

Third Series Vol. VII Part 1

No. 221

Spring 2011

ISSN 0010-003X

Price £12.00

THE COAT OF ARMS

an heraldic journal published twice yearly by The Heraldry Society



THE COAT OF ARMS

The journal of the Heraldry Society



Third series

Volume VII

2011

Part 1

Number 221 in the original series started in 1952

The Coat of Arms is published twice a year by The Heraldry Society, whose registered office is 53 High Street, Burnham, Slough SL1 7JX. The Society was registered in England in 1956 as registered charity no. 241456.

Founding Editor

†John Brooke-Little, C.V.O., M.A., F.H.S.

Honorary Editors

C. E. A. Cheesman, M.A., PH.D., F.S.A., Richmond Herald

M. P. D. O'Donoghue, M.A., Bluemantle Pursuivant

Editorial Committee

Adrian Ailes, M.A., D.PHIL., F.S.A., F.H.S.

Jackson W. Armstrong, B.A., M.PHIL., PH.D.

Noel Cox, LL.M., M.THEOL., PH.D., M.A., F.R.HIST.S.

Andrew Hanham, B.A., PH.D.

Advertizing Manager

John Tunesi of Liongam

PLATE 2



Left (a), crest of Dormar, Oxf(ordshire): CA record Ms Vincent 161, fo 18v.

Below left (b), arms and crest of Brandenstein. From a German armorial compiled by William Smith (Rouge Dragon Pursuivant from 1597 to 1618), now CA Ms SML 11, p. 144.

Below right (c), arms and crest of Babenhhausen. From J. Siebmacher, *Erneuerte und vermehrte Teutsche Wappenbuch* (Nuremberg 1657), part 1, pl. 114.

See page 10.

Images by courtesy of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms



REYNARD IN SEALS AND HERALDRY

John A. Goodall †

Despite the popularity of the tales about Reynard's exploits neither he nor they were often depicted on seals or coats of arms.¹ Most of the heraldic examples stem from the desire to make a visual pun on the name of the bearer – Fox or Tod, Goupil, Fuchs, etc. – and a like concern is found in some of the non-armorial seals too. The following note is prefatory to a large subject rather than an exhaustive treatment, due to the limited number of seals surveyed. In England two collections of non-heraldic personal seals have been used: the catalogue of the Durham seals, admittedly incomplete, published by C. Hunter-Blair in *Archaeologia Aeliana*² and separately in a limited edition; and the larger collection of seals at the National Archives, although not all of these have been examined.³ For the French seals the information has been derived from those described by Y. Metman and M. Pastoureau in the catalogue *Le Bestiaire des Monnaies des Sceaux et des Médailles*.⁴ A few catalogues for other areas have been consulted but little was found, although it is possible that a more systematic survey of unpublished material in archives would assist in tracing the full extent of the development of Reynard in medieval seals.

The analysis of the beast subjects on 950 seals in the National Archives only produced fourteen with the fox in various guises, a rarity confirmed by the study of the French material.⁵ Of four examples which depict the fox alone two may involve a pun on the name of the user – Reynes (twelfth-century) and William de Reimes (thirteenth-century). If the former is correctly dated then it may be an early instance of the influence of the 'beast-epic'. Of the three seals selected for the Paris exhibition

¹ This short article was edited by Steven Ashley, who is preparing *At the Roots of Heraldry: Collected Papers of John A. Goodall* for publication with the Harleian Society. It was originally written for the International Beast Epic Colloquium of 23-25 September 1975 at the University of Glasgow. Since then many more collections of seals and seal matrices have been published; with this in mind, minor changes have been made to the introductory and third paragraphs. The blazons have been standardised, replacing gold and silver with or and argent, and footnotes and illustrations have been added. However the central thesis and conclusions are unaltered. Steven Ashley is grateful to the Society of Antiquaries of London for permission to publish this note the original of which is held in their care; his additional notes below are annotated SA.

² W. Greenhill and C. H. Hunter-Blair, 'Catalogue of the seals in the Treasury of the Dean and Chapter of Durham', *Archaeologia Aeliana* (1911-20), 3rd ser. vols. 7-17.

³ At least 2,286 examples were listed and categorised by John Goodall in his 'Analysis of personal seals in the PRO', unpublished Ms. in Society of Antiquaries [SA].

⁴ 'La faune dans les sceaux du Moyen Age' in *Le Bestiaire des Monnaies des Sceaux et des Médailles* (Paris 1974), pp. 179-239.

⁵ *Le Bestiaire*, p. 221.

the oldest, for Nicholas Gorpil in 1237, was also probably intended as a punning device. Two other seals in the National Archives may be considered here, one, for Adam Oliver in 1377, depicts a fox in the 'alert' position looking backwards. The second, of John Foxholes used in 1456-7, shows the *fox* looking out of his *hole* with the words: 'loke wel forth'. The combination of a pictorial device with an allusive motto is reminiscent of the Italian *imprese* but reflects an English tradition in non-armorial seals beginning in the late thirteenth century.

