4-15-1979

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Abstract
Examines heraldic devices of Arthur and several of his knights, attempting to “give probable religious meanings of each.” Accompanied by a bibliographic note by Ian Myles Slater.

Additional Keywords
Arthurian myth—Bibliography; Arthurian myth—Heraldry; Heraldry—Bibliography; Heraldry in Arthurian legend; Knights of King Arthur—Heraldry; Valerie Protopapas
HERALDRY IN THE ARTHURIAD: A BRIEF SURVEY

by Antoinette H. Brenion

Among the varied strands in the Arthurian mythos is the visual one of devices by which the various knights are recognized. The beasts and other symbols used on their shields indicate broadly the natures of the bearers, as well as suggesting further symbolic meanings. In this paper I will try to examine the devices of several of the knights and give probable religious meanings of each.

Heraldry has its own language, obscure to the uninitiated; a brief overview of the basic terms and principles may be useful to some readers.

The principal part of a coat of arms is the shield. Some also include supporters (two figures holding the shield), helmet, crest, and the like (as in our own Mythopoeic coat of arms); but these are not relevant to the Arthurian mythos, which took its rise in times when simplicity was essential; an armored knight's shield had to bear an easily recognizable device so that one could tell friend from foe in battle.

The field or ground of the shield is one of three kinds: a colour, a fur or a metal. The colours are five: blue (azure), red (gules), green (vert), black (sable), and purple (purpure). The metals are gold (or) and silver (argent). Of the fur, the two principal ones are ermine and vair. Ermine skin is white with a black tip to its tail; the heraldic ermine is a white background with black eyelashes scattered over it. Vair is a squirrel-skin of blue-grey with a white underbelly; it is conventionalized by inverted churchbell shapes of white on blue.

The field is "charged," i.e. has a figure or design on it. About twenty charges that appear frequently, mostly abstract patterns, are called "ordinaries." These include the "chief," a horizontal division of the shield such that the top third is a contrasting kind; the fess, a horizontal band taking up the middle third of the shield; the bar, a diminutive of the fess, which can appear in any part of the shield; the canton, a small square, one-third of a chief, in the upper left corner ("dexter" or right from the shield-bearer's point of view); the quarre, which is just what it sounds like, upper dexter. No metal may be placed on metal, or fur on fur, or color on color.

Greatest of the knights is of course King Arthur, and the first one mentioned with a figure on his shield in the early accounts. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, Arthur's shield shows the Virgin Mary, "...a circular shield called Frides, on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, which forced him to be thinking perpetually of her." (Historia, p. 217) Another shield attributed to Arthur has a red ground with three golden leopards arranged in a horizontal row. This is similar to the arms of England, with its three golden lions on a red ground. However, since it is difficult in the early drawings to determine exactly which animal is depicted, the beasts may well be lions with all their traditional symbolism: majesty, power, and kingship.

A crown is an obvious sign of royalty and sovereignty. Heraldic crowns are basically gold circlets with patterns which represent the rank of the wearer. For a king, it is a plain gold band with a floral motif gracing the decorative molding. Two of Arthur's shields show crowns: one is red with three golden crowns, and the other is blue with thirteen golden crowns arranged in a pattern of 4, 4, 4, and 1. Thus King Arthur's shields symbolize, as would be expected, the power and majesty of his high station.

One unexpected shield for Arthur is black with a golden sycamore torn from the ground, its roots exposed. Perhaps this represents Arthur when he was in hiding before he ascended to the throne; a man ignorant of and torn from his true ancestry.

Often associated with the Arthurian mythos is Sir Tristan (or Tristram, or Tristan), who, according to the oft-told story, drank a love-potion with Iseult (Isold, Isolde) of Ireland while escorting her to Cornwall to marry his uncle, King Mark (for whom the potion was intended). Most of the versions derived from the early Anglo-Norman Tristan romance by Thomas of Britain (c.1160-1180) assign the hero a golden lion, with some differences over the color of the field. Gottfried von Strassburg, who based his German version (c.1210) on Thomas's French text (which is now extant only in fragments) replaced the lion with a boar, which fits some dream-symbolism which he incorporated in his version. The late Roger Sherman Loomis suggested that Tristan's arms were intended to compliment Thomas's king, Henry II of England. The lion was used in the arms attributed to Geoffrey of Anjou, Henry's father, and they were certainly used by one of Henry's sons, Richard I (Lion-Heart), but the date of their actual adoption is obscure.

