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SIGNETS AND SCUTCHEONS: JAMES I AND THE UNION OF THE CROWNS

Adrian Ailes

Between 2 and 3 a.m. on 24 March 1603 Elizabeth I died at Richmond, Surrey. Two days later, on 26 March, James VI of Scotland learned that he had succeeded to the late queen's throne as James I of England. On 3 April he attended Sunday service at St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, before bidding his people and pregnant wife farewell and on 5 April leaving his homeland to secure his new kingdom. Thirty-three days and over 300 newly-created knights later he arrived in London, taking care not to enter the city before the late queen's funeral but in plenty of time for his own coronation on St James' day, 25 July. One of his first actions as king of both countries was to order the production of new coins and seals depicting his new royal arms as king of England.

The royal arms of the early Stuart kings of England are well known (**Figure 1a**). They depict in the first and fourth quarters the arms of France, three fleurs-de-llys, quartering the arms of England, three lions passant guardant. These were the royal arms as used by Elizabeth. James, who was always keen to emphasise his new status as king of 'Great Britain', France and Ireland, now further quartered this (already quarterly) coat with his own arms of Scotland, a lion rampant within a double tressure flory counter flory, and, for the first time in the royal arms, the Irish harp.¹ This attractive new design remained in place until James II's flight to France in 1688. Our earliest known description of them appears in a letter from James dated 13 April 1603 to his privy council; he was then at Newcastle on his journey south. It refers to the production of new coinage and the designs to be used.² What is little known is that James had already been using at least one earlier heraldic design as king of England and Scotland (as well as France and Ireland) before this date. Indeed, his letter of 13 April in which he describes the new arms is sealed with one of those prototype coats.

According to a paper written in 1661 by Elias Ashmole, Windsor Herald, James had first used one of these designs on his signet within 10 days of Elizabeth's death.³ He notes he had seen James' 'privy Signett' on a letter sent from Holyrood House, Edinburgh, on 4 April. Although royal letters of that date still exist amongst Ashmole's papers now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, none bears the new seal.⁴ However, in the same collection are two examples of what is presumably the same

¹ Henry VIII had been declared *king* of Ireland in 1541 but did not alter his arms accordingly. He and his Tudor successors had, however, used the Irish harp on a separate shield.

² Bod. Ms Ashmole 1729 fo. 79v; partial transcript in Henry Ellis, *Original Letters Illustrative of English History* (London 1824), vol. 3, pp. 67-9. Since Elizabeth's death James had been using his previous privy seal and signet depicting the Scottish royal arms or a crowned thistle: W. H. Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole* (Oxford, 1845), cols 1451-3.

³ NA PRO 30/24/44/74; copy also in the College of Arms (see note 21 below).

⁴ Black, *op. cit.* col. 1451. In one example the seal is missing.

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signet. These are attached to letters dated 11 and 13 April respectively and sent by James from Newcastle.⁵ Their designs match those given by Ashmole. The seal, which is in paper embossed over wax, depicts a quarterly shield. In the first quarter are the three lions of England, in the second the lion rampant of Scotland within its double tressure, in the third the fleurs-de-lys of France and in the fourth the Irish harp. The shield is surmounted by a crown and encircled nearest the shield by a collar of thistles for the Order of the Thistle and beyond this by the Garter collar with motto. The same arms can be seen on an engraving of the new king produced in 1603 (**Figure 1b**).⁶

On the very same day that (according to Ashmole) this first design was in use measures were being taken in London to produce entirely new signets; it may be that James' first signet, complete with Irish harp, was hastily produced and not intended as permanent. On that day, 4 April 1603, whilst James was still in Scotland, his principal secretary, Sir Robert Cecil, issued a royal warrant from Whitehall, London, to Charles Anthony, his majesty's engraver of seals and stamps, to produce a greater and lesser signet both in gold to be made for dealing with the king's letters and other warrants (**Plate 4**). Cecil carefully set out the seal legends to be used reflecting the king's new titles and he states that the design should include the 'union of the Armes of both Realmes England and Scotland, with the which his Majesty's pleasure in that behalf we having bene made acquainted'. He refers Anthony to certain patterns delivered to him but unfortunately these no longer exist.⁷

Cecil's acquaintance with the king's pleasure regarding the new royal arms may well stem from one of James' first decisions as king of England. On 27 March, the day after he had learned of Elizabeth's death, James wrote to Cecil commanding him to have a 'cachet' made for sealing letters sent in the king's name. The king specifically mentions that the new seal should contain his arms (of Scotland) joint with those of England, instructions which Cecil faithfully repeats in his warrant of 4 April.⁸ Impressions of Cecil's two new signets appear to have survived. However, they still do not depict the now familiar arms of the early Stuart sovereigns of

⁵ Bod. Ms Ashmole 1729 fos. 77v, 79v.

