

THE COAT OF ARMS

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David F. Phillips (ed.), *Japanese Heraldry and Heraldic Flags*. Danvers, MA: Flag Heritage Foundation Monograph and Translation Series, vol. 7. 2018. 160 pp, 16 colour plates, 38 colour images, more than 1000 black and white figures, ISBN: 978-1-4507-2436-4. Paperback \$ 20.00

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in Europe and North America regarding the Japanese *mon* and flags.⁵ However, since the German studies by Rudolf Lange and Hugo Ströhl from the beginning of the twentieth century, hardly any attempt has been made by scholars to cover this field as a part of the heraldic studies.⁶

The book at hand, *Japanese Heraldry and Heraldic Flags*, is volume 7 of the “Flag Heritage Foundation Monograph and Translation Series”.⁷ It is divided into three main parts, corresponding to the three contributions: “Understanding Japanese Heraldry” (pp. 13–108) by the editor, David F. Phillips, “Japanese Heraldry, Battle Flags and Standards in the Age of the Samurai” (pp. 109–36) by Emmanuel Valerio and “Heraldic Devices on Modern Japanese Flags” (pp. 137–44) by Nozomi Kariyasu.

In the preface, the editor states his aim as being “to attempt to make understanding and *enjoyment* of Japanese heraldry and heraldic flags available to *non-specialists* [my italics]. Following a short introduction on the meaning and origin of *mon*, he goes on to explain why *mon* are of interest, comparing them to their Western counterparts. Already in the first few lines, I became alarmed by some of the theories Phillips states as facts. For example, while comparing the emergence of *mon* and coats of arms, he claims that ‘both systems began as military recognition techniques, fairly abruptly in the middle of the twelfth century’. However, the context of emergence of both *mon* and coats of arms is still very much debated, the military aspect being just one, still unproven theory.⁸ Furthermore, *mon* emerged slightly earlier than the coats of arms. Another statement, that there was ‘a special class of officials to organize and interpret the coats of arms, namely the heralds, has been refuted by a recent publication on *Heraldic Artists and Painters*.⁹ A further claim that is being made is that unlike European heraldry, which ‘relies on variation, rearrangement and multiplication of geometric and stylized figures’, the Japanese system does not. This, however, is not entirely true.¹⁰ In fact, many of the

⁵ Recent publications on this subject include: Julia Hartmann, ‘The Japanese Mon and the European Coats of Arms – A Comparative Study’, *Armas e Troféus. Revista de História, Heráldica, Genealogia e Arte* XVIII (2016), pp. 87–114; Xavid Pretzer (ed.), *O-umajirushi: A 17th-Century Compendium of Samurai Heraldry* (Cambridge, MA 2015); and Lilian Cailleaud, *Japanese Blazon* (Ottawa, 2018).

⁶ Rudolf Lange, ‘Japanische Wappen’, *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen an der Königlichen Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* 6,1 (1903), pp. 63–281; Hugo Ströhl, *Japanisches Wappenbuch. Nihon Monchō* (Vienna, 1906), re-edited and commented by Wolfgang Ettig (Monographien zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Japans vol. 4, Treisberg 2006).

⁷ <http://www.flagheritagefoundation.org/fhf-publications/japanese-heraldry-and-heraldic-flags>.

⁸ Hartmann pp. 111–13.

⁹ Torsten Hiltmann, ‘Arms and Art in the Middle Ages. Approaching the Social and Cultural Impact of Heraldry by its Artisans and Artists’, in *Heraldic artists and painters in the Middle Ages* (Heraldic Studies vol. 1), ed. Torsten Hiltmann and Laurent Hablot (Ostfildern, 2018), pp. 11–23. See also ‘Heraldik zwischen Grundwissenschaft, Kulturgeschichte und Digital Humanities’, *Archiv für Diplomatie* 2019 [forthcoming].

¹⁰ Hartmann pp. 90–95.

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Daimyo flags from George Ashdown Audsley, *Ornamental Arts of Japan* (London, 1882–4) vol 2, an illustration used in Phillips.

Japanese figures are so highly stylised that, although they represent a charge, they visually compare more to the European ordinaries. What Phillips rightly calls to our attention is the fact that many mon (and elements thereof) although they resemble geometric figures are actually highly stylised images of objects etc. It would be interesting to find out whether such figures as the hexagon, which is called “tortoise” (*kikko*) or the fully filled hexagons, which are referred to as “rice cakes” (*mochi*) have been attributed with these meanings retrospectively, or whether they are really highly stylised tortoises and rice

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cakes. Although tincture is not used for distinction and marshalling does not exist, there are still many means of variation to choose from in the Japanese system,¹¹ even though a certain *plainness* is imperative to their creation. I must therefore contend with Phillips' assertion that 'there is hardly any scope for artistic variation', especially if one considers what Ströhl calls the 'imitation figure, where by means of fusion one figure is used to create another one, for example an animal that is created out of a plant, hence there appear creative combinations like the hollyhock crane (*aoitsuru*).