By far the largest numbers of Reynard seals depict scenes from his 'beast-epic' or from the fables of Aesop and are paralleled in other media. Illustrations on seals of the fables are rare but two may be related. A seal of John Benet in 1321 now at Durham (no. 204) has a bird in a tree with a fox seated beneath it; while a slightly earlier seal in the National Archives, of Hugh of Balmenain, 1296, depicts a fox preaching to a bird in a tree. Do these depend on the fables of Aesop⁶ or on the fame of Reynard as a preacher? The medieval seals of Sankt Pölten in Austria depict Reynard with his crozier.⁷ The reason for this is obscure; the name of the town derives from St Hippolytus, the early Christian martyr, and his legend contains nothing which could have prompted this design.⁸

More common are depictions of Reynard's rapine. A small seal of Pierre, vicar of Bex in 1282 at Agaune in Switzerland has a fox carrying away an animal slung on his back; prey and raptor are almost equal in size.⁹ Four seals in the National Archives have similar scenes. Two depict a goose as the prey (Macalpyn, 1296, and John of the Hok, 1339-40), another the fox seizing a hare in a field of thistles (Isaac of Cinport, 1296) and the last, of Thomas of the Forde, 1308-9, shows him bearing a hare on his back across a river. No depictions of his death and burial have been found but two seals may allude to his trial. A seal in the National Archives of Eustace Walker, 1303-4, has a fox sitting in a fenced area – perhaps in prison awaiting his trial? An interesting seal at Durham appears to depict his trial: a gem with a lion is set in a mount engraved on one side with a fox and on the other with a cock (maybe the latter was meant for a hen but the detail is not too clear: no. 191, John Bellerby, 1343).

In heraldry the fox is perhaps more common and, as stated, was used most frequently as a pun on the name of the bearer. The conventions of the science mean that scenes from his life would not be found and the requirements of the designs often led to the use of the head to stand for the whole. For example, in the arms of Todd of Molesey, Surrey, we find the first quarter bearing *Argent on a bend engrailed sable cotised between two estoiles azure three fox's heads erased argent*. The fox, in its natural colours appears in the crest. Likewise in the bookplate of Henry Lord Holland (d. 1840) the head is used in the shield but the whole fox for the supporters;

⁶ ed. E. Chambry (Budé: Paris 1927), pp. 160, 165.

⁷ K. Lind, *Blätter für ältere Sphragistik* (Vienna 1878), pls. 14 and 22.

⁸ According to J. Louda's *European Civic Coats of Arms* (London 1966), p. 218, no. 258, the animal in question is a wolf, taken from the Passau arms (*Ar. a wolf rampant gu.*) as Sankt Pölten owed allegiance to the bishops of Passau [SA].

⁹ D. L. Galbreath, *Sigilla Agaunensia* (Lausanne 1927: extracted from *Archives héraldiques suisses* 39-40 (1925-6)), no. 199.

the identification with the third baron is made by the appearance of his wife's arms of Vassall on the escutcheon. A few coats allude to the rapacity of the fox. One version of the crest of the family of Dormer of Buckinghamshire is given as: *On a mount Vert a fox statant sable holding in the mouth a wing or erased gules* (**Plate 2a**).¹⁰

At least five European families depicted Reynard bearing away his prey in their arms, and in one instance the coat found its way into a fifteenth-century English collection. Randle Holmes Book, c. 1450,¹¹ depends in part upon a Rhenish or Cologne Wappenbuch akin to one which belonged later to Thomas Benolt Clarenceux King of Arms (d. 1534) and is preserved in the College of Arms.¹² In the English manuscript the shield is unnamed, like several towards the end of the German book, and bears: *Azure a leaping fox carrying off a goose argent*. It is possible that these were meant to be the arms of Brandenstein of Sachgrün (Franconia and Hesse) whose ancient arms, according to Rietstap's *Armorial Général* were *Azure a fox rampant ravishing a goose proper*: see **Plate 2b**. In the modern arms the colours are said to be silver on gold, an unusual combination contravening the usual rule against putting colour on colour or metal on metal. Similar designs variously tinctured are given for Babenhausen (Swabia: see **Plate 2c**), Francken (Bois le Duc), Laur (Franconia), and Rääf (Finland). A curious and complex design is given for Desmont of Aragon: *Argent a mountain issuing from the sinister flank a lion descending after a fox bearing away a rabbit all proper*.

Can we draw any conclusions from the evidence so far available? When used alone the fox most often stands for the name of the person using the seal or bearing the arms, although this is not always the case. No doubt the reluctance to use the fox arises from his character in the bestiary and epic traditions of being the trickster. Bishop Theobald's version of the *Physiologus* concentrates on the episode of snaring birds by feigning death and the allegory expounds this in terms of the Fall and states simply, that: 'Men, who practise deceits, are worthy of the name of the foxes.' It goes on to recall the biblical reference to Herod.¹³ Scenes from the fables or epic are rare and only the fox bearing away its prey occurs with any frequency. The Italian jurist Bartolo da Sassoferrato, in his *Tractatus de Armis*, wrote about 1350, that: 'The said animals ought to be depicted according to their noblest act, and where also their strength is depicted.'¹⁴

The moral implications of the scene pointed out by Professor Varty¹⁵ are thus reinforced for ensuring the iconographic popularity of the scene by it being a typical act of the fox.

¹⁰ BL Add Ms 46354 (Writhe's Book of Knights, temp. Henry VII), no. 758.

¹¹ BL Ms Harl. 2169.

¹² CA Ms M.5. I am indebted to Sir Anthony Wagner and the College of Arms for permission to consult this book.

¹³ A. W. Rendell, *Physiologus* (London 1928), p. 24.

¹⁴ E. J. Jones, *Medieval Heraldry* (Cardiff 1943), p. 241, cap. 15.

¹⁵ K. Varty, *Reynard the Fox: a study of the fox in medieval English art* (New York 1967), p. 27.