⁶ A. M. Hind, *Engraving in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, part II: *the Reign of James I* (Cambridge 1955), pp. 35-36 and pl. 10. I am grateful to Erika Ingham of the National Portrait Gallery for this reference.

⁷ NA SP 40/1 fo. 59; *CSP Dom 1603-10*, p. 2; warrant illustrated in James Travers, *James I: The Masque of Monarchy* (Kew 2003), pp. 16-17 (the seal illustrated on p. 14 does not fit Cecil's description).

⁸ *HMC Salisbury (Cecil) XV* (1930), p. 10. I am grateful to James Travers for this reference. Cecil was appointed Keeper of the Privy Seal and Signet on 1 April (*ibid.* p. 25). On 4 April the Privy Council passed an act that such a cachet was to be made which may explain Cecil's 'we have been made acquainted with the king's pleasure' (my italics) regarding the joint arms as specified in his warrant of the same date: John Erskine, *The Principles of the Law of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1802), p. 175. The king's wishes regarding the joint arms may have also been repeated in letters dated 28 and 31 March: Frederick Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer being the payments made out of His Majesty's Revenue during the Reign of James I* (London 1836), p. 1.

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England since they do not include the arms of Ireland. Presumably Cecil had obeyed James' instructions of 27 March to join the Scottish arms with those of England as precisely that and no more; hence the instructions in his warrant to display 'the union of the Armes of both Realmes' with no mention of Ireland. The new signets, therefore, depict in the first and fourth quarters the arms of the realm of England, namely France quartering England, and in the second and third quarters arms of the kingdom of Scotland; these same arms can be seen in an undated (1603?) engraving of James I and Prince Henry Frederick (**Figure 1c**).⁹ The earliest extant example of the greater signet in the Ashmolean papers portraying this design is attached to a letter dated 21 April sent by James from Worksope and of the lesser signet from 1 May.¹⁰

As already mentioned James had decided on the final design of his new arms (which included those of Ireland) by 13 April when he describes them in a letter regarding his new coinage. They were certainly in use by 10 May when James, having abandoned the earlier seals ordered by Cecil, used them on the third signet of his new reign.¹¹ It was now essential for the new coinage and various royal and departmental seals should be heraldically correct.¹² On 8 May the king had ordered Charles Anthony to produce a new great seal and those for the various courts of law, 'accordinge to this patterne herewith sent unto you'.¹³ The seal was delivered on 19 July and again incorporated not only the now well established and permanent version of the royal arms complete with Irish harp but also (in the field of the seal) the unicorn of Scotland.¹⁴ In the meantime, on 29 April, orders had been made for the arms of the late queen set up in churches to be altered 'according to the quarterings of our own coat of arms'.¹⁵

Just how far the English heralds were involved in the design of the new arms is difficult to say. Officers of arms are supposed to have travelled north to meet the king during his stay in York from 16-18 April.¹⁶ They later met James on his entry into London on 7 May and on Friday 13 William Dethick, not one of the most popular or pleasant Garter Kings of Arms, was knighted by his new sovereign.¹⁷ Doubtless most of them, including William Camden as Clarenceux, were heavily involved in preparations for the late queen's funeral, which heraldically was to prove the most sumptuous yet. They were also very busy examining precedents for James' coronation.¹⁸

⁹ Hind, *op. cit.* p. 56, pl. 26a.

¹⁰ Bod. Ms Ashmole 1729 fos. 83v, 85v, 87v, 89v.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, fo. 97. For payment to Anthony by writ dated 9 May see Devon, *op. cit.* p. 2.

¹² In a warrant dated 4 April at Holyrood House James had ordered that for the time being Elizabeth's great seal should continue in use whilst a new seal was prepared. The old seal was physically handed over to him at Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, on 3 May, a few days before he entered London; W. de G. Birch, 'On the Great Seal of James I', *JBAA* 26 (1870), pp. 218-21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18. The pattern no longer exists. See also Devon, *op. cit.* p. 2.

¹⁴ Birch, 'On the Great Seal of James I', p. 219; A. B. and A. Wyon, *The Great Seal of England* (London 1887), p. 78.

¹⁵ *CSP Dom Addenda 1580-1625*, p. 422.

