

GENEALOGICA & HERALDICA XXXV

REFORMATION REVOLUTION RESTORATION



CAMBRIDGE

2022

© The Heraldry Society and the authors for their individual articles, 2023

ISBN 978-0-904858-07-5

The responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information published herein, including the source and legitimacy of the illustrations lies exclusively with the respective authors, and the Heraldry Society denies any liability in relation thereto

Congress logo by Tania Crossingham

Photographs on the rear cover: Congress banners in Clare College Scholars' Garden by Jack Sain, plaque created for the Congress baton by Paul A. Fox

Printed in Great Britain by 4word Ltd, Bath

Correspondence to coatofarms@theheraldrysociety.com

www.theheraldrysociety.com

KING GUSTAV I (1523–1560) OF THE VASA DYNASTY AND THE SYMBOLS OF ROYAL POWER

Dr. HENRIK KLACKENBERG, A.I.H.

In 2023 the 500th anniversary of the election of Gustav Eriksson of the Vasa family as king of Sweden will be celebrated in many ways. In Swedish historiography King Gustav, ever since his death in 1560, has held a very special position as father of the nation.¹ In Jacob Binck's portrait (**Figure 1b**) from 1542 he is about 45 years old and had been king for almost 20 years, but is presented without any princely attributes. During his lifetime he worked hard on establishing a hereditary kingdom and wished to be remembered for all his deeds. Among his descendants are his grandson King Gustav II Adolf (ruled 1611–1632) and the latter's daughter Queen Christina (ruled 1632–1654), who were both important political actors in seventeenth century Europe.



Figure 1: left, 1a and right, 1c: seal impression and seal matrix of Gustav Eriksson Vasa as regent c. 1522; centre, 1b: portrait of King Gustav I by Jacob Binck, 1542.

The image of Gustav Vasa and his journey to royal power was for a long time influenced by an uncritical reading of the historiographer Peter Svart's chronicle, which is a biography very much coloured by the authors proximity to the king.² A more critical view was not established among historians until the late twentieth century, when despotic and paranoid aspects of his rule came to be noticed. Notwithstanding, I find the story of Gustav Vasa's route to kingship a fascinating one. Starting in 1520 as a young fatherless aristocrat, he became the leader of an uprising against Danish rule within the Kalmar union, and went on to establish a hereditary kingdom.

In this paper my intention is to study particular aspects of this story, specifically the symbols of power that Gustav Vasa acquired and used on his way to power. The sources are not rich, but a certain development can be traced through a closer look at the use of heraldry on seals, coins and other insignia. The splendour of his coronation in 1528 and his funeral in 1560 are other important sources.



Top left: *Figure 2*: coin of 1522, possibly a half gyllen; Top right: *Figure 3*: seal of the realm 1439–1520; lower left: *Figure 4*: royal seal of 1527; lower right: *Figure 5*: half gyllen coin of 1523.

In november 1520 a decisive event in the history of the Scandinavian countries took place. It is known to history as the *Stockholm blood bath*, and was the spark that ignited Gustav Vasa's rebellion and led to him becoming a monarch. The Danish King Christian II, in Swedish historiography known as Christian the Tyrant, was holding a coronation party in Stockholm after having finally broken Swedish resistance. At this party more than 80 people were executed, most of them part of the Swedish elite. They included bishops, nobility, and prominent Stockholm burghers. Christian's intention was, in the spirit of Machiavelli, to once and for all suppress the Swedish opposition, that had successfully resisted his military efforts to keep Sweden within the Kalmar union. The conflict was almost as old as the union itself, and during the previous century the Swedes had for periods elected kings and regents of their own.

