

# The Coat of Arms

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# THE COAT OF ARMS

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# OF CAMELOPARDS AND CAMELOPARDELS

JORDAN WALBESSER

## Abstract

*The giraffe has a triple identity in heraldry. It has been used as the actual animal, as well as in the guise of two derivative heraldic beasts, the camelopard and the camelopardel. This paper explores the history of the giraffe in art and how that usage evolved over time.*



*Figure 1: The Camelopard according to Arthur Fox-Davies.*

Heraldry is full of mythical hybrid beasts – the manticore, the centaur, the griffin, the cockatrice, and the camelopard. What sets the camelopard apart from these beasts is that the camelopard is entirely real. It is, of course, an ordinary giraffe, and in no sense do we consider these animals to be mythical or hybrid creatures. So why does the science of heraldry call giraffes camelopards, and why does it classify the charge as a mythical heraldic beast? Arthur Fox-Davies explains as follows:

*The Camelopard, which is nothing more or less than an ordinary giraffe, must be properly included amongst mythical animals, because the form and semblance of the giraffe was used to represent a mythical hybrid creation . . . Possibly they represented the real giraffe (which they may have known), taking that to be a hybrid between the two animals . . . (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> This paper will consider how the giraffe became a mythological hybrid beast, and how that mythological origin impacted its heraldic categorization and use.*

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London, 1909), p. 227. In this passage, Fox-Davies erroneously states that ancients believed that the giraffe was “begotten between a leopard and a camel” instead of a pard and a camel.

## Giraffes in the Ancient World

Giraffes, of course, are real animals found primarily in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> The earliest known giraffe depiction is believed to have been created around 8,000–6,000 B.C. (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: The Dabous Giraffes, a large neolithic rock art petroglyph in Niger's Aïr Massif region. Source, Albert Backer, 1991, Wikimedia Commons.

Giraffes were prized gifts between kingdoms, as evidenced by a wall painting in the Theban tomb of Rekhmire, an official who served in the late fifteenth century B.C. (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> Both the African petroglyph and the wall painting are remarkably accurate compared to future European heraldic emblazonments. In the *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder recorded the first European description of a giraffe in the late first century A.D.<sup>5</sup> He wrote how this extraordinary creature was brought from North Africa to the Roman amphitheatre in 46 BC to be exhibited at the games in the Circus.<sup>6</sup> To Pliny and his contemporaries the creature appeared to be a hybrid of a camel and the semi-

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Kingdon, *The Kingdon Field Guide to African Mammals* (San Diego, 1997), p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Williams, *Giraffe* (London, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Polinger Foster, *The Earliest Zoos and Gardens*, *Scientific American* (July 1999), vol. 281, No. 1, pp. 68. Coincidentally, giraffes have always been popular political gifts, including from the sultan of Egypt to Lorenzo de' Medici (the Magnificent) in 1487 and from Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman viceroy in Egypt, to both Charles X of France and George IV of England in 1826. Habsburg emperor Franz II of Austria received a giraffe from the viceroy in 1828. See Marina Belozerskaya, *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power* (New York, 2006); Philip McCouat, 'The art of giraffe diplomacy', *Journal of Art in Society* (2015), available online via <http://www.artinsociety.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. Bostock and Riley (London, 1855), VIII.17.

<sup>6</sup> Pliny, *The Natural History*, VIII.69.

## THE COAT OF ARMS

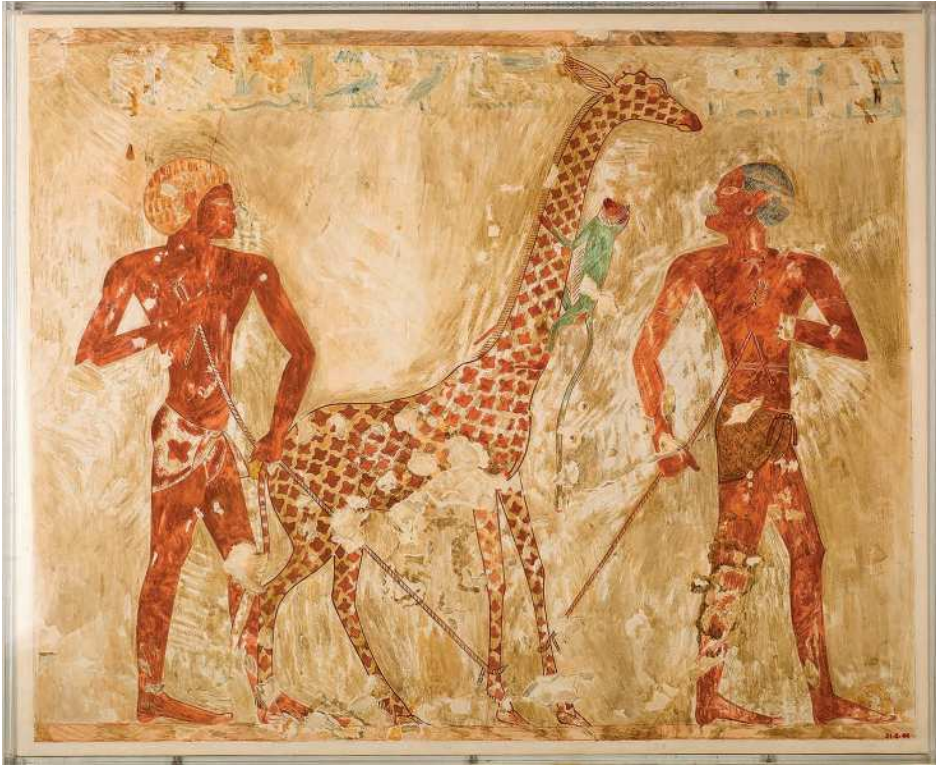


Figure 3: Nubians with a Giraffe and a Monkey, Tomb of Rekhmire. Nina de Garis Davies, Nubians with a Giraffe and a Monkey, Tomb of Rekhmire, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1504–1425 B.C., Acc. No. 31.6.40.