In his commentary on the tiles illustrating Thomas's version, found in the ruins of Chertsey Abbey, Loomis pointed out that the Lion rampant (a rampant beast stands on the left hind paw, its body inclined upward about forty-five degrees, the right hind paw raised from the ground, the fore limbs clawing the air in front of the head, and the tail lifted high and flexed) appears facing in different directions, depending on whether Tristan is receiving or striking a blow. The balance of the evidence suggests strongly that Tristan's lion was the Lion of Anjou, linking him to the English royal dynasty established by Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, but that it could also be considered a common personal symbol. As an example of the complexities in the romance tradition, the Italian collection Tavola Ritonda, which otherwise follows Thomas's Tristan story closely, explicitly denies that Tristan used a Lion, and assigns him other arms entirely, of unknown origin or significance.
One of the most renowned of the Arthurian knights is Sir Lancelot, whose tragic love for Queen Guinevere led to the destruction of the Round Table, the final battle and the end of the kingdom. He is often depicted as the best of the knights. Sir Lancelot too uses a heraldic lion; one of his shields is black with a rampant silver lion in the center. Again, we have an indicator of his personal courage and of his vassalage to Arthur. Another shield is silver with three diagonal red lines, which may, as in many such, represent the Trinity. The vivid contrast of red and white suggests the passionate devotion and heroic courage associated with Sir Lancelot.

In the Vulgate and related versions, Sir Galahad is the son of Sir Lancelot. His shield uses the same colors: the ground is silver, and either there is no charge or the charge is a red cross. But clearly the colors here carry quite a different meaning; the cross means sacrifice and atonement, and the silver suggests the purity inseparable from the name of Galahad.

Another knight of wide fame is Sir Gawain, a nephew of King Arthur and (in most sources) son of Queen Morgause, Arthur's half sister, and King Lot of Orkney. He is frequently depicted as the great example of knightly courtesy. One of the shields he bears is silver with a red quarter, the colors, as with Sir Lancelot, of devotion and courage. Some of Sir Gawain's other shields use eagles. One of them is the arms attributed to Judas Maccabaeus, in the medieval tradition of the Nine Worthies, a red background with a golden eagle probably displayed (i.e., its wings outspread.) The eagle is a symbol of kingship and dominion. It may be attributed to Sir Gawain to show that he is akin to Judas Maccabaeus, or perhaps to show descent.

Sir Gawain has another shield charged with a golden eagle, but on a purple ground. This is a double-headed eagle, fully displayed, with silver beak and claws. In contrast to the power and majesty of this bird, his brother Sir Gareth has a silver shield seeded with red eaglets, evidencing his lesser stature.

A third brother, Sir Agravain, uses the same colors as Sir Gareth (and Sir Gawain), but different devices: a rampant red lion and a peacock's tail (color not given) on a silver ground. The lion indicates vassalage to King Arthur while the colors show his family relationship. Thus he combines his status in family and court with his own individual image, a peacock tail, perhaps symbolizing pride.

Another shield for Sir Agravain is very similar to Sir Gawain's third shield, with the main difference being the eagle's claws and tongue. It is a purple shield with a golden double-headed eagle, but the eagle's claws and beak, as well as a circle around each eye, are red. It is charged over all with a green bar. The bar makes it distinctive since the claws, beak and eyes are not visible at a distance.

One of the earliest knights is Sir Kay, foster brother to King Arthur. When Arthur became king he made Kay his seneschal, arranging and commanding banquets, and responsible for the safety of the castle. One of Sir Kay's shields shows a blue background with two silver keys, perhaps crossed in an X-shape. These clearly symbolize the responsibility of guarding the castle and all its stores for his lord.

Some of the knights who do not have high places in the mythos nonetheless have very interesting designs. Sir Sagremore is one such. Those who saw Camelot by Lerner and Loewe may recall the words "Oh, there goes the black and crimson of his shield" when he fights Sir Lancelot. His shield is described as red with three golden eight-pointed mullets (stars), and on a silver canton over all is a seven-pointed black mullet. The canton hides one of the eight-pointed mullets. An alternate version has each mullet as five-pointed while another version gives the field as black. Eight-pointed stars are called Stars of Regeneration because eight symbolizes rebirth. Following the divine octave of creation comes the eighth day, a renewal of the first day; it is the day of Resurrection, of new light and new creation. There may also be an allusion to the eight persons saved in the ark. The seven-pointed star reflects the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, while the five-pointed star symbolizes guidance, merit, and protection. The reason for the change of field to black is unknown. However, silver ink gradually changes to blue and perhaps a very dark blue finally appears black.

