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A MEDIEVAL ARMORIAL SCABBARD FROM NORFOLK STREET, KING'S LYNN

Steven Ashley

A well-preserved leather scabbard with armorial decoration was found in a possible latrine pit of c.1250-1350, during excavations in Norfolk Street, King's Lynn in 2001.¹

The Scabbard

The leather² scabbard (see **Figure 1**) is 168mm long, with edge/grain stitches on the back seam and four suspension slots on the side where it was hung vertically by a thong attached to a belt.³

The surviving linear decoration was engraved with a blunt tool and comprises three shields arranged one above the other on two rectangular panels. The upper and lower panels are separated one from the other by four transverse lines marking the division between the knife handle and the blade. One shield (no. 1) is set on the upper panel that conforms to the position of the handle and the other two (nos. 2 and 3) are placed on the lower panel that conforms to the space occupied by the blade.⁴ There are narrow rectangular panels flanking both of the central shield-bearing panels, each of which is decorated with two opposed pairs of oblique lines, with an additional oblique line towards the base of the lower right-hand panel.

The shields are armorial or pseudo-armorial and can be blazoned:

1. *A gryllus within a bordure.*
2. *Quarterly in the second and third quarters two bars over all a bend.*
3. *Three bends* [or possibly *Bendy of six*].

The Arms

The armorial or pseudo-armorial decoration employed here is problematic. Most, if not all, scabbards of this type were originally painted and/or gilded⁵ and the lack of

¹ Norfolk Historic Environment Record 31393. See P. Cope-Faulkner, Assessment of the Archaeological Remains from the Excavations at Norfolk Street, King's Lynn, Norfolk (31393 KLY): Archaeological Project Services Report no.182/04 (2005).

² Probably calf leather as approved by the Guild of Furbishers who in 1350 forbade the use of any other leather for scabbards; J. Cowgill, 'Manufacturing techniques', in J. Cowgill, M. de Neergaard and N. Griffiths, *Knives and Scabbards* (London 1987 [henceforth K&S]), pp. 8-39 at 34-5.

³ Cowgill, op. cit. p. 37, fig. 10, and J. B. Ward Perkins, *London Museum Medieval Catalogue* (London 1940), p. 189.

⁴ This decorative division is common on medieval scabbards and appears to have been established by the tenth or eleventh century; M. de Neergaard 'The decoration of medieval scabbards', *K&S*, pp. 40-4 at 40.

⁵ J. Russell, 'English medieval leatherwork', *Archaeological Journal* 96 (1939), pp. 132-41 at 133f.

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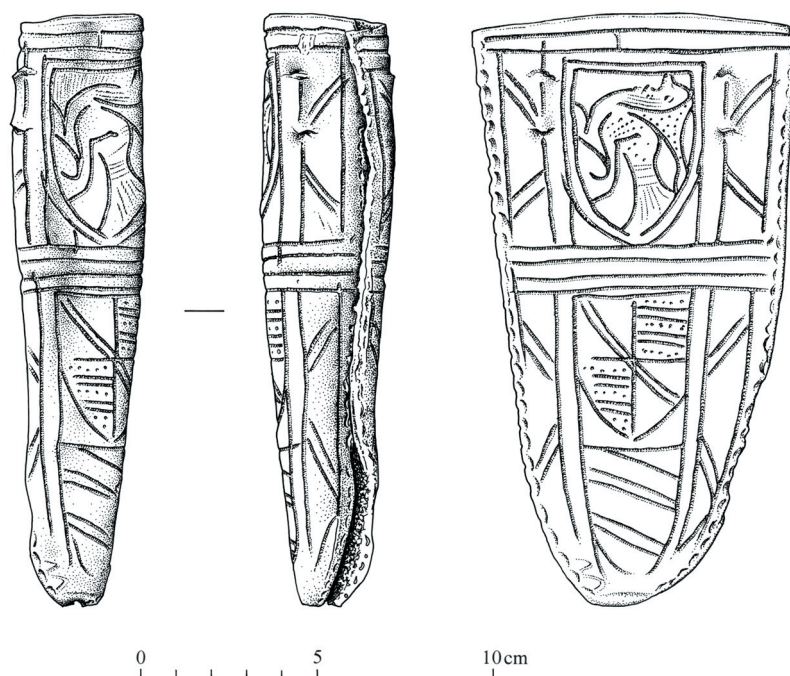