mythological pard.<sup>7</sup> Like the camelopard, the pard is another example of a mythological beast born from biological misunderstanding. Distinct from a leopard, Pliny described, in lascivious detail, how the pard sought out and mated with female lionesses on the banks of Africa's rivers. The male offspring of a pard and a lioness, he noted, lacks the mane associated with purebred lions. As such, it has been suggested that Pliny mistook male panthers to be pards, which are themselves black leopards in Asia and Africa. Regardless, Pliny called the giraffe a 'camelopard' which is a literal concatenation of the Greek κάμηλος (camel) + πάρδαλις (pard).<sup>8</sup> The name stuck.<sup>9</sup>

In an age without cameras and easy travel, depictions of the camelopard started to drift. For example, a large mosaic floor circa 300 A.D. unearthed during road construction in Lod (the Biblical Lydda and ancient Diospolis) shows depictions of

<sup>7</sup> Pliny, *The Natural History*, VIII.17; Varro, *On the Latin Language*, trans R. Kent (London, 1938), V.100.

<sup>8</sup> 'camelopard', OED.

<sup>9</sup> Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. C.B. Gulick (London, 1927), V.201C; *Historia Augusta*, Gordiani Tres, XXXIII.1 (Philip the Arab celebrated the millennium of Rome's founding with the display in the Circus of ten *camelopardali*).



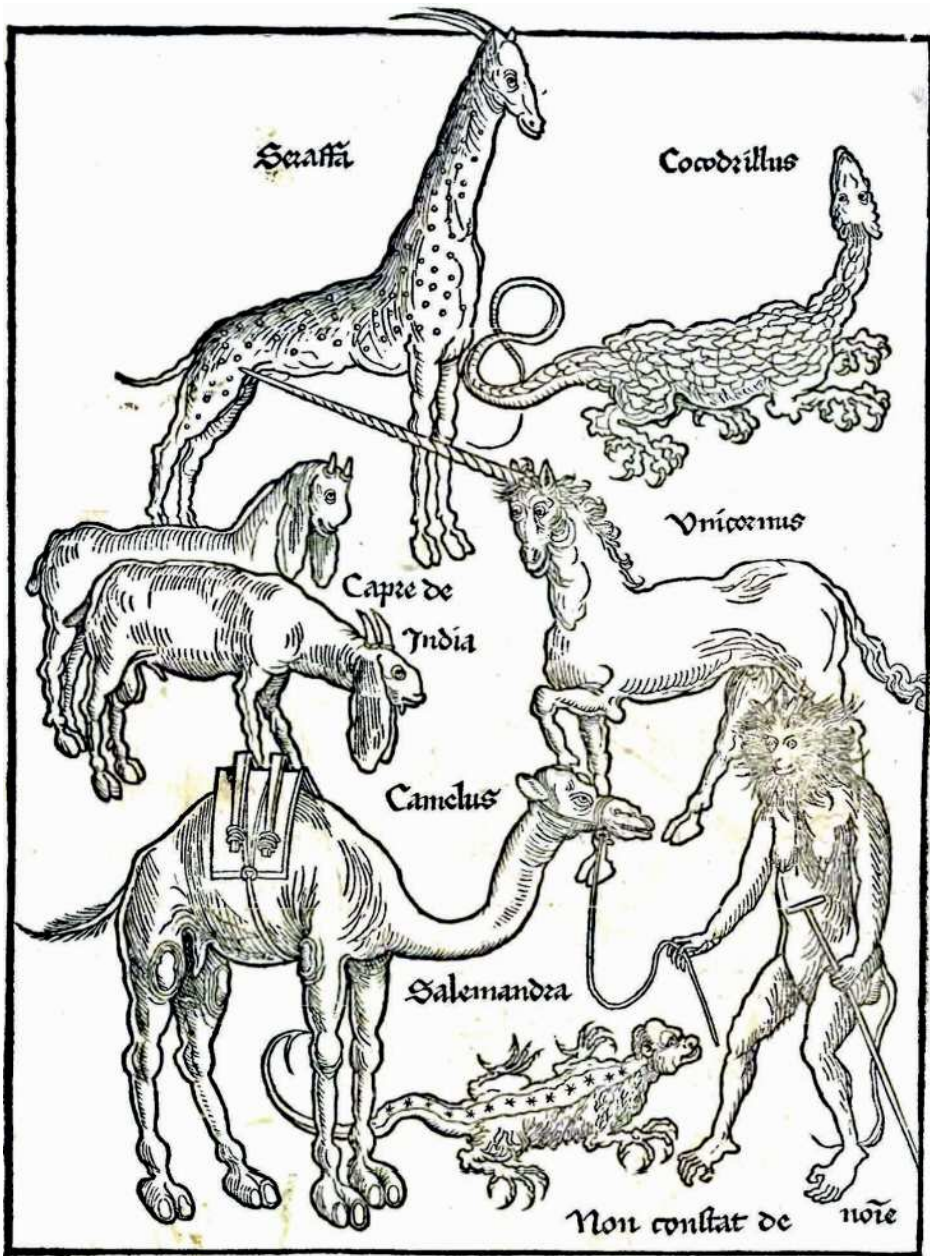
Figure 4: The Roman Mosaic from Lod, Israel.