Many of the higher Swedish nobility lost their lives in the *Stockholm blood bath*, Gustav Vasa's father among them. Gustav escaped the fate of his father as he was abroad at that time. He soon returned to Sweden, and from 1521, beginning in the province Dalarna, he led a rebellion against Danish rule. As the leader of the rebellion he called himself regent (in Swedish, riksföreståndare), a title which in its latin form can be read on the legend of a seal from 1522 (**Figure 1a** and **1c**): *Sigillum Gotstavi Erics Gubernator*. From this period there also survives his silver seal matrix. Here we have no sign or symbol of princely pretention other than the title *Gubernator*. The seal is simply a very elegant one made for a noble.³

The Vasa family coat of arms is displayed on these seals. What the emblem represents has been given many different interpretations by heraldists, including a sheaf, a point of a

SYMBOLS OF POWER

spear, and a chessman. The arms are known from the fourteenth century and have been drawn in many different ways, which explains the many ideas of what the motif is. It is interesting to note that in the 1540s King Gustav himself stated that the emblem was a sheaf (Swedish vase/stormvase), that in a more modern military terminology is called a fascine, which is a bundle of twigs and brushwood used for traversing ditches and trenches.⁴

As regent and leader of the rebellion in 1521 to 1523, Gustav Vasa struck coins with his portrait and arms on the obverse side (**Figure 2**). The regent is there displayed with sword and armour, but without a crown. In its place he wears an elegant hat. The reverse has more to say from a heraldic perspective. It is decorated with a coat of arms charged with three crowns, two crossed arrows and the initial G. The three crowns are the emblem of the kingdom and G stands for Gustav. The arrows are the arms of the province of Dalarna, which tells us that the coin was minted in this province, where Gustav started the uprising. The shield is surmounted by a crown to express that it is the arms of a kingdom, although without a king.⁵

The question is, why didn't Gustav as the leader of an uprising use the seal of the realm (**Figure 3**), displaying the patron saint Erik and the arms with three crowns of Sweden? His predecessors had used it frequently from the 1430s to 1520 to express their independence vis-à-vis the kings of the Kalmar union seated in Denmark.⁶ I suppose that the matrix was not available to him. Probably it was under Danish control, and might have been taken to Copenhagen together with former regent's archives. If the matrix never left Sweden it lost its relevance when Gustav was elected king.

The war against the Danish troops was successful, and in June 1523 Gustav Vasa made his triumphal entrance into Stockholm, just a few weeks after he had been elected king of Sweden. He was the first native king since Karl Knutsson Bonde in 1470, although regents of the Sture family had periodically maintained Swedish independence during the preceding fifty years. Gustav's new position as elected king soon found its heraldic expression on both seals and coins.

The new royal seal (**Figure 4**) was of a larger size than Gustav's earlier seal, and displayed the royal coat of arms as it had been composed during the reign of Karl Knutsson Bonde in the middle of the fifteenth century, with the addition of an escutcheon of the Vasa family arms. The first and fourth quarters show the arms of the three crowns, while the second and third quarters are charged with the lion of the Folkunga family that ruled Sweden in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For centuries this combination had made, as they still make, the arms of the kingdom. The legend of the seal can be read as: *Sigillum Gotstavi Svecorum Gothorumqve Electi Regis 1523*, which means that Gustav calls himself King of the Swedes and Goths elected in 1523.⁷

The new coins (**Figure 5**) depicted on the obverse a king in full armour with orb and sword.⁸ Between his feet the Vasa emblem is visible, which makes it possible to see this image as a transition from the St Erik picture on the earlier seal of the realm to an image of the new king. On some of the coin series the legend still refers to St Erik, as had been the tradition during the fifteenth century. The reverse of the coin display a coat of arms with three crowns laid on a cross. Between the crowns there is an initial that refers to the mint: S for Stockholm.

¶ Dentar i Stockholm År effor gods byrd.
1526. på femtende dagh Augusti.



The orb

The sceptre

The sword

The crown



Top left: *Figure 6*: woodcut from New Testament printed in Stockholm 1526; top right, *Figure 7*: detail of a funeral procession in 1594; bottom: *Figure 8*: royal seals of 1532 and 1560.

Another interesting heraldic expression from this early period of King Gustav's reign is an image (**Figure 6**) in the first Swedish edition of the New Testament, printed in Stockholm in 1526.⁹ Here is depicted what is explained as *Insignia Gotstavi, Suecorum Gothorumque Regis*. The woodcut shows the royal arms with those of Vasa on an escutcheon, and supported by two savages. The lions that we see today in this position were introduced in the sixteenth century.

