

General Overview of the English Rolls of Arms during the Thirteenth Century

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The English heraldic system was taken over from the French heraldry. Heralds and the compilers of the armorials used the language of the French system, but it wasn't fully adopted and a special English terminology was born to blazon the shields. This present paper aims to give a general overview of the main differences, although it also points out an English speciality in the case of lions. Equally interesting is the usage of the eagle, fish, plants and instruments.

Keywords: *English heraldic system, special English terminology, speciality in the case of lions and eagle*

Introduction

The present paper gives an overview on heraldry. In the first part I will introduce the examined source group and give a general overview on the English Rolls of Arms compiled during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and highlight the special value of these armorials and the way they are classified by heraldic research. Later I will focus on the system of heraldry, with special regard to the difference between English and French heraldic structures. Finally, I will give more detailed information about the ordinaries and charges which appear in the thirteenth centuries armorials. The rolls of arms are a very unique group of historical – especially heraldic – sources. Not only do they give us more detailed information about the age when using a shield with the owners sign became more reasonable and fashionable, but also we can detect some of the social processes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Moreover, the rolls of arms are highly useful sources for genealogical research. For this kind of research Richard Wagner's work, the CEMRA, is inevitable.²

Regarding the remanence of the rolls of arms, one can arrange them into several groups according to different aspects. The first aspect is the date of formation, which results two separated groups of the roll of arms. The first group contains unique, rare,

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2 Wagner (1950)

and valuable armorials created during the middle ages. The second group includes rolls of arms copied during the early modern age. When we examine some compilations from the second group we have to be very critical, because sometimes the editor of the copy made some changes based on their current knowledge, added some extra data, removed something or one compiler even added his ancestors to the copy in the seventeenth century as a proof of the existence of their nobility already during the reign of Edward I. Fortunately, we have the original armorial as well, which makes the seventeenth-century transcript irrelevant, but the later document is still a good example to prove how important critical thinking is, and how circumspect we have to be when dealing with copied armorials.

Classification of armorials

Regarding the dating I have to mention A. Richard Wagner's method. According to Wagner's system we have to find who was born the latest and who died the earliest.³ We can classify the armorial sources as they are blazoned versions or pictorial rolls (or their combinations).

Obviously, the most ideal case is when the armorials contain both of them, the description of the shields and pictures as well but this is the rarest possibility. The proper terminology of the formal description of a coat of arms is *blazon*. Henceforth, I will use the word *blazon* for the regular depictions of shields. Before we would get on to the third possibility of classification we have to take a nearer view at what the word *blazon* and blazoned shield means in practice. As I mentioned it above blazon is the formal description of a shield, using the heraldic terminology, which is rich but very limited. A blazon consists of the tincture (colors or metals) or texture of the coating of a shield. It might be a color or a furred enamel. If the shield's field includes two colors, the blazon has to include the situation of them. In the second place the ordinary has to be mentioned or the charge of the shield and the color, which is the main component of a coat of arms. Why are these blazoned or painted armorials so valuable and unique for historical research? The biggest amount of heraldic sources from these ages are seals. But from the seals we would be not able to know the colors of the coats of arms. In the case of the well-known shields it would not cause any problem, but since the thirteenth century is the beginning of the *living heraldry* the armorials just started to become more and more complicated. Which means, there are many coats of arms that have the same structure, ordinary or charges, only their colors were different and that meant the only distinction between them.

The rolls of arms can also be divided into four groups according to the nature of the coats they contain. The first group is the *general armorials*. This kind of rolls contains royal and noble blazons as well. Not only the local kings' blazon, but all of the kings and emperors of Europe and Jerusalem. This rare kind of rolls can help us to examine the flow of information at the age of compilation. The second group is called *occasional rolls*,

³ Wagner (1967) 43.

which covers all the armorials which were made on the occasion of a special event like a tournament or siege. They were written mostly from the end of the thirteenth century. The third group of the armorial rolls are the *regional rolls*. This group contains the lord of an area. One of the first is the list about the nobles of Kent. The fourth group is the collection according the ordinaries or charges. The last group of armorials became more popular during the later centuries.

The French and English system of ordinaries

The ordinaries are geometrical elements of the shield. We demark two different kinds of systems today, the English and the French. Originally the heraldic terminology and the system of heraldry came from France,⁴ and that system was adopted in England. The English heraldic system creates two groups of the ordinaries: *honourable ordinaries* (the main ordinaries), and the *subordinaries*.⁵ There are many different opinions today about which elements fall under the honourable ones, but there is a consensus that the elements from edge to edge are part of it. These are mentioned first in a blazon after the color of the field. Following this logic the subordinaries are those elements which do not touch the edges. The French system varies from the English that its structure contains diminutives as well.⁶ The diminutives are the shorter or thinner versions of the main ordinaries, followers of the main elements.

The charges

The case of charges is clearer. The first two big groups are the natural and the artificial groups of elements. In the case of the first group there are animated and unanimated elements. The first group contains the human forms, animals and plants. In case of humans in this age there are only body parts not whole human bodies, like on the shield of Man – *l'escu de gules, a treis iambes armez* (Camden Roll-D, 18th blazon).⁷ In the group of animals there can be birds, fish, mammals and reptiles. The unanimated elements cover the celestial bodies and not living elements from the ground, which can be for example a mountain. In the class of artificial charges there are clothes, instruments, tools, buildings and weapons. There are some more popular ordinaries and charges. It is not easy to name the most popular ordinary, however, in my opinion the most used ordinary is the fess. This thick vertical line usually is not “decorated” by any other elements during the examined centuries, only sometimes straddle by diminutives.

