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# PLATE 1



Above (a), armorial medallion found in the parish of Runciton Holme, Norfolk, in 2005; *see page 19*. Below left (b), detail of a shield of the *Equites Honoriani Taifali iuniores* from the *Notitia Dignitatum*, Bod Ms Canon. Misc. 378, fo.138r; *see page 22*. Below right (c), 'Dragon-and-Pearl' motif on a porcelain stem bowl. Ming dynasty, AD 1403-1424; *see page 23*.



By courtesy of the Bodleian Library

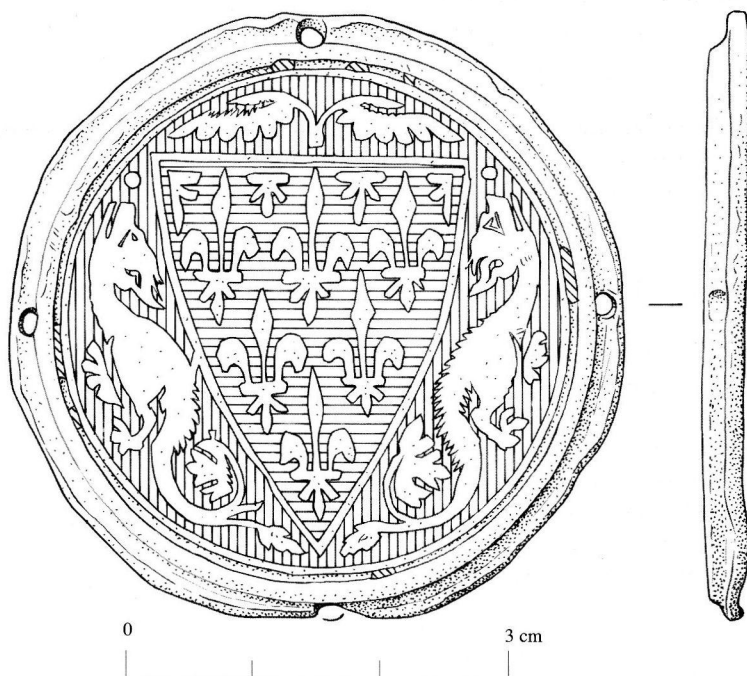


By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

# THE 'DRAGON-AND-PEARL' MOTIF ON A MEDIEVAL ARMORIAL ROUNDEL FROM NORFOLK

Steven Ashley

*In memory of John A. Goodall, FSA.<sup>1</sup>*



An armorial medallion (illustrated above and **Plate 1a**) was found in 2005 with the aid of a metal detector in the parish of Runcton Holme, Norfolk,<sup>2</sup> and the details of its discovery reported to the Finds Identification and Recording Section of Norfolk Landscape Archaeology at Gressenhall. In addition to the familiar arms of *France Ancient* the roundel bears an archaic motif derived from the nomadic tribes of the Central Asian Steppe.

<sup>1</sup> John Goodall was always generous with his time and knowledge and enthusiastic about the work of others. He kindly read an early draft of this short note and had agreed to be the co-author of an expanded version of this paper that would also have considered the relationship between European and Asian depictions of dragons. Sadly this paper cannot now be realised. I publish here a revised version of my original note.

<sup>2</sup> Norfolk Historic Environment Record 43135.

### The Roundel

The gilt and *champlevé* enamelled copper-alloy medallion is circular (diameter 49mm, 3.5mm thick) with a concave flange pierced by four rivet-holes obliquely-angled inwards, the lower of which is broken. All four rivets are missing. The arms displayed on the central shield are those of France Ancient: *Azure semy-de-lys or*. The shield of France is set below two palmettes springing from a single stalk and between two wyverns, each with a pellet above its mouth, on a red enamelled field. There is a narrow engraved bordering line around the central design that contains fragments of turquoise enamel.

A number of medieval mounts of similar form have been published.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the example under discussion here, which is cast in one piece, most of these mounts appear to be two-part composite objects, with a central disc and separate frame.<sup>4</sup> Some later examples are very elaborate.<sup>5</sup> They have been identified as mounts from, variously: portable furniture, mazers (vessels), morses (ecclesiastical copes), belts and horse harness. One-piece mounts of slightly different form, from Limoges, were employed on *coffrets* (small chests or caskets).<sup>6</sup> This mount was probably originally attached to either portable furniture, such as a casket, or to horse harness. It was discovered in a field, the centre of which is c. 330 metres from the church of St Andrew, South Runcton, a possible candidate for the location of any such high quality furnishing. If however it was derived from harness then the loss of such an item in transit would not be unusual.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Campbell, 'Badge of Richard II', in J. Alexander and P. Binski (edd.), *The Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400* (London 1987), p. 524, no 725; G. C. Dunning, 'Heraldic and decorated metalwork and other finds from Rievaulx Abbey, Yorkshire', *AntJ* 45 (1965), pp. 53-63; R. Marks and A. Payne, *British Heraldry from its Origins to c.1800* (London 1978) pp. 74f (no 142: 'Circular plaque with the arms of Warden Abbey (Beds.)'); W. de C. Prideaux, 'Notes on medieval enamelled armorial horse trappings with especial reference to a Weymouth find', *Proceedings of the Dorset Field Club* 32 (1911), pp. 226-38; Anon. 'Harlech Castle: a recent find', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 1921, p. 70; and especially the discussions in G. Egan, 'Circular-composite armorial mounts', in G. Egan and F. Pritchard, *Dress Accessories c.1150-c.1450 (Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 3)*, London 1991) pp. 181-4, and S. Margeson, *Norwich Households: the medieval and post-medieval finds from Norwich survey excavations 1971-1978 (East Anglian Archaeology 58: Norwich 1993)*, pp. 93f.