¹⁶ D. Harris Wilson, *King James VI and I* (London 1956), p. 162.

¹⁷ John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First* (4 vols., London 1828), vol. 1, pp. 113, 120.

¹⁸ *CSP Ven 1603-7*, p. 27.

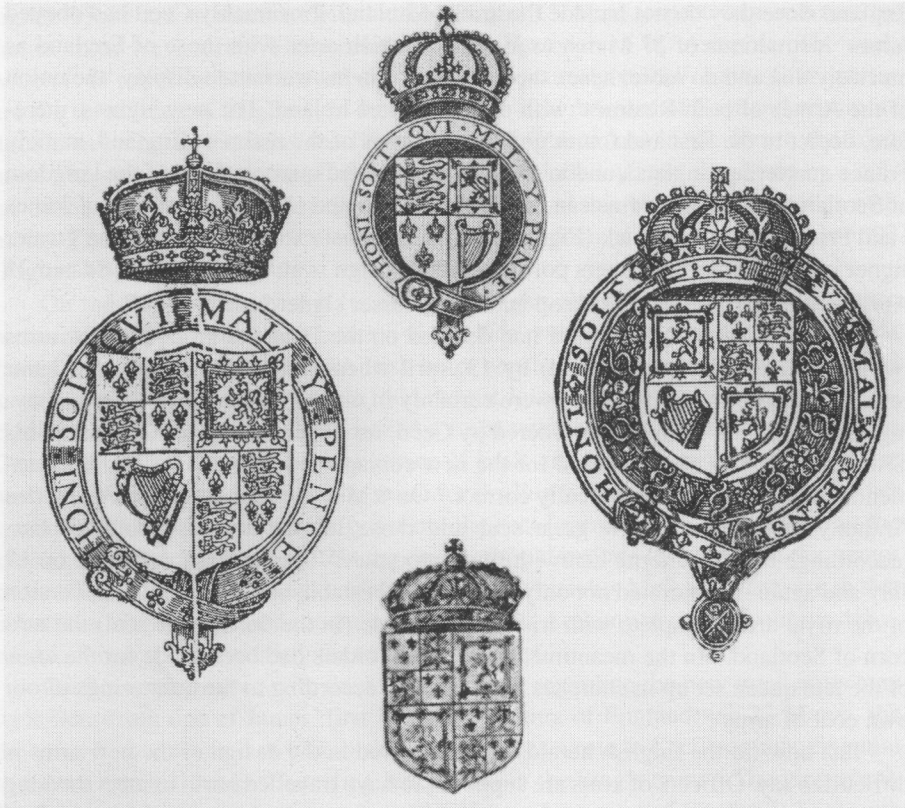


Figure 1: Versions of the royal arms used by James I of England and VI of Scotland.

Left (a), the final version of the royal arms. From Ralph Brooke, *Catalogue and succession of the Kings of England* (London 1619). Top (b), the first version used by James on his first signet as king of England and Scotland. From a portrait dated 1603; by kind courtesy of the National Maritime Museum. Bottom (c), the second version as used by James on his second signet produced on the instructions of Robert Cecil. From an anonymous engraving (1603?), by kind courtesy of Cambridge University Press. Right (d), the royal arms as used by James in Scotland. From Nichol's *Progresses of James the First* (4 vols., London 1828).

Despite some initial hitches then, by mid-April the new Stuart arms as used in England had finally been agreed. This left plenty of time for the forthcoming coronation where the officers of arms wore their new tabards displaying the arms of all four kingdoms.¹⁹ Why were the first two earlier versions abandoned? The omission of the Irish harp clearly ran counter to James' desire to be seen from the very outset of his reign as king of Great Britain, France and Ireland. The decision to abandon

¹⁹ Ibid., p.75 where the Venetian Secretary does not say how the arms were marshalled; *CSP Dom 1603-10*, p. 25. The tabards may have been ready for the earlier Garter Feast at Windsor (ibid., p. 18). Warrants for the new tabards refer to the newly marshalled arms (Bod. Ms Ashmole 857 p. 56).

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the design that separated the three lions of England from the fleurs-de-lys of France is more complicated. The answer, however, might well be found in Ashmole's paper to which reference has already been made. This is entitled 'Considerations and Reasons why the Armes of France and England should continue quartered as now they are; in the first quarter of your Majesties Scutcheon of Armes' and was addressed to Charles II. In this Ashmole discusses the reasons why the arms of England were first quartered behind those of the more prestigious kingdom of France in support of Edward III's claim to that title. This resulted in 'one entire Coate ... namely the Armes of England'. Hence, states Ashmole, Henry V used coins in France depicting two shields, one for France (the three fleurs-de-lys), the other for England, namely France quartering England. Had the latter coat represented his arms as king of England *and* France then why, asks Ashmole, did Henry need to show the first shield depicting the royal arms of France.