It was not until 1528, almost five years after the election in Strängnäs and the triumphal entrance into Stockholm, that King Gustav was crowned. The coronation was a very important ceremony for a king at this time, because it gave him his mission from God. This was also an opportunity for developing a royal splendour full of symbols of power. Heraldry was an important part of this, but let us dwell for a moment on the other insignia that then were in use. We have no depictions of the coronation in Uppsala cathedral in 1528, but in the chronicle of Peter Svart there is a description of the ceremony and the regalia that were in use. A drawing (**Figure 7**) showing a royal funeral

SYMBOLS OF POWER

procession in 1594, gives us an idea of what a procession with the regalia might have looked like.¹⁰

The chronicle tells us, that three types of regalia were carried into the cathedral by prominent members of the nobility. A golden orb was carried by the king's steward, the sword by his marshal, and the sceptre by a prominent lawman. At the investiture the king was given a ring as a token of fidelity, a small sword as a symbol of his office and finally, kneeling at the altar, he was invested with a purple mantle and a crown. The purpose of the crown was to symbolise that the king held his office by the grace of God. Seated at a throne in the choir of the cathedral the king also received the sceptre as a symbol for justice, the orb as a symbol for the prosperity of the realm, and the sword to protect the good and punish the evil.¹¹

Unfortunately, none of these regalia survive today, but we can get an idea of the design from their illustration on royal seals and coins. About the royal crown not much more is known, other than that it was made by a goldsmith in Stockholm, and presumably it was of the medieval type without arches. A more concrete understanding of the regalia can be derived from a study of the corresponding objects in the grave of King Gustav, as will be described later.

In terms of heraldic content, no important change took place in the royal seals during the period between the coronation and the death of the king in 1560. From about 1540 the Vasa arms in the escutcheon were changed in some details, and the design came bear a stronger resemblance to the sheaf that we are used to see today.¹² The seals also came to be created in progressively higher artistic quality, as can be seen on the two from 1532 and 1560 (**Figure 8**). The legend was changed following the coronation: *Electus* was deleted and *Dei Gratie* added, both as a consequence of the coronation and the new title. *Rex Vandalorum* was added to the legend as a title of pretention on seals from the king's final years. The land of the Vends on the southern shores of the Baltic sea was not, and had never been, under the Swedish crown. This addition to the royal title was part of a conflict with the king of Denmark concerning the rights of the two kingdoms. During the reign of King Gustav the conflict never found actual heraldic expression, but it did so during the reign of his son King Erik XIV, when the conflict led to a war caused by the use of heraldry, among other things.¹³

Most of the larger coins (**Figure 9**) from this period show on the reverse side the well established picture of the royal arms with four fields and an escutcheon under an open crown. In the 1530s the obverse side of the coins show a more contemporary image of the king, but in most cases with the same royal insignia: crown, sword and orb. The legends are sometimes abbreviated to *Gostavs Dei Gratie Rex Svecorum*, due to lack of space. There are also some other series of coins with the reverse displaying three free standing coats of arms united under a crown. The third shield so depicted is the Vasa arms; I would not ascribe any new heraldic meaning to this composition.¹⁴

A special coin was struck for distribution at the coronation in Uppsala (**Figure 10**). Its reverse displays the royal arms laid on a cross, while on the obverse we meet a king in full armour with sword and orb. Between the feet the Vasa coat of arms is visible. It is not known how many of these coins were actually distributed to the people at the coronation, but the intention to spread the image and arms of the king is obvious.¹⁵

The artistic peak among the coins struck during the reign of King Gustav are the 'daler' coins from 1542 and 1559 (**Figure 11**). It has an obverse displaying the royal



Top: *Figure 9*: daler coins of 1534 and 1535; middle left: *Figure 10*: coronation coin of 1528; middle right, *Figure 11*: daler coins of 1542 and 1559; below, *Figure 12*: royal helmet, armour and sword of 1540s.

arms in combination with a demi-figure of the king in armour, with crown, sword and orb, and a reverse side showing Christ the Saviour. The legend reads *Gostavus D G Sweci Got Wan Rex*, but the title *Rex Vandalorum* is not expressed. A similar daler coin dating 1559 shows an aged king.¹⁶

By the 1540s King Gustav was well established on the throne, which gave him the opportunity to make Sweden a hereditary kingdom with a more advanced administration and court. It was in this period that, as an expression of royal splendour and power, Gustav acquired from Germany a crowned helmet, a suit of armour and a sword of the