animals and exotic beasts, including a camelopard, likely pitted against one another or against venatores in the arena (**Figure 4**). Perhaps the mosaic depicted the very same events that Pliny discussed in *The Natural History*.<sup>10</sup> The giraffe's ossicones are depicted as a camelopard's horns.

Three centuries later, the camelopard's myth continued to grow. Around 600 A.D., Isidore of Seville reinforced Pliny's claim that leopards are born from the cross-mating

<sup>10</sup> See, Pliny, *The Natural History*, VIII.69.

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*Hec animalia sunt veraciter depicta sicut vidimus in terra sancta*

Figure 5: Erhard Reuwich, The Animals in the Holy Land. Source Bernhard von Breydenbach, Peregrinatio in terram sanctam (Mainz, 1486).



Figure 6: Detail from Lorenzo de' Medici Receiving Gifts from His Ambassadors (c.1556) by Giorgio Vasari (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence) Source: Wikimedia Commons.

of a lioness and a pard.<sup>11</sup> And Isidore confirmed Pliny's view that pards have a 'mottled coat', speckled with white (like a giraffe's).<sup>12</sup> Completing the connection, Isidore claimed that the "giraffe (camelopardus) is so called because while it is speckled with white spots

<sup>11</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof (Cambridge, 2006), XII.ii.10, p. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Isidore, *The Etymologies*, XII.ii.19, pp. 251–2; Pliny, *The Natural History*, VIII.27.

## THE COAT OF ARMS

like the pard (pardus), it has a neck like a horse, ox-like feet, and a head like a camel (camelus).” These misconceptions carried on for centuries, as evidenced in the fifteenth-century publication of *De proprietatibus rerum*<sup>13</sup> and in von Breydenbach’s account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, published in 1486, with woodblock illustrations by Erhard Reuwich including animals “just as he saw them” (**Figure 5**).<sup>14</sup> Of course, the author’s claim to have seen these animals is suspect, given the giraffe’s depiction and its inclusion with a unicorn, salamander, and a man with a tail and prehensile feet. It is more likely that Reuwich drew a mythological camelopard as a stand-in for a giraffe that he never saw.

One year later, Italians would see, in person, the differences between camelopard and giraffe. In an attempt to establish better diplomatic relations with Florence against the Ottoman Turks, the sultan of Egypt presented a female giraffe to Lorenzo de’ Medici (the Magnificent), the first to be seen in Italy in more than fifteen-hundred years.<sup>15</sup> The occasion was so notable, that Cosimo I de’ Medici commissioned a fresco showing Lorenzo seated before his ambassadors, and towering over them, Lorenzo’s accurately depicted giraffe (**Figure 6**).<sup>16</sup>

### Camelopards in Heraldry

So we have seen that the camelopard – which at one time was nothing more or less than an ordinary giraffe – became mythological due to a combination of inartful portmanteau, oft-repeated taxonomic errors, and artistic license. But despite the heraldist’s love for all things ancient, mythological, and historical, the camelopard is a relatively rare charge in heraldry. An early heraldic writer, John Bossewell, depicted the camelopard in 1572, but not in regard to any specific coat of arms.<sup>17</sup> Judging from his illustration, Bossewell had never seen a giraffe (or camelopard) in person (**Figure 7**).

The earliest known heraldic use of the camelopard is the badge of Sir Henry Crispe dating to 1553.<sup>18</sup> Crispe was an English landowner and politician.<sup>19</sup> Shortly before the death of Henry VIII he was recommended for knighthood, but he did not receive it, or

<sup>13</sup> M.C.Seymour (Ed.) *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum: A Critical Text*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1975), xviii.Xx ‘Cameleopardus hatte cameleopardalis also... And has ye heed of a camele..and spekkes of ye parde.’

<sup>14</sup> Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in terram sanctam* (Mainz, 1486). See Elizabeth Ross, *Picturing Experience in the Early Printed Book. Breydenbach’s Peregrinatio from Venice to Jerusalem* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 2014); Charles D. Cuttler, ‘Exotics in Post-Medieval European Art: Giraffes and Centaurs’, *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 12, no. 23 (1991), p. 167, where the camelopard is labelled ‘seraffa’ which derives from the Arabic Zarafa.

<sup>15</sup> Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, trans A. de Rosen Jervis (New York, 1969), p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier, ‘Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Giraffe as a Symbol of Power’, *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 8, no. 16 (1987), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> John Bossewell, *Works of armorie : deuyded into three bookes, entituled, the Concordes of armorie, the Armorie of honor, and of Coates and creastes* (London, 1572), ii.f.53.

<sup>18</sup> Siddons Badges II.2, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Hyde, ‘Henry Crispe (by1505-75), of Birchington, Isle of Thanet, Kent’, *Hist. Parl., The Commons 1509–1558*.