Figure 1: The leather scabbard and its decoration unfolded.

applied colour on this example, coupled with rather inaccurate execution, makes the identification and attribution of arms difficult.

The uppermost coat (no. 1) displays a hooded mythological creature, a bird with a human head, which can be described as a gryllus.⁶ Two alternative monsters of similar appearance, the harpy⁷ and the siren⁸ also combine human and avian characteristics. However, both are female and the monster depicted here is male. He has a beard comprising fine engraved vertical lines to one side of his mouth running from below the eye down towards his chin. The gryllus is found in a variety of forms on a number of contemporary objects. It is shown on scabbards of similar date from London, on one in combination with three other shields, of which two bear

⁶ A monster of dissimilar body parts, the gryllus often comprises a human head and a bird-like body with a tail and two legs. In other instances the body is that of a lion or a wyvern.

⁷ A mythical creature with the head and breasts of a woman and the body, wings and claws of a bird; H. King 'Half-human creatures', in *Mythical Beasts*, ed. J. Cherry (London 1995), pp. 138-67 at 148-52.

⁸ A sexually voracious bird-woman, comprising the body of a bird and a female head, winged although sometimes depicted with arms as well; King, op. cit. pp. 143-8. The term siren can also be found in armorial blazon as a synonym for mermaid, although this bears no relation to the siren of Greek mythology.

Figure 2: A gryllus with hooded and bearded human head and the body of a beast.
From a tile, 14th or 15th century:
Eames (see note 12), no 1390.



charges similar to those on the central shield on the scabbard described here (no. 2, see below).⁹ The gryllus also appears on horse harness pendants,¹⁰ a seal matrix¹¹ and medieval tiles (see **Figure 2**).¹² Both sexes are represented; hooded and bearded males (like that described in this note) and females in elaborate headdress. Other examples lack attributes that are sex-specific. Most of the monsters listed above

⁹ T. Wilmott, 'A note on the heraldic decoration of the scabbards', *K&S*, pp. 45-50, Ordinary nos. 32 (*Quarterly a bend within a bordure*) and 33 (*Quarterly in the second and third quarters a fess over all a bend within a bordure*); *K&S*, p. 160, Catalogue no. 478. A similar monster is shown in combination with wyverns and the arms of FitzWalter on another scabbard and is described as a possible harpy; T. Wilmott, 'The Arms of FitzWalter on leather scabbards from London', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 32 (1981), pp. 132-39 at 133, no. 6.

¹⁰ Cf. examples with lion-like bodies in S. Ashley, *Medieval Armorial Horse Furniture in Norfolk* (East Anglian Archaeology 101: Gressenhall 2002), pp. 16f., fig. 17, nos. 154-4; J. Cherry 'Harness pendants', in P. Saunders and E. Saunders (edd.), *Salisbury Museum Medieval Catalogue*, Part 1 (Salisbury 1991), pp. 17-28 at 22 and 26, fig. 3, no. 15 (with three other examples in the collections of the British Museum and one example each in the collections of Cirencester Museum and the Museum of London); J. Goodall and T. Woodcock, 'Armorial and other pendants, studs and ornaments', *AntJ* 71 (1991), pp. 239-47 at 244 and 246, fig. 14, no. 30. Another pendant bearing a gryllus, with a female head in elaborate headdress and a lion-like body, was found recently in Langley with Hardley, Norfolk (Norfolk Historic Environment Record 31397).