Ashmole refers to James having initially split the quartered arms of France and England on his first signet used within ten days of Elizabeth's death but adds 'this *Error* was very early taken Notice off' (my italics). Ashmole continues that 'upon better consideration' and 'with reference to the intrest of State' James realised that the quarterly arms 'could not bee altered, without greate damage of his Tytle to the throne of France', hence his instructions of 13 April to reinstate the quarterly coat.²⁰ In his summing up to Charles II as to why the quarterly coat of France and England should not be split Ashmole notes that this single coat has always been 'inviolably preserved from alteration, and which upon 2nd thoughts and fuller deliberation were Confirmed by your Royall Grandfather', namely James; even kings (and divinely sanctioned ones at that) could have second thoughts.

The reason for Charles considering his division of the quarterly arms of England may have been to satisfy the vanity of Louis XIV of France.²¹ Whatever the case, in 1660 his engraver to the Mint, Thomas Simon, depicted the quarterly arms: England (three lions only), Scotland, France, and Ireland, on a pattern for a gold broad coin.²² It was this that may well have prompted Ashmole to write his paper in which he states that these arms (first seen in James I's reign) are now being proposed to his majesty. Ashmole took the matter seriously enough to advise his royal master not to prejudice his title and claim to France. For him at least this was no heraldic triviality but 'an Affaire of so publique and high a Concernement as this both is and may prove to bee'. The political implications of heraldry were still far from dead. Even the new Scottish version of the royal arms in which the lion rampant took precedence

²⁰ On 17 April the Venetian secretary in England wrote that the new king was determined never to abandon his claim to France (*CSP Ven 1603-7*, pp. 5f.).

²¹ The reason is given in Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford 1988), p. 189, which refers to an eighteenth-century copy of Ashmole's paper by John Anstis, Garter King of Arms 1718-44, now in the College of Arms; I am grateful to Antti Matikkala for this reference. Anstis dates Ashmole's paper to 16 June 1661. Ashmole has signed and annotated his own version in the National Archives.

²² Interestingly Simon changed this coat to the normal Stuart version of the royal arms on a later revision (produced after Ashmole's paper) in 1663; G. C. Brooke, *English Coins from the Seventh Century to the Present Day* (London 1950), p. 237 and pl. LX nos 1, 3.

over the arms of England (or rather France quartering England) could still cause offence when used in England as late as 1613 (**Figure 1d**).²³ Deciding on the new union flag likewise was not without its problems.²⁴

As king of England and Scotland James may not have had to wear two crowns simultaneously but as king of Great Britain, France and Ireland he did somehow have to bear at least three different coats. Just how this was to be managed had clearly not been sufficiently thought through by James and Cecil before Elizabeth's death. Payments to the royal seal engraver refer to *various* patterns for the quartering of his majesty's arms and for new signets made after the *third* pattern.²⁵ The division of what was then considered the single arms of England, namely France quartering England, may have been an initial 'error'. So too was the omission of James' addition of the Irish harp. This lapse in future planning is perhaps all the more surprising since both James from his mother and Cecil from his father would have both been well aware of the propaganda value of heraldry in which certain claims and rights could be, and were, tangibly displayed. William Cecil had taken Mary Queen of Scots' use of the English royal arms as a particularly provocative expression of her rivalry to Elizabeth's throne.²⁶ Fortunately by the time of James' arrival in his new capital and the minting of new coinage and the cutting of a great seal, the final design of the new royal arms (at least for use in England) had been decided. The Glorious Revolution and the union of parliaments were to change this heraldic situation for the Stuarts yet again.

Appendix

List of James I signets (April-May 1603) in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmole MS 1729.

(a) First signet: Quarterly shield: 1st quarter England (three lions); 2nd Scotland; 3rd France (three fleurs de lis); 4th Ireland, all crowned and within collars of the Thistle

²³ NA SP 14/72 fo. 103. This version of the arms (Quarterly 1st and 4th Scotland, 2nd France quartering England, and 3rd Ireland) was used on James' great seal for Scotland: J. H. Stevenson and M. Wood, *Scottish Heraldic Seals*, vol. 1: *Public Seals* (Glasgow 1940), pp. 16f. (earliest date 18 April 1605), and *BM Seals* no. 17222; but it was not used on Scottish coins till 1610 (Brooke, *English Coins*, p. 196). See also A. Wyon, 'The Great Seals of Scotland, part ii', *JBAA* 45 (1889), pp. 235-49 at 247, and Hilary Jenkinson, 'The Great Seal of England: Deputed or Departmental Seals', *Archaeologia* 85 (1936), p. 324 and pl. xcv (nos 3 & 4).

