms is limited, as they generally consist of illustrations of shields, or a written description of the design, accompanied by a name. Nevertheless, most of the rolls dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been transcribed and published, and most of the individuals included have been identified, with comments about the family they belong to. The text given in the rolls may be of assistance in identifying or confirming genealogical connections, while the comparison of similar designs may also be instructive.

Glover's Roll exists in several copies, the earliest version being dated to 1253, consisting of the blazons of the arms, without illustration, on the basis of the inclusion of certain individuals.³⁵ The entry for William Bardolf is followed by one for Thomas 'son filz [his son]', the latter bearing his father's arms with minor differences.³⁶ The same description is used for William de Ros and his son Robert, as well as for John Balliol and his son Hugh.³⁷ In most cases, the similarity of surname and design of arms have been the starting point for making genealogical connections, but literary evidence is often present.

A large number of personal arms are recorded both on seals and in rolls of arms. In such circumstances the roll of arms has an advantage in that the colours used in the design are indicated or illustrated.³⁸

In some cases it may be possible to make comparisons between evidence on seals and that in rolls of arms. The Eccleshall family discussed earlier provides an example. The main line of the family died out not long after the period that the charter was made, Sir Robert de Eccleshall having apparently died without male issue sometime before 1342.³⁹ They used the Arms *Fretty on a Chief a Bend between two Martlets*. In the Parliamentary Roll of Arms, dated c. 1307-8, the same Sir Robert de Eccleshall used the Arms *Gules a Bend between Six Martlets Argent*.⁴⁰ In this period it was relatively common for related individuals or branches of a family to use slightly different designs of Arms.⁴¹ Here, as in the majority of cases, the motivation for the change in design of the Arms is unknown.

³³ Charles Boutell, *Boutell's Heraldry*, Revised Edn., ed. J P Brooke-Little (1970), 269.

³⁴ Denholm-Young, *op. cit.*, 147.

³⁵ Wagner, *Aspilogia II* (1967), 92.

³⁶ Wagner, *Aspilogia II* (1967), 128 (Nos. 70-71).

³⁷ Wagner, *Aspilogia II* (1967), 127 (Nos. 66-67); 122 (Nos. 36-37).

³⁸ Wagner, *Aspilogia I* (1950), xvii.

³⁹ Joseph Hunter, *Hallamshire* (1819), I, 197.

⁴⁰ Joseph Foster, *Some Feudal Coats of Arms from Heraldic Rolls, 1298-1418* (1901), 85.

⁴¹ Boutell, *op. cit.*, 103.

Tombs

Heraldic monuments are a rich and eloquent source of information for the medieval genealogist, as they enable links to be made between visual and documentary evidence. The heraldry, assuming that it is accurate, will identify the family concerned and may also indicate intermarriage. A married couple are represented by the division of the shield vertically – the husband's arms appear on the dexter side of the shield (from the point of view of the person holding the shield, the right side, but the viewer's left), the wife's on the sinister (viewer's right). Quartered shields may also be seen, evidence that a lady whose family had no surviving heirs had married; as an heraldic heiress this quartering would be inherited by her children along with the arms of the husband. A monumental inscription will give more precise details about the individual or family commemorated, often providing information as to dates of birth and death. In some cases the evidence of an inscription may not identify a person beyond doubt, but the corroborative evidence of a Coat of Arms may confirm which family the deceased came from. When there are several shields this may be an indication of those with whom the deceased had genealogical or feudal links.

Two examples are to be found in the parish church of St Mary Magdalene, Newark-on-Trent, co: Nottingham. Chantry chapels were erected in the church on either side of the sanctuary in the early 1500s. They are both believed to have contained tomb chests with inscriptions, which have subsequently been removed. The will of Thomas Mering (proved 8 October 1500) stipulated that the testator's body was to '*be buried in the north parte of the altere by twix the two pillars next the altar as at the tyme of Ester itt is used to sett the sepulcre of Jesus Criste*', and funds were allocated '*unto the making of a chapell and my grave or sepulcre*'.⁴² Robert Markham, whose will was dated 16 June 1505, stipulated that he was to be buried '*in the channcell of the church of Saynte Marye Magdalene on the south side of the high altre*'.⁴³

An examination of the carved shields shows several examples of the Mering arms on the north chapel, and a number of the Markham coat on the other, in addition to those of other local families. These arms can then be usefully compared with the pedigrees and heraldry recorded for the Markham and Mering families in the Harleian Society's version of the *Heralds' Visitation of Nottinghamshire in 1614*.⁴⁴ The tinctures of these arms were recorded in this manuscript, as well as in an illustrated pedigree roll of the Markham family (privately owned), apparently compiled by William Camden, Clarenceux King of Arms 1597-1623. When Sir William Dugdale came to survey the county after the Restoration (1662-1664) he compiled records of heraldry on significant tombs, though neither chapel was referred to. Many medieval tombs include shields that were painted rather than carved, and due to the wearing of time or the iconoclasm of later generations, the designs have often been erased. However, carved shields preserve an excellent contemporary record of the arms used at the time of the tomb's construction.⁴⁵

⁴² Borthwick Institute, York Wills, Vol. 13, f. 327r, quoted in Brenda M Pask, *Newark Parish Church of St Mary Magdalene* (2000), 332.

⁴³ Borthwick Institute, York Wills, Vol. 6, f. 207v, quoted in Pask, *op. cit.*, 334.

⁴⁴ George William Marshall, ed., *The Visitations of the County of Nottingham in the Years 1569 and 1614* (1871), 13, 24.

⁴⁵ Henry Lawrence, *Heraldry from Military Monuments before 1350 in England and Wales* (1946), xii.

Researching Medieval Heraldry

The College of Arms is the source of all official information relating to the granting and confirming of coats of arms in England and certain other territories of the Crown from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Their records, in the form of copies of later medieval grants of arms, and early generations included in the Visitation pedigrees, may be of assistance to the scholar seeking to use heraldry as a tool for medieval genealogy. However, the majority of the documents giving details about arms borne in the medieval period are widely dispersed. The collection and organization of this data has been a long-held ambition of the heraldic community in this country, one that in recent years has been coming to fruition. The *Dictionary of British Arms* is a four-volume work which records the blazon of all known arms used in medieval Britain, together with the name of the family or individual with which it is associated, and the source from which it is drawn. The first of these volumes only appeared in 1992,⁴⁶ and the third has recently been published. The sources include manuscripts, seals, glass, and tombs, and aims to present a comprehensive survey of the use of heraldry before the beginning of the Visitation period in the 1530s.

Although medieval genealogy can be a complex area of research, heraldry may help to suggest or confirm family connections. The use of visual records in an age of limited literacy should not be underestimated.

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⁴⁶ Hubert Chesshyre & Thomas Woodcock, eds., *Dictionary of British Arms: Medieval Ordinary*, Vol. 1 (1992).

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