¹¹ Mid-twelfth-century seal of William Fossard bearing 'a gryllus formed by the head and shoulders of a horned man, with sword and shield, set upon a bird's body, with right leg ending in an eagle's claw and left in a horse's hoof': BL Add. Charter 20561, in G. F. Warner and H. J. Ellis (edd.), *Facsimiles of Royal and Other Charters in the British Museum*, vol. 1: *William I – Richard I* (Oxford 1903), p. 46, plate 30.

¹² See the variety of forms shown in E. S. Eames, *Catalogue of Medieval Lead-Glazed Earthenware Tiles in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum* (2 vols., London 1980), nos. 1390-1403. See Figure 2 above.

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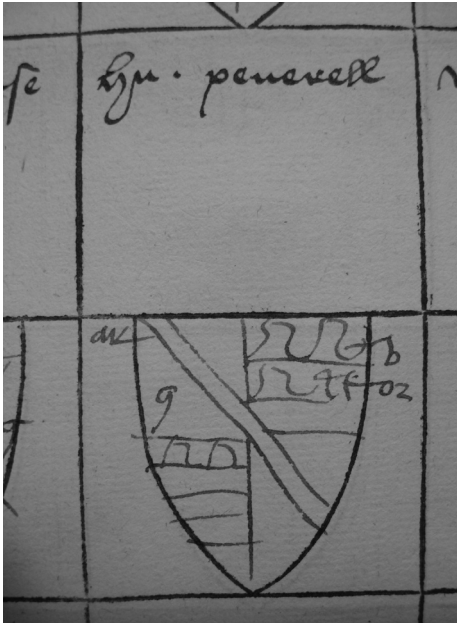


Figure 3: Arms of Hu. Peverell in trick, from a rough copy c. 1575 of a lost painted roll of c. 1400, designated the 'Norfolk and Suffolk Roll' in *CEMRA* (p. 73). CA Ms Vincent 164, fo. 84v.

are employed in a purely decorative manner. Conversely, the armorial nature of the gryllus on this scabbard is reinforced not only by its placement on a shield but also by being set within a bordure, albeit in an unusual vertically passant attitude.

The quartered central shield (no. 2) bears an unattributed coat: *Quarterly in the second and third quarters two bars over all a bend*. It has been pointed out to me that this design appears to combine variations on arms associated with the family of Peverell,¹³ though contemporary rolls of arms record the second quarter with vair rather than bars (see **Figure 3**).

The execution of the lower shield (no. 3) is poor and it is hard to be certain whether it is intended to represent *Three bends* (missing one engraved oblique line in sinister chief) or a rather irregular *Bendy of six*. On balance the former seems more likely.

Discussion

The common occurrence of scabbards on archaeological sites with conditions favourable to the survival of organic deposits, demonstrates their widespread availability and use.¹⁴ Scabbards and fragments of scabbards from anaerobic deposits in King's Lynn include at least two more with armorial decoration.¹⁵ A group of

¹³ Ron Fiske (personal communication): *Qtly. vt. and or a bend ar.* (Burke, *GA*) and *Qtly. gu. and vt. two bars wavy ar.* (Burke, *GA*, and Papworth, p. 1041).

¹⁴ 'The use of knives, shears, scissors and scabbards', in *K&S*, pp. 51-61 at 61.

¹⁵ H. Clarke and A. Carter, *Excavations in King's Lynn 1963-1970* (Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series 7: London 1977), fig. 169, nos. 89-90.

armorial scabbards from excavations in London, of similar type to the example described above, has been dated to the latter half of the thirteenth century. They are engraved with the arms of FitzWalter. This livery, emblazoned with paint and gilding, would have displayed the allegiance of the bearer. It would have been familiar and immediately recognisable to the local inhabitants and to other knights, nobles and retainers.¹⁶