SYMBOLS OF POWER



Top left: *Figure 13*: detail of a funeral procession in 1594; Top right: *Figure 14*: provincial arms in an armorial from 1562; bottom: *Figure 15*: royal tabard of 1560 and detail of mourning procession in Brussels 1558.

highest quality (**Figure 12**). The sword was called the *sword of majesty* and was intended for royal ceremonies. It is decorated with the royal arms.¹⁷

When King Gustav died in 1560 the ceremonial and heraldic splendour at his funeral surpassed anything that had been seen before in Sweden. For his heirs it was very important to show the world that this new royal dynasty was the equal of the older ones in the neighbouring kingdoms. The impressive mourning ceremony for the Emperor Charles V in Brussels in 1558 served as a model.¹⁸

For three days in December 1560, a funeral cortege comprising more than a thousand followers moved slowly from Stockholm to Uppsala cathedral, where the funeral was to take place. No depictions of the procession have survived, but several participants have given detailed verbal accounts. From these we can conclude that the heraldry used was contextually very important, with the royal arms displayed in various ways, including on the coffin, the banners, and on tabards.

A company of 700 footsoldiers led the procession preceded by a black banner. They were followed by 200 cavalymen in black and the same number of singing scholars, priests and bishops. After the clergy went four heralds on horseback with the royal arms on their tabards. Next were 24 nobles on horseback, each carrying a black banner on which the arms of a province was painted. The horses were all caparisoned in black.

An idea of what this might have looked like can be gained from a drawing of a similar funeral procession in 1594 (**Figure 13**), with the difference that in the case of the mounted banner holders both the horse caparisons and banners were black.

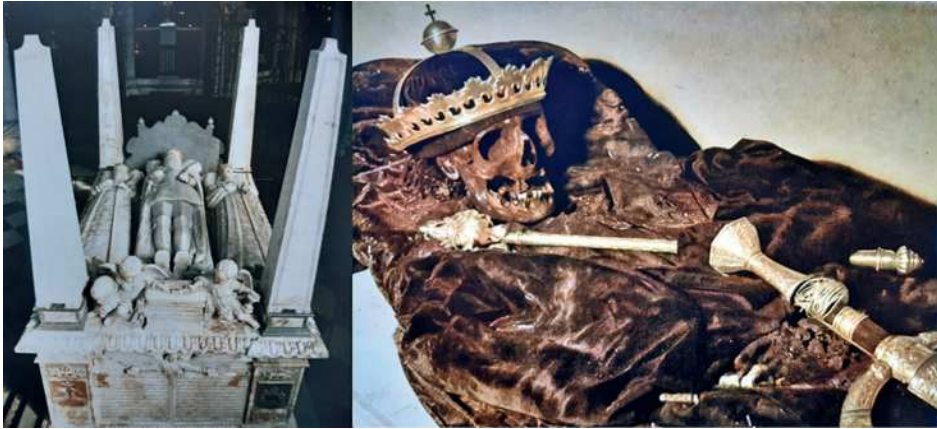
This is the first time that a complete collection of provincial arms is mentioned in the Swedish historical record. They were probably composed for the occasion by the royal secretary Rasmus Ludvigsson to show the world the great number of provinces that made up the kingdom. The artistic design was by Anders Målare, who at that time was one of the best in the country. Since no depiction of the procession is known, we do not know the design of the arms precisely, but an armorial from 1562 (**Figure 14**) gives a good idea.¹⁹

Following the 24 banners of provincial arms a few men of the higher nobility on horseback conveyed the royal insignia. The leader of this group carried a banner decorated with the royal arms in gold. The man after him carried the royal tabard on a pole, as can be observed in a depiction of the imperial mourning procession in 1558 (**Figure 15**). The royal helmet was carried together with the tabard. After this noble rider there followed another dressed in the royal armour. Immediately in front of the coffin was placed the most prominent nobleman who carried the sword of the realm, that at this time was the most important symbol of royal power. It had been acquired in Germany in 1541 and can, together with the armour, helmet and tabard, still be inspected at the museums in the royal palace in Stockholm. After the coffin, carried by four horses with black caparisons, followed the king's horse, the princes, the councillors of the realm, other nobility, princesses, the widow queen, ladies of the nobility, more soldiers on horse and on foot, and finally burghers and others, but for all these categories nothing is mentioned about displaying heraldic devices.