²⁴ See especially Bruce Galloway, *The Union of England and Scotland 1603-1608* (Edinburgh 1986), pp. 82-4.

²⁵ Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer*, pp. 2, 5; NA AO1/212/1 rots 1d, 2.

²⁶ See especially John Guy, 'My Heart is My Own': *The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London 2004), pp. 95, 96, 105, 464, 509; C. Wilfrid Scott-Giles, *The Romance of Heraldry* (London 1967), pp. 162-5; Patrick Barden, 'The Royal Arms, Badges and Mottoes during the Reign of Queen Mary 1542-1567', *Double Tressure*, 14 (1992), pp. 19-29; and Bod. Ms Ashmole 858 p. 54.

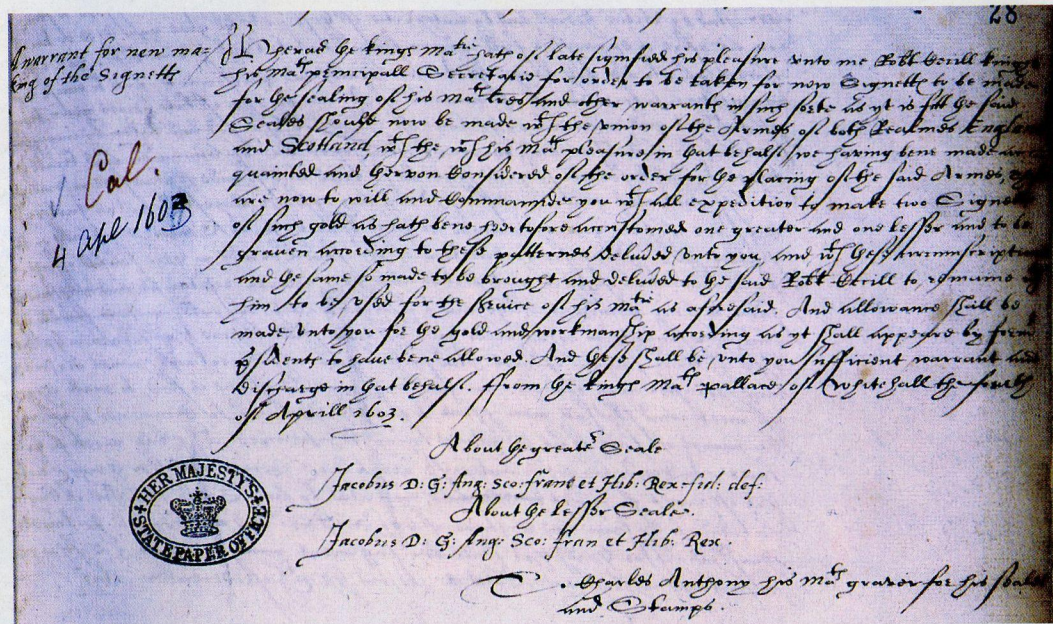
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and of the Garter. JACOBVS [] FRA SCO [] FIDEI DEFENS. 50cms. [4?] 11, 13 April 1603 (fos. 77v and 79v).

(b) Second signet (greater): Quarterly shield: 1st & 4th quarters France quartering England; 2nd & 3rd Scotland, all crowned and between the letters I R. JACOBVS DG ANGL SCO FRAN [] HIB REX FID DEF. 40 cms. 21, 23, 27 April 1603 (fos. 83v, 85v, 87v).

(c) Second signet (lesser): Same arms again crowned between I R. JACOBVS DG ANG SCO FRAN HIB REX. 35 cms. 1 May 1603 (fo. 89v).

(d) Third signet (lesser?): Quarterly shield: 1st & 4th quarters France quartering England; 2nd Scotland; 3rd Ireland, all crowned between the letters IR. IACOBVS DG ANG SCO FRA ET HIBER REX. 32cms. 10 May 1603 (fo. 97).



Sir Robert Cecil's warrant (4 April 1603) instructing James' seal engraver, Charles Anthony, to produce greater and lesser signets depicting 'the union of the Arms of both Realms England and Scotland'. NA (PRO): SP 40/1 fo.59. See p. 16.