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ROYAL HERALDRY IN TIMES OF REVOLUTION: INTERPRETING ADAPTATIONS MADE BY MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY OF BELGIUM

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This study analyses a number of emblematic cases of adaptations to the coats of arms of members of the Royal Family of Belgium, resulting from revolutions or major political changes. Five case examples will be presented:

- The accession to the throne of the first King following the Belgian Revolution.
- The Second Empire of Mexico, a compromise between local terroir and European imperial tradition.
- the heraldic consequences of the creation of the independent state of Congo
- The impact of territorial changes in the Austro-Hungarian Empire on Belgian royal heraldry.
- And finally, the saga of the Saxon shield in Belgian royal arms

1. The Belgian Revolution and a search for political stability – Leopold I, King of the Belgians (1831–1865)



Figure 1: arms of Leopold I, left to right 1a: 1816; 1b: 1818; 1c: 1831; 1d: 1839.
Source: Archives du Palais Royal, except for 1c, a stained glass window from the church of Notre-Dame au Sablon in Brussels.

In 1830, less than a month after the fall of Charles X, the last King of France, revolutionary fever swept through Brussels. The provisional government proclaimed Belgium's independence on 4 October 1830, and opted to become a constitutional monarchy. In June 1831, the Chambers elected Leopold of Saxe-Coburg as King of the Belgians. He took the oath of office on 21 July 1831, the date that in 1890 became Belgium's national holiday.

The first King of the Belgians belonged to a German ducal family that was to have an exceptional destiny, since in addition to Belgium, the house of Saxe-Coburg came to occupy the thrones of Great Britain, Bulgaria and Portugal, in addition to their historic duchy. When he took the oath of allegiance to the Belgian Constitution, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg already had a prestigious past. He was the godson of Emperor Leopold II of the Holy Roman Empire, a general in the Russian army during the military campaigns that

led to the fall of Napoleon I, and would have become the Prince Consort of Great Britain had the tragic fate of his first wife Charlotte of Wales not decided otherwise. He was then approached to occupy the throne of Greece, an offer which he declined just a few months before becoming King of the Belgians. For all these reasons Leopold I gave his new country international status and a guarantee of stability.

What then of the heraldic consequences of his accession. Before acceding to the Belgian throne, Leopold bore the German arms of the Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld branch (**Figure 1a**), which he used at his marriage to Princess Charlotte of Wales in 1816. Following the tragic death of the princess in 1817, her father-in-law the Prince-Regent of Great Britain, the future George IV, granted him the right to quarter his personal arms with those of his late wife (**Figure 1b**). A characteristic feature of this complex coat of arms is that it shows the princess's cadency mark of the label of five points as the granddaughter of a king, in this case George III, the central pendant charged with a rose gules.

When Leopold I arrived in Belgium this characteristic feature of the British heraldic system was often misdrawn. The rose disappeared and the label was reduced to one of three points before eventually disappearing altogether. In the meantime the sovereign himself considered his shield to be overly complex, and decided to simplify his German quarters, keeping only the shield of Saxony. At the beginning of his reign, he placed the shield of Brabant, *Sable a lion rampant or armed and langued gules*, over England quartering Saxony on an escutcheon (**Figure 1c**). Brabant should not be confused with the arms of Flanders, which have the colours reversed. The shield of Brabant was adopted by the Constitution for the new Kingdom.

In 1839, a major change was made to the heraldic composition of the coat of arms, altering the order of importance of the shield's furnishings (**Figure 1d**). The quarterly Great Britain-Saxony was placed on the shoulder of the lion of Belgium, a sign of the kingdom's preponderance over the King's origins.

On the rare initiative of Queen Victoria, a second plaque of knighthood in the Order of the Garter was placed in St George's Chapel Windsor to reflect heraldically the change in her uncle Leopold's political status following his accession as King. The fact that on his stall plate the lion is faces to the sinister is not a mistake as the animals on the coats of arms in the north stalls are turned towards the choir as a courtesy.