An impressive sepulchral monument of marble (**Figure 16**) was erected for King Gustav and his two queens in Uppsala cathedral. It was richly decorated with royal and provincial arms, but not completed until 1583. It is today the most visible and concrete memorial to King Gustav, and has for centuries contributed to the image of the king as a father of his land. Considering that the monument was completed more than twenty years after the death of the king, it has more to say about the use of heraldry of his successors King Erik and King John.²⁰

The royal grave has been opened and investigated more than once, the last occasion being in 1945. (**Figure 17**). Through these investigations we are familiar with the regalia that were put in the grave in 1560: a crown with arches and orb, a sceptre, and a sword. It is worth noting that this kind of crown was never worn by King Gustav during his lifetime, if we are to believe the examples provided on his coinage. The heir King Erik XIV probably wished that the founder of the dynasty (at least in the grave) should have the same kind of crown as the kings in the greater European kingdoms. The first Swedish crown with arches is the one that was made for the coronation of King Erik himself in 1561, and that crown was a lot more expensive than the one that his father had at his coronation in 1528.²¹

SYMBOLS OF POWER



Left: *Figure 16*: royal tomb of Gustav I completed 1583, Uppsala cathedral; right: *Figure 17*: King Gustav in his grave, investigated in 1945.

We have now followed how the use of royal symbols of power developed during the time of King Gustav. To sum up: when he as a rebel in the 1520s he possessed neither the seal of the realm, nor a crown in his hand. A crown, and armour with a crowned helmet, a sword of majesty, and other insignia, were acquired during his reign. Depictions of the king and his arms were given wide circulation on seals and coins. The result of his effort was that his heir began his reign in a considerably enhanced position regard to his insignia of office.

¹ L-O Larsson, *Gustav Vasa – landsfader eller tyrann* (Stockholm, 2002).

² G. Westin, (ed), *Peter Svart, Gustav Vasas krönika* (Malmö, 1964).

³ G. Fleetwood, Sigill, *Gustav Vasa Minnen* ed. Livrustkammaren (Stockholm, 1938), pp. 48–49, 55–57.

⁴ Larsson, op. cit., p. 25.

⁵ L. O. Lagerqvist, *Äldre Vasatid, Myntningen i Sverige 995–1995, Numismatiska Meddelanden XL* (Stockholm, 1995), p. 132.

⁶ C. Nevéus, *Medeltida småkonst – Sigill i Riksarkivet* (Stockholm, 1997), p. 52.

⁷ Fleetwood, op. cit., pp. 49–52, 59–61.

⁸ Lagerqvist, op. cit., pp. 131–132.

⁹ Larsson, pp. 129–130.

¹⁰ Westin, op. cit., p.152; M. Olsson, *Vasagraven i Uppsala domkyrka*, del 1–2 (Stockholm, 1956), pl. 68.

¹¹ Larsson, pp. 165–169.

¹² Fleetwood, pp. 52–53,63.

¹³ N. Bartholdy, *Det danske kongevapen. Fra Valdemarerne til Frederik VI* (Copenhagen, 2021), pp. 193–227.

¹⁴ Lagerqvist, pp. 135–141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133–134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–144.

¹⁷ R. Cederström, *De svenska riksregalierna och kungliga värdighetstecken* (Stockholm, 1942), pp. 87–102; Olsson, op. cit., pp. 36–37, pl. 53–56; L. Rangström, *Dödens teater. Kungliga svenska begravningar genom fem århundraden* (Stockholm, 2015), pp. 21–26.

¹⁸ Olsson, pp. 32–47; Rangström, op. cit., pp. 18–43.

HENRIK KLACKENBERG

¹⁹ C. Nordenfalk, *En svensk vapenbok från år 1562, Meddelanden från Riksheraldikerämbetet IX* (Malmö, 1941); Olsson, pp. 35–36.

²⁰ Olsson, pl 1–2; Rangström, pp. 27–29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–28, 47–56; Rangström, pp. 30–34.