The arms on the scabbard from Norfolk Street cannot be attributed. Nos. 1 and 2 do not correspond to any known arms. No. 3 is lacking the tinctures that would differentiate it from similar coats. Evidence for attribution of arms comes primarily from rolls of arms and seals. Despite the occasional discovery of a previously unknown coat¹⁷ a considerable number must remain unrecorded. The arms of 1,110 knights are recorded in the Parliamentary Roll compiled under Edward II c.1308.¹⁸ Although this is the largest surviving roll of arms, and was regarded by Anthony Wagner as a 'not far from complete census of the knights then existing',¹⁹ the number of armigers was probably larger than the number of arms given here. According to Noel Denholm-Young fewer than half of the c. 3,000 qualified to take up knighthood during the reign of Edward I actually did so, of whom only c. 500 were active or 'fighting' knights.²⁰ Many potential knights who did not take up knighthood bore arms.²¹ Furthermore, esquires,²² noblewomen, clerics and merchants figure among those groups whose arms are not recorded.²³

¹⁶ Wilmott, 'The arms of FitzWalter on leather scabbards from London', pp. 135-8.

¹⁷ Seal matrices bearing hitherto unrecorded arms continue to be discovered; see for example S. Ashley 'An armorial seal matrix for Richard Talbot found in Fincham, Norfolk', *CoA* 2nd ser. 13 (1999-2000), no. 189, pp. 190f., and 'A papal bulla re-used as an armorial seal matrix for Robert de Bessingham, found in Gresham, Norfolk', *ibid.* 15 (2003-4), no. 206, pp. 255-9.

¹⁸ Wagner dated the roll c.1312 in *CEMRA*, pp. xiv, 42-50, cf. his *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages* (2nd edn., Oxford 1956), p. 52, and c.1310 in his *English Genealogy* (Oxford 1960), p. 104. However, Denholm-Young argued convincingly for a probable date of 1308; 'The Song of Caerlaverock and the Parliamentary Roll of Arms, and the Galloway Roll' in *The Collected Papers of N. Denholm-Young* (Cardiff 1969), pp. 121-32.

¹⁹ Wagner, *English Genealogy*, p. 104.

²⁰ Denholm-Young calculates that between 1266-1322 there were at any one time 3,000 'potential' knights, 1,250 'actual' knights and 500 'fighting' knights; 'Feudal society in the thirteenth century: the knights', in *The Collected Papers of N. Denholm-Young*, pp. 83-94 at 87. These numbers might have been higher: see P. Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400* (Stroud 1993), p. 70, and G.J. Brault, *The Rolls of Arms of Edward I (1272-1307)* (*Aspilogia* 3: two vols., London 1997), vol. i, pp. 60-2.

²¹ A. Ailes, 'Up in arms: the rise of the armigerous valettus, c.1300' *CoA* 2nd ser. 12 (1997-8), no. 177, p. 11.

²² Under Edward I there were substantial numbers of lesser gentry (those below knightly rank) such as *valletti*, *armigeri* and esquires. It has been calculated that when the number of lesser gentry is added to that of the upper gentry (lords and knights), it would produce a total of nine to ten thousand 'gentry' families: M. Keen, *Origins of the English Gentleman: heraldry, chivalry and gentility in medieval England c.1300-c.1500* (Stroud 2002), p. 68. For a discussion of the arms-bearing status of knights, esquires, *valletti* and *armigeri*, see Ailes, *op. cit.*

²³ Ailes, *op. cit.* pp. 10-12; Brault vol. i, p. 62.

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So, while it is possible that the arms displayed on the scabbard are truly armorial, no record of them has been discovered that could prove this. They might equally be non-specific, made in imitation of noble fashion.²⁴ Whatever is the case they do illustrate the vogue for applied armorial decoration on items of personal dress and equipage that achieved its full flowering under the first three Edwards.²⁵

²⁴ Wilmott, 'A note on the heraldic decoration of the scabbards', p. 45.

²⁵ P. Coss, 'Knighthood, heraldry and social exclusion in Edwardian England' in P. Coss and M. Keen (edd.), *Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England* (Woodbridge 2003), pp. 39-68 at 39.

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