## OF CAMELOPARDS AND CAMELOPARDELS

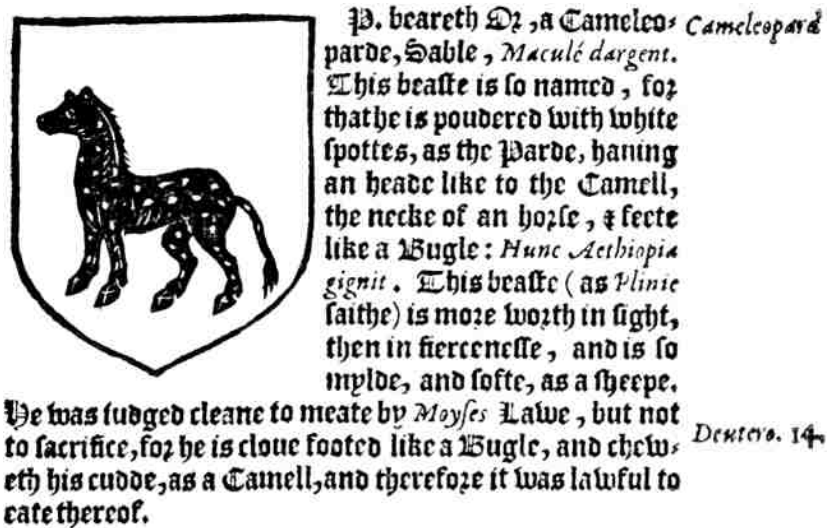


Figure 7: Bossewell's camelopard. Arms: Or, a cameloparde, sable, maculé d'argent  
Source: *Works of armorie* ii.f.53.

his crest, until the accession of Mary I.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, the camelopard later appears as the crest of several coats of arms for the name of Crisp.<sup>21</sup> For example, Frederick Arthur Crisp, Esq. of Grove Park, Denmark Hill, and of Broadhurst, Surrey (**Figure 8a**). Another Crisp had a more naturally emblazoned crest (**Figure 8b**). Further examples are on the crests of Cecil Thomas Crisp-Molineux-Montgomerie, Esq. (**Figure 10**) and of Frederick Crisp, Esq. (**Figure 11**).

The camelopard is otherwise very rarely used as a charge. In the modern era the giraffe comes into use. The head of a giraffe appears in the arms of Lebeuville, a commune in the Meurthe-et-Moselle department in north-eastern France (**Figure 9a**).<sup>22</sup> The arms are said to derive from those of the seigneurial family of Bainville, *azure semy of crosslets botonny fitchy, a cross argent*, also used by the abbey of Lebeuville, of which the family were patrons.<sup>23</sup> The giraffe's head which was added derives from the arms of the Maillart family. Claude-Antoine de Maillart was ennobled in 1561 by Charles III, Duke of Lorraine as lord of Labeuville.<sup>24</sup> He bore *Purple a chevron or between three giraffe's heads argent* (**Figure 9b**). Fox-Davies, writing in 1909, believed that the

<sup>20</sup> J. Twyne, *De Rebus Albionis* (1590), p. 69–70; J S Brewer (Ed.) *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII 1509–1514* (London, 1920), vol.1 pp. 984–997; John Roche Dasent (Ed.) *Acts of the Privy Council of England 1542–1547* (London, 1890), vol.1 p. 511.

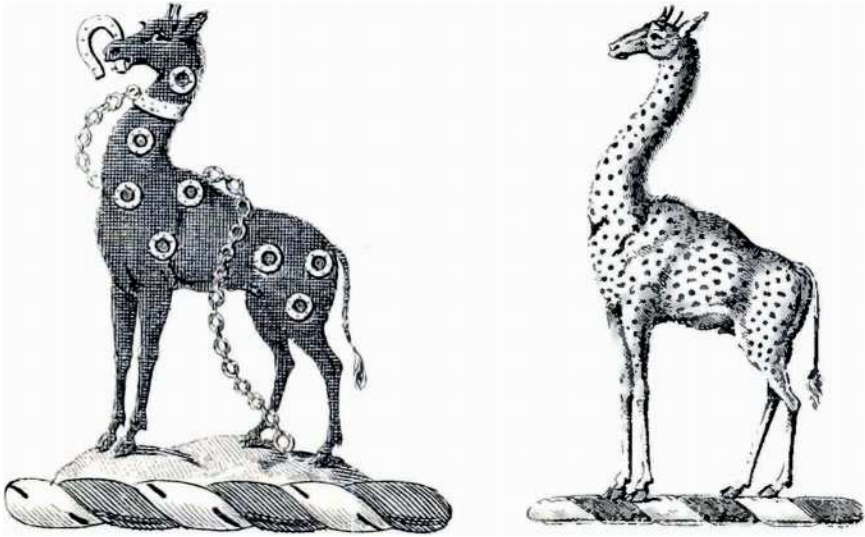
<sup>21</sup> Fox-Davies 1909, op.cit., p. 227; James Fairbairn, *Fairbairn's book of crests of the families of Great Britain and Ireland*, (London, 1905), i.142 and ii plate 132.

<sup>22</sup> Anon, *Lebeuville, Monographies communales de Meurthe-et-Moselle* 305 Bibliothèques de Nancy, Ms. 820 (1888).