<sup>4</sup> A one-piece enamelled mount closely paralleling the example described here, bearing a white quatrefoil surmounted by a turquoise cross potent on a blue field, was discovered recently in Great Dunham, Norfolk (HER 48874).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Marks and Payne, *British Heraldry*, pp. 74-5 ('A fifteenth century mount from Bedfordshire').

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the enamelled armorial mounts on two thirteenth century coffrets illustrated in E. Taburet-Delhaye and B. De Chancel-Bardelot, *Enamels of Limoges 1100-1350* (New York 1996), pp. 360-3 and pp. 376-8, catalogue nos 123 and 133 (by B. De Chancel-Bardelot and M. Pastoureaux).

<sup>7</sup> S. Ashley, *Medieval Armorial Horse Furniture in Norfolk (East Anglian Archaeology 101: Gressenhall 2002)*, p.30.

### The Arms and the Wyverns

The arms of France Ancient shown here were used first by prince Louis of France, son and heir of Philip Augustus, on his seal of 1211.<sup>8</sup> They were subsequently used by kings of France and quartered in England on the Great Seal of Edward III in 1340, to illustrate the English claim to the French throne. Henry IV reduced the number of *fleurs-de-lys* to three in 1404/5 following their reduction on French seals and coins in the late fourteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

The wyverns on this roundel fill the space created on both sides of the shield when placed on a circular background. Pairs of beasts and monsters are often used in this way and are the precursors of true heraldic supporters.<sup>10</sup> Two wyverns can be found employed in a similar manner on either side of a shield bearing the arms of England on a seal bag of 1319.<sup>11</sup> The way in which these wyverns are depicted, however, may have a more complex and exotic ancestry than it is usually possible to trace.

Each of the flanking wyverns is pursuing a small pellet suspended just in front of its mouth (plate 2). The deliberate and distinctive combination of wyvern (two-legged dragon) and pellet appears to be a variation on the Chinese 'Dragon-and-pearl' motif, where a dragon is shown chasing a ball or pearl that may represent the sun or the moon and which 'grants all desires'.<sup>12</sup> Dragons have been depicted in China since the Shang Dynasty (c. 1700-1050 BC). Shang Dynasty dragons were shown with either one or two pairs of legs.<sup>13</sup> During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) they take on the more familiar four-legged form.<sup>14</sup> However, their symbolic importance increased (along with that of the Red Bird) during the T'ang Dynasty (AD 618-906).<sup>15</sup> It is during this period that the combination of Dragon-and-Pearl, with its Buddhist connotations, was probably introduced to China from Central Asia.<sup>16</sup>

An obvious difference between the image on the roundel and the now ubiquitous Chinese motif is the number of legs that the dragons/wyverns possess. Considerations of space and design if nothing else may have dictated the number of limbs shown here. Dragons with two legs (wyverns) are commonly found in medieval Europe. Notably, one appears in the Bayeux Tapestry as king Harold's standard and others are depicted in the borders.<sup>17</sup> Two-legged dragons can also be found

<sup>8</sup> W. M. Hinkle, *The Fleurs de Lis of the Kings of France 1285-1488* (Southern Illinois 1991), p. 4 and plate 1.

<sup>9</sup> Hinkle, op. cit. pp. 40-8.

<sup>10</sup> *PRO Seals* 1, p. 7 and plate 3, no P76.

<sup>11</sup> A. Payne, 'Medieval Heraldry' in Alexander and Binski, *The Age of Chivalry*, fig. 28. An enamelled copper-alloy roundel from Holme Hale, Norfolk (HER 34512) has a shield bearing the arms of the bishopric of Ely between two dragons addorsed and below another, also with its back towards the shield; Ashley, op. cit. fig. 20, no 196.

<sup>12</sup> S. R. Canby, 'Dragons', in J. Cherry (ed.), *Mythical Beasts* (London 1995), pp. 26-8, and H. Nickel 'The Dragon and the Pearl', *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26 (1991), pp. 139-46.

<sup>13</sup> J. Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: the Lotus and the Dragon* (London 1984), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Canby, op. cit. p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Rawson, op. cit. pp. 93-9.