The visual explanation given of the mon, categorising them by single charges, identical charges (of 2, 3, 4 and more figures), combined charges, etc. is both clear and comprehensible. The listing of the most important charges into classes: plants, animals, artefacts, inanimate nature, geometric charges (which I would put into another category, comparing them to the ordinaries), figures of notation (namely Japanese characters) and frames (which, to me, belong to the geometric elements as well) makes this a valuable contribution. It is possible to skim through the pages, with the many illustrations providing some interesting and useful information on the elements from which mon are composed, and on the means of displaying these elements in various ways. Unfortunately, no names are provided of the families that bore the mon, and except for a very few examples, we are not informed whether these examples are post early modern, or were actually used in medieval and early modern times.

The range of different mon illustrated is remarkable, with their many means of variation explained, demonstrating how changeable mon and their charges are. An impression can be gained of the sheer abundance of different mon that can be achieved by these techniques, ranging from something as simple as perspective to complex combinations (as Philipps names them). Explanation is given of the different symmetries (radial, reflective and rotational), all very interesting aspects for those interested in the visual aspects of mon. The different means of arrangement has been collected in a useful glossary, sorted in thematic order, providing detailed explanations. What would have made this tool even more useful though would have been the inclusion of the Japanese characters. Indeed linguistic connotations of the mon which allude to wordplays (e.g. canting arms) have been entirely neglected. The book concludes with five compositions of mon with ermine to inspire heraldic artists to imagine what they could produce out of European heraldry and Japanese mon.

The section on samurai heraldry is illustrated with the author's own paintings of flags with mon displayed on them. It begins with the Gempei War (1180–1185), the conflict between the famous Taira and Minamoto, showing their red and white banners, their mon, and the mon that they bestowed upon their allies. The most important wars and military events are dealt with chronologically until the peaceful Tokugawa period (seventeenth century). Nozomi Kariyasu presents post Meiji Restoration (after 1868) flags which display mon, explaining their meaning, and stating where these can be

¹¹ Hugo Ströhl, 'Imitationsfiguren der japanischen Heraldik', *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprache an der Königlichen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* 13 (1910), pp. 1–17, gives examples of how stylised and multifaceted mon can actually be, the special fusion of elements ('imitation figure') going even beyond what we know from European heraldry.

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found today. Included here is the imperial mon of the chrysanthemum (or the Mitsubishi emblem) and quite a few cities that have adopted a mon as their municipal emblem.

Spelling mistakes are usually not something worth criticising, however, a few mistakes have to be pointed out, especially when it comes to Japanese or the wrong blazon of a *mon*: p. 29: figure 32F is actually figure 33F; p. 33: the examples concerning “facing in” and “facing out” have been allocated the wrong way; p. 36: wrong designation for figure 51D; p. 45 *hitatsu* (sic!) instead of *hitotsu* (meaning “one” [quantifier]; see also p. 90, same mistake); p. 67, nos. 106 and 107: the example of the stylised plum blossom, to my knowledge, is not *umeboshi* 梅干 (pickled and dried plums) but *umebachi* 梅鉢¹²; p. 109, footnote 1: Minamoto, not Miramoto. Besides avoiding mistakes such as these, for those who study mon it is vital to master the Japanese language at least to some extent to provide Japanese characters for clarification in cases such as on p. 38, where *tsuru* means ‘vine’ 蔓 and *not*, as usually, ‘crane’ 鶴.

As a basic guide this book is excellent value for money. While it does not add much new to our understanding of the Japanese mon and the flags whereupon mon were displayed, it was not the aim of the authors to explore how mon were inherited, assumed and bestowed. These are interesting aspects that might shed light on function and usage. If we are to really understand mon, a cultural historical approach is required. What the present volume has shown once again is the sheer complexity of the Japanese mon.

Julia E. Hartmann

Nimal de Silva, *Flags: flag traditions of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Padmapani Publishers, 2012, iv + 248 pp. Hard cover. ISBN 978-955-51235-1-8. 51 LKR.

This excellently produced, large format, and beautifully illustrated volume was an excellent airport purchase, being an authoritative and exhaustive treatment of a specialised area of heraldry and vexillology. The book is divided into five chapters detailing the tradition of flag use in Sri Lanka, flags used for specific purposes – administrative, religious and caste flags, and finally the art and culture of flag design. Many flags can be described due to the initiative of the Colombo museum, the director of which initiated the collection of flags and information on them in 1812. These were published as memoirs of the Museum, and brought together by E W Perrera in 1916. In addition to these and other existing sources, Prof de Silva discovered over 300 original flags preserved in the National Museum, in private collections, and in Buddhist temples.

Models in gold, silver and bronze including depictions of flags have been found in Sri Lanka dating back to the 2nd century BC. In addition there are many literary texts describing the design and use of flags, and a Buddhist text of the 5th century AD goes into great detail on the design, dimensions and ways of fixing flags (p 203). There were eight named types of flag categorised by size and colour. Other documents describe processions, and list the flags displayed in royal and religious events. The principal charges, particularly those of an animal or mythological nature are described. Influences in flag design came from southern India, and from Europe from the 16th century, as a

¹² Cf. Hartmann p. 106.