<sup>23</sup> Jean Cayon, *Ancienne chevalerie de Lorraine* (Nancy, 1850), pp. 12–13.

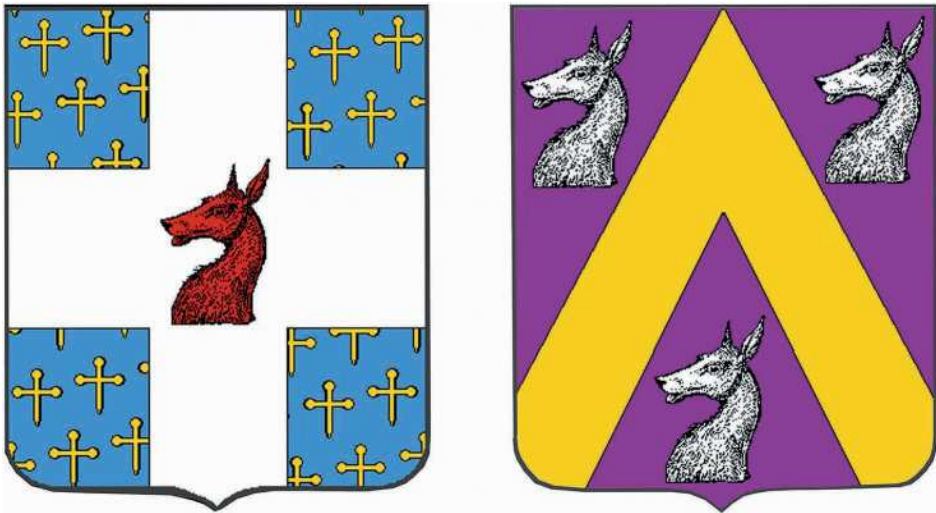
<sup>24</sup> Ambroise Pelletier, *Nobiliaire ou armorial général de la Lorraine et du Barrois* (Nancy, 1758), p. 510–511.

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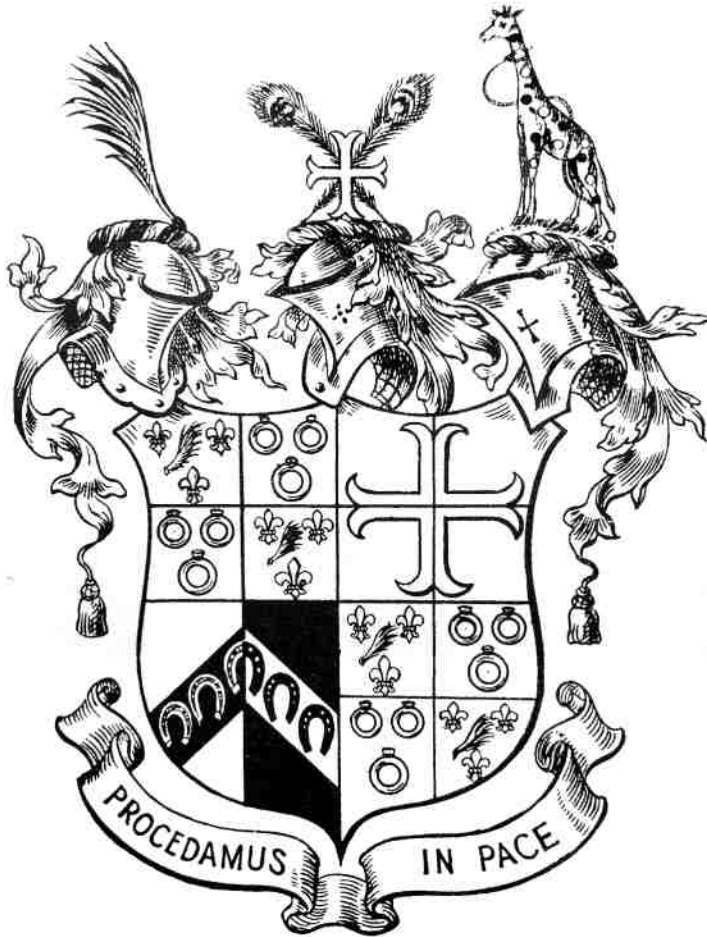
*Figure 8a, left: crest of Frederick Arthur Crisp, Upon a rock proper, a camelopard statant sable, semée of annulets, and gorged with a collar; thereto affixed a chain reflexed over the back, and holding in the mouth a horseshoe, all or. Figure 8b: crest of an unnamed member of the Crispe family of a camelopard statant proper.*

Source, Fairburn's Crests plate 132.



*Figure 9a, left: The arms of the commune of Lebeuville. Figure 9b: the Maillart arms.*

## OF CAMELOPARDS AND CAMELOPARDELS



*Figure 10: Full achievement of Cecil Thomas Crisp-Molineux-Montgomerie, Esq. Quarterly, 1 and 4, quarterly i. and iii., azure, a branch of palm-tree in bend sinister between three fleurs-de-lis or; ii. and iii., gules, three rings or, each enriched with a sapphire (for Montgomerie); 2, quarterly, azure and or, a cross moline counter- changed (for Molineux); 3, per pale argent and sable, on a chevron five horse-shoes all counterchanged (for Crisp), impaling the arms of Lascelles, namely: sable, a cross patonce within a bordure or. Mantling azure and or.*

*Crests: 1. on a wreath of the colours, a palm-branch proper (for Montgomerie); 2. upon a wreath of the colours, in front of two peacock's feathers in saltire, a cross moline or (for Molineux); 3. upon a wreath of the colors, a mount vert, thereon a camelopard argent, armed and unguled or, semé of pellets and hurts alternately, collared and line reflexed over the back gules (for Crisp).*  
 Source: Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *The Art of Heraldry: An Encyclopædia of Armory* (London, 1904), p. 252.