1831–1850

King Leopold I used two types of external ornaments, neither of which was ever ratified by a royal decree. It was not until 1880 that the arms of the royal house were laid down in an official text.

In the first composition, the King placed his coat of arms on a panoply of six flags (**Figure 2a**). He later adopted more conventional external ornaments, with supporters, a mantle, and behind these the banners of the nine provinces of his realm (**Figure 2b**). From the time of Leopold II onwards, the provincial banners were reserved for the Great Seal of the State, and the monarch no longer used them in his personal arms.

Comparing the arms of Louis-Philippe, King of the French, with those of his son-in-law Leopold I, there are obvious similarities in the arrangement of the outer ornaments. Father-in-law and son-in-law became king just one year apart. The hand of Justice and



Figure 2: the full achievement of King Leopold I. Left, 2a: 1831–39; right, 2a: 1850.

the sceptre surmounted by the cruciferous globe are similarly arranged in the arms of both, whereas in Belgium the sceptre is normally surmounted by the lion of Brabant.

2. The Second Mexican Empire, a compromise between local custom and European imperial tradition

The end of the reign of Leopold I saw the start of the Mexican adventure in which his daughter Charlotte lost everything: her throne and her sanity, her husband shot by revolutionaries. When she disappeared in 1927, Mexico's second empire was a distant memory. When the Western powers decided to put their house in order in Mexico, they created an empire that was entrusted to Maximilian, brother of Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. The new Mexican court invented armories that were a synthesis of typically Mexican elements: an eagle from Anahuac (a region in central Mexico), perched on a nopal (a kind of flowering prickly pear) and devouring a snake that it was holding in its right talon. The nopal springs from a rock in the middle of a lake, drawn in the stylised manner of Aztec scribes. The two griffin supporters are a reminder of the supporters used by the Austrian emperors (Figure 3a).

The Imperial Crown of Mexico was an international design. The crown combines French and Austrian influences, combining the eagles of the French imperial crown with the mitre shape of the crown of Rudolf II of Habsburg. This had repercussions on the personal arms of the Empress, who as Grand Mistress of the Order of Saint Charles of Mexico, an order reserved for ladies, also bore the cross of the order between the two shields of the couple's arms (Figure 3b). A version of the Grand Cross insignia, made from ivory and malachite which belonged to Queen Louise of Denmark is kept at the Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen (Figure 3c).

3. The heraldic consequences of King Leopold II's accession to sovereignty over Congo

In 1885, when Europe was dividing up Africa at the Berlin Conference, in order to establish colonial empires, King Leopold II manoeuvred to have himself recognised as



Figure 3: Left, 3a: arms of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico; centre, 3b: arms of Empress Charlotte of Mexico; right, 3c: Grand Cross of the Order of Saint Charles (Mexico) - copy of Queen Louise of Denmark, born Princess of Hesse-Cassel, wife of King Christian IX of Denmark, from the Didier de Meester de Betzenbroeck Collection Royal Palace of Amalienborg, Copenhagen (Denmark).

sovereign of the independent state of Congo, a highly controversial page in history today. This major geopolitical change had heraldic repercussions. In 1886 the State of Congo adopted a coat of arms published in an official Bulletin specific to the colony, a sign that the king was keen to use the legal attributes of a sovereign state to establish his legitimacy. It is worth noting that the King's personal shield with a lion, the shoulder charged with a Saxon escutcheon, is repeated in the Congo shield. The composition of the great arms shown here (**Figure 4**) is unofficial, but clearly reflects the concept of the