In the following part of the paper, I will examine the charges I found the most popular during my research, and I will highlight some problems I had to face during the examination. Firstly we have to mention the lion as a charge. The lion symbol has a very old tradition in the English heraldry. It has so many meanings that it makes clear why

4 Pastoureau (1979) 89.

5 Parker–Gough (1894) 34.

6 Fox-Davies (1904) 106.

7 Brault (1973)

the lion was the most popular charge not only in the Brittan heraldry but also in the continental one. Lion is the first royal symbol in heraldry. No other living or legendary animals or creatures, e.g. the dragon or the Welsh version, the wyvern,⁸ or the griffin, became more popular than the lion. Heraldry distinguishes a lot of positions and a lot of body parts related to the lion, thanks to the living heraldry's last period, when the coats of arms become more and more complicated and thanks to the time when the coats of arms stopped being used as a practical sign in the battlefield. During this period the armorials become more artistic, very elaborate and even overcrowded.

During the second half of the thirteenth century the figure of lion and leopard started to differentiat,⁹ moreover, the words of *rampant* and *passant* appeared to describe their position. However, the strict French terminology could not be naturalized in England, and this is followed by an inaccurate presentation. According Fox-Davies the difference between a lion and a leopard is their body position not their form. Which means in the case of the thirteenth-century blazons that every time a compiler wanted to describe a lion, he had to use the word *rampant* and when a leopard appeared on the shield, the word *passant* had to be used. What did a lion have to look like on a shield? The lion is standing on the two hind legs in profile and raising their forepaws. The head is on the centreline of the shield the two stepping hind legs on the two sides of the centreline. The tail arched, not infrequently there are two tails, which are twisted. This was one of the first variants for the lion as a charge, but there are some cases when a leopard has the twisted tail. Moreover there are some problems with the position of the face of the lion and the leopard. Usually the leopard is depicted in a facing position. In some isolated instances we can find the opposite in the early English armorials. This proves Fox-Davies' point of view that the continental heraldry was adopted only partially.

Amongst the birds the eagle is the most popular charge. The eagle has a symbolic meaning, as the lion it is a royal signet. We can often find the eagle on a monochrome field, but also with supplement elements. After the most popular animals, one of the most popular charge is the fish.¹⁰ It should be noted that while a fish could not be found so often on armorials, it had a special status. We never see a fish on shield on its own. There are always some subordinaries or diminutives around it, and the genus of the fish is written all the time. But not just written, the heraldic terminology has special words for the different types of fish. On a few shields there are dolphins, which were considered a fish in heraldry. After animals there is a big group of plants, including flowers.¹¹ The most used is the pentapetaled flower, the beam and rarely the heraldic rose. Last-named rose is sometimes blazoned with the green flower-stalk, which makes it special, because it is close to natural imagery. Two kinds of furs appears in the early blazons, the ermine and the vair.¹² Ermine is in all cases in a silver/argent field and

8 Bedingfield-Gwynn-Jones (1993) 81.

9 Fox-Davies (1909) 173.

10 *Ibid.*, 253.

11 Fox-Davies *op. cit.*, 162.

12 Brault (1997) 59.

the black tail. We cannot find the opposite combination or in other colors. If we take a closer look at the vair, it is noticeable that it is blue and silver all the time. Later, we can find different color combinations, but during the first century of the living heraldry, it is the above mentioned two colors. What makes the fur special is that the blazon does not have to mention the colors. Only if it diverges from the silver-black and blue-silver combinations, but sometimes the compiler wrote the standard colors to the blazon as well. But it has to be mentioned, that the continental language was only partially taken over to England.

Other charges were not used so often, like the deer, the antler, or different kinds of instruments like the buckle, the gonfanon, the shirtsleeve and the leather bottle.¹³ The antler is interesting because it is the only animal part that appears in the early rolls of arms during the examined period. Later, during the fifteenth century, we can find paws and legs as well. Moreover, there are some rarely appearing elements like the sun and the stars. At last I would like to mention the allusive arms, which means the name of the owner of the insignia recognizable. This unique group of the coats of arms appears from the earliest time, we can find them in the first armorials.

The English heraldic system was taken over from the French heraldry. Heraldry and the compilers of the armorials used the language of the French system, but it wasn't fully adopted and a special English terminology was born to blazon the shields. This present paper aimed to give a general overview of the main differences, although it also pointed out an English speciality in the case of lions. Equally interesting is the usage of the eagle, fish, plants and instruments. We can see that the early English heraldry follows the characteristics of the French system and terminology.

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¹³ Fox-Davies (1904)

ABSZTRAKT

Adalékok a 13. századi angol címertekercsek vizsgálatához

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Jelen tanulmányban arra vállalkozom, hogy egy általános áttekintést nyújtsak a korai angol, 13. századi címertanról. Mivel azonban ez nem választható el a kontinentális francia heraldikai rendszertől, így mindkettőbe betekintést nyújtok, előtérbe helyezve a főbb rendszerbeli különbségeket. Ezek után az angol címertekercsek csoportosítási lehetőségeire térek ki, érintve a forrásértéket és sajátosságait. A szigetországi heraldika 13. századi jellemzőivel foglalkozik a tanulmány második fele, amelyben a különböző címerábrák jellegzetességeit és néhány érdekességét járom körül. Különös figyelmet fordítok a népszerű oroszlán ábrára, illetve a majdnem olyan sikeres karriert befutó sas címerképre. Ezek után következnek a különböző halak, növények, illetve eszközök. Végül a tanulmány a korai címerek egy különleges csoportjának áttekintésével zárul, amelyben láthatjuk, hogy a beszélő címerek már a legkorábbi időktől fellelhetők az angliai címerek közt.

Kulcsszavak: címertan, Anglia, címertekercsek, oroszlán és sas ábra, beszélő címerek