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*Figure 11: Arms of Frederick Crisp, esq. Sable, on a chevron argent, surmounted by a pale engrailed of the last, pierced of the field, five horse-shoes counterchanged.*

*Mantling sable and argent.*

*Crest: On a wreath of the colors, in front of a camelopard statant argent, semé of pellets, gorged with a collar with line reflexed over the back gules, three horse-shoes sable.*

*Source Fox-Davies 1909, op.cit., p. 162.*

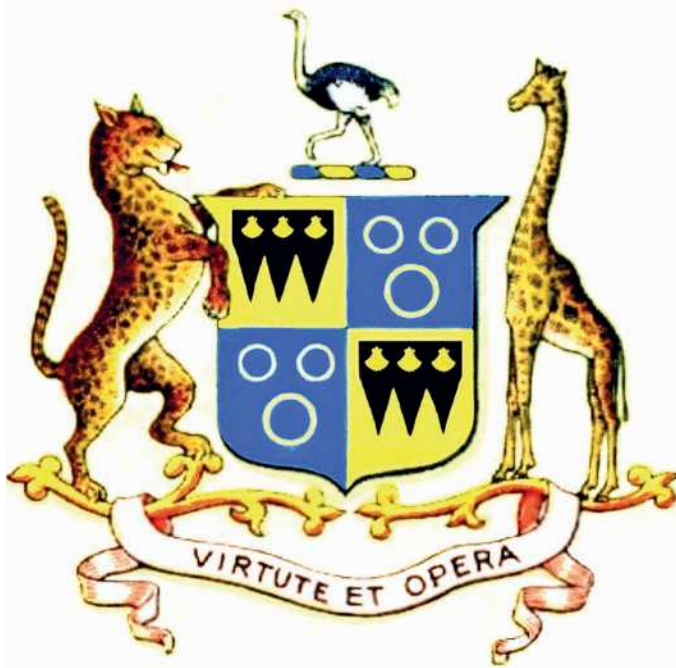
OF CAMELOPARDS AND CAMELOPARDELS



Figure 12: The University of Nairobi. *MS Grants 116 p.308* with the gracious permission of the Kings, Herald and Pursuivants of arms.

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giraffe was as yet unclaimed as a supporter.<sup>25</sup> However it has since been used in African civil and academic heraldry. In Kenya, the University of Nairobi uses a giraffe as a supporter, having embraced the symbolism of the “graceful” giraffe which is now given two meanings: it both represents Tanzania, and is a call to all staff and students to “aim high.” (Figure 12). The exact same arms were granted by the College of Arms in 1955 to the Royal Technical College of East Africa, which became The Royal College, Nairobi under the terms of a bill passed by the Legislative Assembly of East Africa in 1960.<sup>26</sup> It became University College Nairobi in 1964 and the University of Nairobi in 1970. The arms are blazoned: *Vert in chief a lion passant guardant and in base three torches two in saltire and one in pale or enflamed proper*; the crest: *On a wreath of the colours three clasped hands each couped at the wrist one erect carnat the others fesse-wise sable and or ensigned with an open book proper bound gules edged gold*; and the supporters: *On the dexter side a crowned crane and on the sinister side a giraffe proper each gorged with a chain or pendent therefrom an escutcheon vert charged with a pair of calipers gold*. Grahamstown in South Africa was granted a giraffe as a supporter by the College