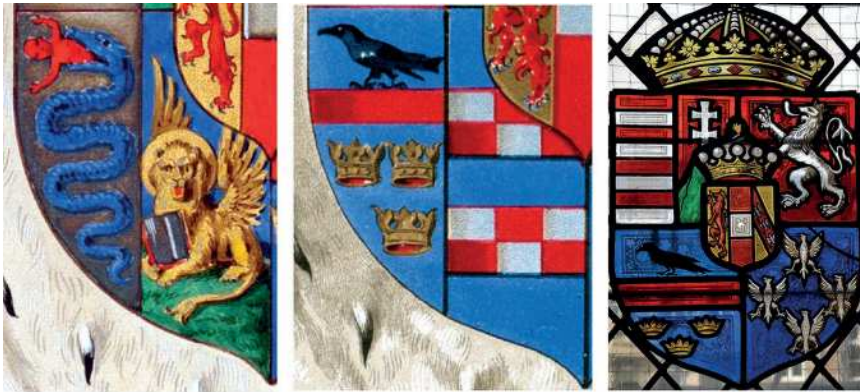


Left, *Figure 4*: Great arms of Leopold II as sovereign of Congo, from the guestbook of the Grand Serment Royal and Saint-Georges des Arbalétriers, Brussels, Artist Julien Bal; right, *Figure 5* arms drawn in 1853 by Jules Gérard for the marriage of the Duc de Brabant to Marie-Henriette-Anne, Archduchess of Austria, Archives du Palais Royal, Brussels.

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personal union of two states, with its banners, its collars of two orders (of Leopold and the African Star), and having two mottoes.

4. Impact of the evolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the arms of Queen Marie-Henriette



Top left, *Figure 6a*: Austrian quarters of Lombardy-Venice; top centre, *Figure 6b*: revised Austrian quarters of Galicia and Lodomeria from the Austrian State Archive in Vienna; top right, *Figure 7*: arms of Queen Marie-Henriette in a window from the church of Notre-Dame au Sablon, photographed by the author; below, *Figure 8*: funeral hatchment of Queen Marie-Henriette, 1902, Royal Collection, Brussels.

On 31 March 1896 the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified Count Paul de Borghrave d'Altena, the King's Chef de Cabinet, of the modification to the arms of the Imperial and Royal Family of Austria-Hungary in accordance with an Imperial and Royal Decree of 11 February 1896. This modification concerned all members of the Imperial House of Austria, with the exception of the reigning branches of Tuscany and Modena. In the shield of the Archdukes and Archduchesses of Austria, the quarters of Lombardy-Venetia were replaced with those of Galicia-Lodomeria (**Figures 6a and b**). Queen Marie-Henriette of Belgium (1836–1902), the consort of Leopold II, was born an Archduchess of Austria as daughter of the Palatine of Hungary. The arms that she bore on her marriage to the Duc de Brabant in 1853 are illustrated in **Figure 5**. The Queen made a somewhat free adaptation of the imperial directive, taking only the quarter of Galicia, and adding an archduke's crown to the shield (**Figure 7**) which was not at all foreseen in the instructions from Vienna. However, on the funeral hatchment used at her funeral in 1902 (**Figure 8**), the district of Lodomeria took its place, and the archduke's crown disappeared from the whole; a sign of the complexity of the practice.

5. The saga of the Saxon shield 1831–2019

The inclusion of the shield of Saxony in the royal coat of arms was enshrined in a royal decree of 13 July 1880, which was the first regulatory provision governing the arms of the King and members of the royal family. Previously, the only provision had been the royal decree of 15 June 1858 governing the royal ensign. As a result of the First World War, anything that sounded German was discarded. The King no longer used his German titles of Duke of Saxony and Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and removed the Saxon shield from his coat of arms. However, King Albert I did not formalise these changes by royal decree. It was not until 1921 that the removal of the Saxon shield from the King's coat of arms was translated into a legal text (**Figure 9**). This was enacted indirectly via a royal decree relating to the flags and pennants of members of the royal household. The abandonment of the titles Duke of Saxony and Prince of Saxony-Coburg-Gotha was not the subject of any royal decree.