Sir Yvain has at least three shields, all quite different; it is possible that each Sir Yvain is a different man. The first shield is blue with a golden lion having a red tongue and claws and a forked tail arranged in an X-shape; recall that this is the same device as Sir Tristram's, with a difference. The second shield is very plain, silver with a gold band running down the center. Here we have, of course, a violation of the rule no-metal-on-metal. The shield may have predated the rule, for it appears often in very old shields. The two metals represent majesty and purity, perhaps meant to apply to the character of Sir Yvain. The third shield is very ornate. It is gold with two red bars running across the shield horizontally. Each bar is composed of two circles joined
by links; the upper bar has an eagle and a lion while in the lower one they are reversed. Sir Yvain is known as "The Knight of the Lion" and is accompanied by a lion in the Romance of Yvain. Perhaps this shield is intended to show kingship over all animals and birds since the lion rules one and the eagle the other.

Sir Bors, a nephew of Sir Lancelot, has one shield that is ermine with three diagonal red lines. We have seen that this symbol may represent the Trinity. The charge is the same as one of Sir Lancelot's but the ground is different. The device used indicates a kinship since relatives often use similar devices or the same colors.

In Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Sir Bors is recognized by "that pelican on the casque" (helmet). The pelican, a symbol of sacrifice, is traditionally shown wounding itself to feed its young. Sir Bors is presenting himself as atoning for his past deeds. It is especially appropriate since Bors vowed a quest for the Holy Grail (another symbol of sacrifice) after seeing it in King Arthur's hall.

In sum: Lions are frequently seen in Arthurian shields, perhaps because of the majesty and power associated with the beast as well as its links to King Arthur and England, and to the house of Anjou. Eagles are common because of their power and majesty in flight. A double-headed eagle is able to look in both directions at once and thus can symbolize an ever-vigilant man. Stars serve as reminders of the heavens, the varying numbers of points all having different meanings. Each device used can have many meanings including hidden personal ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE
by Ian Myles Slater

Heraldry is not one of the most prominent topics in the modern study of "The Matter of Britain." It is not, for example, given any extensive treatment in the great collaborative history by leading scholars in the field, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, edited by the late Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959). Discussions often center on unusual coats of arms, such as Gawain's pentangle star in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, when they occur at all, rather than on examples of obedience to the laws of the Heraldic Art.

One possible reason for this situation is the chronological fact that the great flowering of Arthurian romance in the later twelfth and earlier thirteenth centuries was during the infancy of systematic heraldry, which makes it difficult to reach solid, supportable conclusions about the significance of literary descriptions. In addition, such major figures as Lancelot sometimes change shields, and arms, in the course of a story, as a disguise or to commemorate some event.

On the other hand, Arthurian literature, romances and pseudo-histories alike, provided opportunities for propaganda employing contemporary coats of arms, or recognizable variants of them, and heralds themselves were not slow to manufacture an emblem past for themselves. Between the efforts of romance-mongers and pseudo-historians, and the industry of imaginative herald writers, the heroes of classical antiquity as well as those in Arthurian and Carolingian cycles were provided with appropriate arms—even if not two writers might agree on what they were. Interesting examples of this process may be found in the collection The Story of Troilus: as told by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffroy Chaucer, and Robert Henryson, translated with an introduction by R. K. Gordon (J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1934; paperback edition, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1964).

In the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance these arms were somewhat standardized, and they provided painters and pageant directors with an easy way of labelling such figures as the Nine Worthies, the legendary Trojan Kings of the Franks and the Britons, the Twelve Peers of France, etc. In some cases, an attempt was made to harmonize conflicting accounts. King Arthur was assigned a picture of the Virgin Mary on his shield in the well-known and 'authoritative' History of the Kings of Britain, by Geoffrey of Monmouth (translated by Lewis Thorpe, Penguin Books, 1966, 1973). In other works and artists, as the Nine Worthies for the Hofkirche statues of the Nine Worthies for the Hofkirche.

The principle technical discussion of the early heraldic contributions to this area is the book Earliest Blazon: Heraldic Terminology in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, with Special Reference to Arthurian Literature, by Gerard J. Brault (Oxford, 1972), based on medieval texts, with three plates. For basic investigation of visual representations of Arthurian coats of arms in their literary and cultural contexts, however, the essential book is still Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art, by Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis (The Modern Language Association, New York, 1938). This is almost literally a monument of scholarship (it is a coffee-table size volume, with an excellent commentary in addition to a super-abundance of plates, showing statues, reliefs, tapestries, murals, etc., in addition to manuscript illuminations (and early woodcuts). Unfortunately, all are in black and white, which makes for a sad search for use, although details on color are often supplied by the accompanying text. The principle technical discussion of the early heraldic contributions to this area is the book Earliest Blazon: Heraldic Terminology in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, with Special Reference to Arthurian Literature, by Gerard J. Brault (Oxford, 1972), based on medieval texts, with three plates. For basic investigation of visual representations of Arthurian coats of arms in their literary and cultural contexts, however, the essential book is still Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art, by Roger Sherman Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis (The Modern Language Association, New York, 1938). This is almost literally a monument of scholarship (it is a coffee-table size volume, with an excellent commentary in addition to a super-abundance of plates, showing statues, reliefs, tapestries, murals, etc., in addition to manuscript illuminations (and early woodcuts). Unfortunately, all are in black and white, which makes for a sad search for use, although details on color are often supplied by the accompanying text. (Cont'd on p. 38)
the dead, although never once entering their actual realm. This method is called necromancy. Aeneas, however, journeys into the actual realm of the dead, the underworld, and encounters with the dead in their own environment.