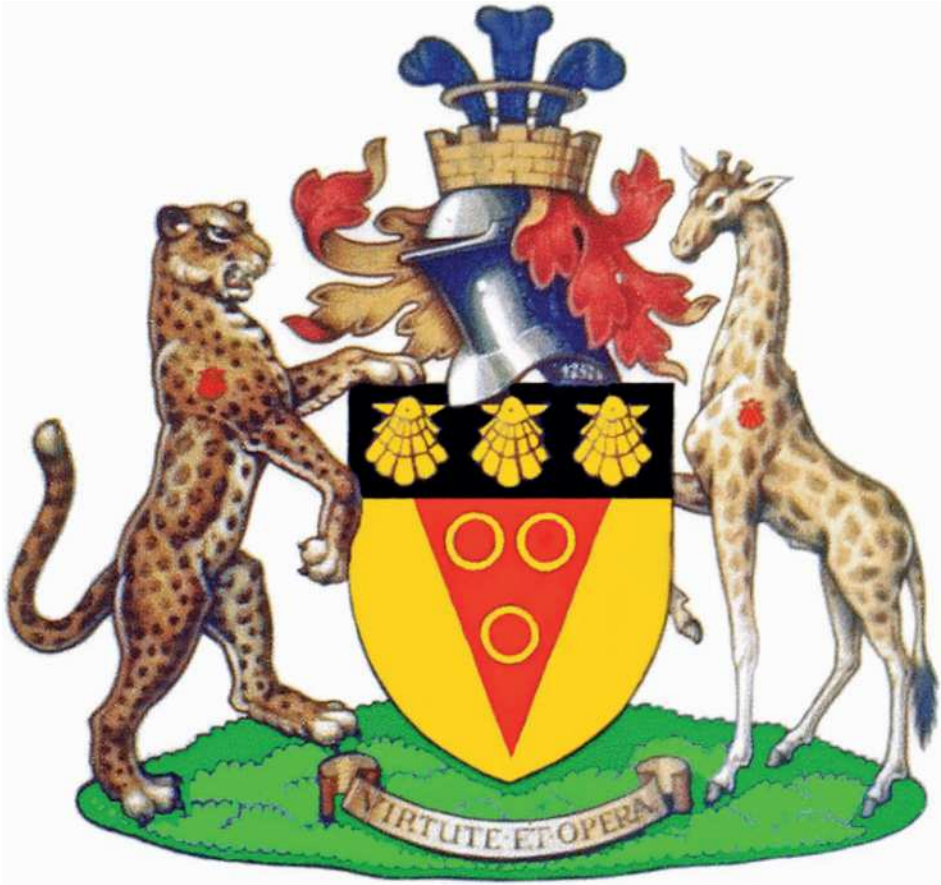
*Figure 13: The original 1912 arms of Grahamstown. Quarterly: 1 and 4: Or; three piles sable; upon a chief sable, three escallops or; 2 and 3: Azure, three annulets or. Crest: An ostrich courant proper. Supporters: Dexter, a leopard rampant; sinister a giraffe statant, both proper.*

<sup>25</sup> Fox-Davies 1909, op. cit., p. 438.

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Mr Adam Tuck, Rouge Dragon Pursuivant, for providing this information as well as the full details of the blazon.

## OF CAMELOPARDS AND CAMELOPARDELS

of Arms in 1912 (**Figure 13**). The crest and supporters represent wildlife once common in the area and symbolize the wildness of the area when the British settlers first arrived in 1820. The original ostrich crest was altered by the South African Bureau of Heraldry in 1994. (**Figure 14**).



*Figure 14: The Coat of Arms of Grahamstown, South Africa. Or, on a pile gules, three annulets placed 2 and 1 or; on a chief sable, three escallops or. Crest: Issuant from a mural crown or, masoned sable, a plume of three ostrich feathers sable, embellished argent, enfiled of an annulet or. Mantling: Gules and or. Supporters: Dexter a leopard and sinister a giraffe, proper, each charged on the shoulder with an escallop gules.*

## DE CAMELOPARDALI.



CAMELOPARDALIN sacræ literæ uocant זמר zamer, Deuteron. 14. ubi Chaldaica translatio habet ארפכא deba, Arabica سرافه faraphah, Persica سرافه sera phah, Septuaginta καμηλοπαρδαλις, Hieronymus camelopardum, David Kimhi præterea testatur Rabi Ionā scribere, zamer animal Arabicè uocari sarapha. In tanto igitur ueterum intpretum consensu, nihil mouebunt nos recentiores, siue Iudæi (qui merito magna rerum omnium inscitia laborant) siue alij, qui rupicapram aut alcen Ebraicam uocem zamer exponunt. Alces enim Syriæ peregrinæ sunt, rupicapra uerò aliud Ebraicum nomen habent, ut suo loco dicemus. Numeratur autem zamer inter animalia cibo hominum concessa; nec obstat quod camelopardalin nusquam in cibum uenisse legerimus: raritas enim & peregrinitas facit ut cibo eā nemo experiatur. Camelopardalin Aethiopes nabin uocant, à qua uoce recentiores fortassis Albertus & alij, anabulam suā detorserunt: sape enim in Arabicis dictionibus a uel ha prima syllaba articulatione abundat, Pausanias camelum Indicam uocat, Reliquæ gentes, quod sciam, omnes non alia quā

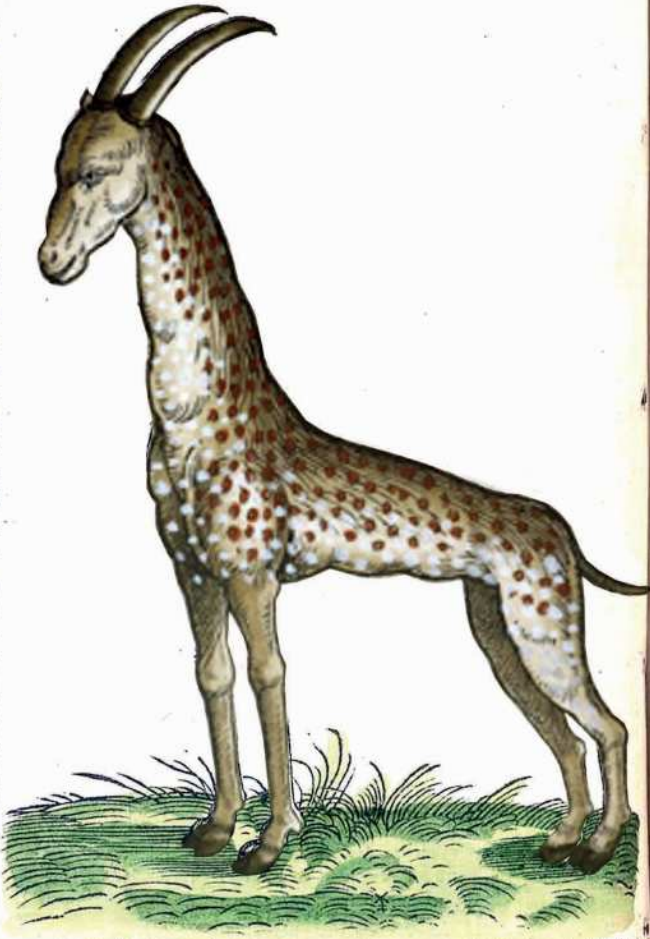


Figure 15: A camelopardel as illustrated in 1551. Source Konrad Gesner, *Historia animalium* (Zurich, 1551), p.160.