The Archives of the Royal Palace hold a letter from the King's Chef de Cabinet, Count d'Arschot Schoonhoven, addressed to M. De Ridder, Director General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 23 April 1921, which states the following: *“I spoke to the King yesterday afternoon about the subject of the letter you sent me on 9 October 1920 and the conversation we had yesterday: the removal from the titles of the King and members of the royal family of the titles of Princes and Dukes of Saxony implies the removal of the Saxon coat of arms from the coats of arms of Our Sovereign and his children, and this removal should be enshrined in a royal decree. The King considers it preferable not to make this deletion the subject of a decree, as this would unnecessarily draw attention to the arms and their disappearance. It would be better to let them fall into disuse and not reproduce them when we have the opportunity to reproduce the royal arms. You will understand that I am telling you the above on a personal basis. If I wrote it to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, my letter would be an official communication and I think that its character would then exceed that which the King wishes to see given to this affair”*.

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Figure 9: Evolution of the royal shield of Belgium, top row, left to right: 1831, 1839, 1880, 1921, 2019; bottom row, the Great Arms before and after 1921, artist Léon Diekmann.

It was therefore a decision not to use the coat of arms, rather than an outright repeal. As a result, the Royal Decree of 1880, which defined the arms of the royal house with the Saxon shield, remained legally in force, but was no longer used in practice. This means that in 2019, when the Saxon shield once again began to be used as a reminder of the family origins of the dynasty, no change in the law was required.³

Leopold III (1934–1951)

The future Leopold III, as Duke of Brabant, bore the shield of Saxony on the lion's shoulder until the age of 20. The shield subsequently disappeared from his coat of arms and did not reappear for him either as reigning king or in the Archives of the Royal Palace after his abdication.

Baudouin I (1951–1993)

King Baudouin never used the shield of Saxony (**Figure 10**), having been born following the 1921 decision of his grandfather. His status as royal prince exercising the constitutional powers of his father Leopold III during the “Royal Question” of 1945–1951 had no heraldic impact. Leopold III was ostracised for his refusal to join the Belgian government in exile in 1940, contrary to his perceived constitutional role, and was forced to abdicate in 1951. During this difficult period the crown prince continued to bear his arms as Duke of Brabant.



Figure 10: arms of Baudouin I, left to right, as comte de Hainaut 1930, as duc de Brabant 1934, as Prince Royal 1950, and as King in 1951.

Albert II (1993–2013)

Albert II, the younger brother of Baudouin I, himself abdicated as King of the Belgians on 21st July 2013, in favour of his eldest son Philippe. He did not use the shield of Saxony until the 2019 reform, a particular feature of which was the introduction of a brisure for kings who have abdicated, a label charged with a royal crown (**Figure 11**), which was directly inspired by the heraldic solution to fix the situation of the Duke of Windsor, who had abdicated as King Edward VIII of Great Britain. This was the first time in Belgium that the question of the heraldic response to the abdication of a sovereign was settled. In the case of his father King Leopold III, the King had retained his arms unchanged (together with the full royal title) so that it was not possible to see any difference between Leopold and the then reigning King, Baudouin.

Philippe, King of the Belgians, epilogue to a Saxon shield

In 2019 King Philippe issued a decree to reorganise the arms of the members of the royal house of Belgium. One of the effects of this royal decree was the re-establishment of the use of the Saxon shield and the officialization of the national motto in the three national languages of French, Flemish, and German: l'Union fait la Force, Endracht maakt macht, and Einigkeit macht stark. (Unity is strength). (**Figure 12**).

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Above, *Figure 11*: arms borne by Albert II. Left to right, as prince in 1934 and 1937, as King in 1993, and following his abdication in 2019. Below, *Figure 12*: arms borne by King Philippe on his accession and following the decree of 2019.

¹ J.A. Tiroff, *Wappenbuch der regierenden Monarchen Europas*, 1846

² Grand gala royal saloon „Louise-Marie“, 1856, Bodywork by Jones Frères, door panel from the Musée du Cinquantenaire. Brussels.

³ Royal Decree of 12 July 2019 determining the coat of arms of the Royal House and its members, *Moniteur Belge* of 19-07-2019, no. 2019030777, p. 72666.