This Vergilian nekyia is known as a katabasis and more closely resembles the nekyia of Aragorn, who, like Aeneas, confronts the dead in their own environment.

Aeneas and Aragorn are both aided in their quests by the lord of a river. In Book VII of the Aeneid, Father Tiber, god of the Tiber River, visits Aeneas and advises him on battle strategies. Elrond aids Aragorn by commanding the water at the Ford of Bruinen to rise and halt the advancing Ringwraiths.

The Battle at the Ford of Bruinen resembles the Homeric mache parapatetos, a battle about a river. In Book XXII of the Iliad Achilles fights the Trojans on the banks of the river Skamandros, which, provoked by the carnage, rises to engulf the warlike hero. The river in Book VII of the Iliad, however, fights against the hero, while in both the Aeneid and LOTR the river assists the hero, and I therefore feel that the river motif in LOTR is more a Vergilian than Homeric influence.

The Aeneid and LOTR share a similar format. Both involve first a hero's journey and then a battle to regain a promised kingdom. Hence, the famed Odyssean-Iliadic structure of the Aeneid also appears in LOTR.

The cities associated with each hero have a common numerical feature. Seven circles make up Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor, while Rome, capital of Italy, stands upon seven hills.

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Many illustrated books on the Arthurian legend contain at least a few color reproductions of works of art assembled by the Loomises, in addition to those in black and white. One of the more useful, and beautiful, of these books is Richard Barber's King Arthur in Legend and History (Cardinal paperback edition, Sphere Books Ltd., London, 1973), with thirty colour and thirty black and white plates, many with more than one medieval or modern illustration. Barber's King Arthur is (or was) available in paperback at a comparatively low price (U.K. £ 1.00), given the many illustrations. Besides the selection of medieval and modern art, the book contains a fairly detailed, if somewhat dogmatic, text, a chronological list of major (and some minor) Arthurian literature from c. 550 to 1958, and an annotated select bibliography. (This is a reply to the suggestions of Roger Sherman Loomis on the subject, found in the afore-mentioned Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art and reprinted in a much more accessible volume, now available in paperback; The Romance of Tristram and Yseult, by Thomas of Britain; Translated from the Old French and Old Norse, with the Middle English, German, and Italian retellings for some details. This edition also includes twenty-three of the best-preserved of the thirty-five known Chertsey Abbey tiles, discovered in the ruins about ten miles from Windsor Castle in 1885 and 1922, and apparently dating from about 1215. There is a 12-page commentary excerpted from the Arthurian Legends volume included (besides the interesting, but not entirely reliable, introduction).

Most of these books include bibliographies or bibliographic notes. Those interested in pursuing further investigations should be aware of a major bibliographic resource, the annual Bibliographic Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society, which has appeared for over thirty years. Articles are grouped by country of origin/language, and the indexing is usually extremely good. In addition to the annotated bibliographies, there are usually several excellent articles or essays. Sets should be available in college and university libraries.

The epic theme of nostos (a hero's return) is common to both the Aeneid and LOTR. The Returns, a poem in the epic style attributed to Homer, describes the returns of the Achaeans heroes from Troy to a dangerous situation from which the hero is never fully able to recover. Odysseus, Diomedes, and Agamemnon, the greatest three surviving Achaeans, meet with treachery, exile, and death upon their respective homecomings. Only Odysseus is able to regain even a fraction of his old station. Aeneas and Aragorn, in contrast to the dethroned Achaeans, successfully return to recapture their ancient kingdoms.

In both Vergil and Tolkien the hero does not enjoy a total victory as he wins his kingdom only through the deaths of many good men, yet he stands alone as the most powerful ruler in his world.

In conclusion, one can demonstrate the existence of both Homeric and Vergilian motifs in LOTR. A closer look, however, reveals that the characters and events in LOTR more closely resemble those events in the Aeneid than those of the Homeric epics. From this comparison it is evident that although the influence of Homer on The Lord of the Rings cannot be denied, the influence of Vergil's Aeneid is clearly the stronger.

1. Paul H. Kocher, Master of Middle Earth, (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1972), p. 130
2. Ibid., p. 147