<sup>16</sup> Nickel, op. cit. p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> D. M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London 1985), plates 71 and 14, 17-8, 21, 25, 43-4 and 57.

in Central Asia: dragons are frequently employed in Seljuk decorative art and a two-legged incarnation is shown in combat with a warrior on a thirteenth century plaster frieze from Konya, Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

In Europe stylised versions of the 'Dragon-and-pearl' motif appear on shields of late Roman cavalry units shown in the *Notitia Dignitatum* muster roll of AD 408 (**Plate 1b**). These units included recruits from among the Taifali and Marcomanni, Germanic tribes who had settled in the region of what is now Hungary and the Ukraine, where they were in contact with Alans, Sarmatians and other nomadic peoples from the Central Asian steppe.<sup>19</sup>

A similar or related motif to that seen on the roundel appears on another object of British provenance, a walrus ivory comb from Jedburgh. One face of the comb has a carving that shows a wyvern, with a ball slightly above and in front of its open jaws, in combat with a standing knight.<sup>20</sup> The comb was probably made in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. The scene has been interpreted as one of the labours of Hercules, showing the eponymous hero in the garden of the Hesperides, attempting to take a golden apple from a tree guarded by the dragon (or serpent) Ladon.<sup>21</sup> It is possible however that the dragon/wyvern with ball was taken from, or inspired by, a design on silk from China or Central Asia. Trade in such silks contin-

<sup>18</sup> D. J. Roxburgh (ed.), *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600* (London 2005), pp. 114f. and 392, no 58, and p. 396, no 75.

<sup>19</sup> J. C. Mann, 'The *Notitia Dignitatum* – dating and survival', *Britannia* 22 (1991), pp. 215-9. H. Nickel, 'The mutual influence of Europe and Asia in the field of arms and armour', in D. Nicolle (ed.), *Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour* (Woodbridge 2002), pp. 114f. and figs. X32-5. Some reservations have, however, been expressed about the evidence presented in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, in M. C. Bishop and J. C. N. Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment* (London 1993), p. 173. The form of the dragons shown on shields in the *Notitia Dignitatum* appears to derive from *dracones*, battle standards with metal dragon-heads and tubular wind-sock bodies. These *draco* standards of the Dacians and Sarmatians can be seen carved in relief at the base of Trajan's Column (as a trophy of the Dacian Wars, AD 101-6) and on the column of Marcus Aurelius (as a trophy of the First Marcomannian War, AD 167-75): H. Nickel, 'The Dragon and the Pearl', pp. 139f., figs. 3-6. A dragon standard also appears on the fragmentary second-century AD tombstone of a mounted Sassanian/Alanian standard bearer from Chester (*Deva*) who is shown holding the standard aloft in both hands: M. Henig, G. Webster and T. Blaag, *Roman Sculpture from the North West Midlands (Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani. Great Britain 1.9: Oxford 2004)*, p. 21 no 59 and plate 59. Some examples have survived: a silvered and gilded bronze dragon head belonging to the first part of the third century AD was found in the Roman *castellum* at Niederbieber, Germany; a Sassanian silver dragon head of the seventh century AD was discovered in the Government of Perm, Russia and a golden standard with dragon head was unearthed with gold and silver hoards in the Sargetia valley, Transylvania in 1543: J. Makkay, 'The Sarmatian connection', *Hungarian Quarterly* 37 (1996), no 144, pp. 114-7. See also J. S. P. Tatlock, 'The dragons of Wessex and Wales', *Speculum* 8 (1933), pp. 223-35.

<sup>20</sup> There is a griffin attacking a quadruped on the other face. J. Higgitt, 'The Jedburgh comb', in *Romanesque and Gothic: Essays for George Zarnecki* (Woodbridge 1987), pp. 119-27 and plates 1 and 2.

<sup>21</sup> Higgitt, *op. cit.* p. 125; Canby, *op. cit.* pp. 21f.

ued to increase during the eleventh century.<sup>22</sup> During the twelfth century imported silks became a material signifier of status and aristocratic taste. In particular silks from the Byzantine Empire and Persia had a considerable influence on the development of early arms.<sup>23</sup>

The engraved and enamelled armorial roundel described above was made in England (or possibly France) in the fourteenth century. It provides evidence for the remarkable translation, probably via contemporary or earlier imported goods such as silks or ceramics (**Plate 1c**), and survival in medieval Europe of an ancient motif that has its origins among the nomads of the Central Asian steppe.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900* (Cambridge 1991), p. 723.

<sup>23</sup> T. R. Davies, 'Diaper, paillé and papelonné', *CoA* 2nd ser. 6 (1984-6), no 129, pp. 2-9, and T.A. Heslop, 'Courtliness and the Culture of Consumption' (1997 Slade Lectures, Cambridge: forthcoming in print).

<sup>24</sup> Acknowledgements: I am most grateful to the late John Goodall for discussing various armorial and related matters with me, including wyverns and Chinese dragons, on a number of memorable occasions and for reading and commenting on an early draft of this paper. I am also indebted to Alice Cattermole and Sarah Spooner for help with computerised images and Melanie Rolfe and Sandy Heslop for commenting on the text. The drawing is by the writer. Plate 1a is by David Wicks; plate 1b was provided by the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford and the writer is indebted to Rigmor Båtsvik for her help in obtaining this image; and Plate 1c was supplied by the British Museum.