## Camelopardels in Heraldry

A variant of the camelopard is the camelopardel, a suppositious beast of heraldic creation, formed by fixing two straight horns in the head of the camelopard (**Figure 15**).<sup>27</sup> It is unclear where the term “camelopardel” came from. Perhaps it is merely a mistranslation from Latin – camelopardalis.<sup>28</sup> The astute reader will note that the camelopardel bears a striking resemblance to Reuwich’s depiction above. In 1688 Randle Holme described the camelopardel thus:

*The Camelopardal, hath two little horns growing on his head, of Iron colour, turning a little backwards, and smooth. His mouth but little, like an Harts; his Neck long having no Ears; and the fore-Legs longer than the other; which makes his back decline towards his Buttock, which are like an Asses. The pass of this beast differeth from all other in the World; for he doth not move his right and left foot one after another; but both together, and so likewise the other, whereby his whole body is removed, at every step, or strain.*<sup>29</sup>

Fox-Davies offers a more modern description of the camelopardel: . . . *another mythical animal fathered upon armory, [the Camelopardel] is stated to be the same as the camelopard, but with the addition of two long horns curved backwards.*<sup>30</sup>

Neither Robson nor Fox-Davies believed that the camelopardel was in heraldic use.<sup>31</sup> However, Parker believed, without citation, that he had seen the camelopardel used as a crest.<sup>32</sup> The earliest recorded use of a camelopardel which the author has been able to discover either in a crest, or otherwise, was in a 2010 grant by the College of Arms to Simon Andrew Camamile of Pickworth in the County of Lincolnshire, Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (**Figure 16**).

## Camelopards in the Non-Heraldic Arts

The term camelopard is used in other disciplines than the heraldic arts. Zoologists will find the name familiar – in taxonomy, the giraffe is a genus currently consisting of one species, *Giraffa camelopardalis*. So will astronomers – Petrus Plancius, a Dutch-Flemish astronomer, cartographer, and clergyman, defined the constellation now known as Camelopardali Hevelii (abbreviated as Camelopard. Hevel.) [**Figure 17**].<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most famous camelopard reference in literature comes from American humorist Mark Twain. The ‘duke’ and ‘dauphin’ in Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* understood the appeal of fantastic heraldic beasts when advertising a scam play called “*THE KING’S CAMELOPARD OR THE ROYAL NONESUCH ! ! !*” In that play, the titular king came

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Robson, *The British Herald* (Sunderland, 1830), p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Camelopardalis’, Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879).

<sup>29</sup> Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory* (London, 1688), vol. ii. p.178.

<sup>30</sup> Fox-Davies, op.cit., p.227.

<sup>31</sup> Robson, op.cit., p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> James Parker, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry* (Oxford, 1894), p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> Nick Kanas, *Star Maps: History, Artistry, and Cartography*, (Berlin, 2009), p. 119; Ian Ridpath, *Stars and Planets Guide*, (Princeton, 2001), pp. 92–93..

## THE COAT OF ARMS



*Figure 16: arms of Simon Camamile. Arms: Azure a pale ermine enfiling three crowns each composed of a rim set with four camomile flowers three manifest or. Crest: A camelopardel statant ermine armed unguled tailed and gorged with three crowns as in the arms attached to each thereof a chain reflexed over the back and terminating in an annulet all or. Reproduced with the kind permission of the armiger.*



Figure 17: Camelopardalis as depicted in Urania's Mirror, a set of constellation cards published in London c.1825. Source: plate 2 in Urania's Mirror, a set of celestial cards accompanied by A Familiar Treatise on Astronomy, Explaining the General Phenomena of the Celestial Bodies; with Numerous Graphical Illustrations by Jehoshaphat Aspin, 1825, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002695395>

## THE COAT OF ARMS

“a-prancing out on all fours, naked; and he was painted all over, ring-streaked-and-striped, all sorts of colors, as splendid as a rainbow.”<sup>34</sup> Although their living emblazonment was a bit off the mark, it was not a bad attempt for con men (**Figure 18**).

### Conclusion

Heraldic charges, especially hybrid beasts, are often based on mythical or imaginary creatures. The camelopard is a fascinating exception of a mythical hybrid beast that turns out to be completely real, albeit misunderstood for centuries. Unlike our predecessors, modern heraldists know exactly what giraffes are, and how to depict them in new grants. There is still the option of utilising camelopards and camelopardels as well, although their precise physical appearance remains open to question.



Figure 18: The King's camelopard illustrated by Edward Windsor Kemble in Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (1885, New York), p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (New York, 1885), pp. 195–6 “Admission 50 cents. Ladies and children not admitted”.