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NOBLE AND BURGHER ARMS IN REVOLUTIONARY TIMES: SOME EXAMPLES OF POLITICAL PROFILES IN EIGHTEENTH TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY DENMARK

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Introduction

The period from the end of the eighteenth to the early twentieth century was a tumultuous time in Europe in terms of social and political change. There were probably more institutional and ideological changes in the span of those 150 years than at any time in the previous 1,500 years. From Enlightenment thinkers came new views of mankind and the world: ‘older’ ideas of, say, God, king and country now battled newer ideals such as liberty, equality and justice. Simultaneously, demands for greater political influence from the broader classes of society became widespread. It was also a time where ‘new’ men more easily rose to the top of society, while older families were often displaced. These changes quite naturally also left their mark on heraldry – including in the arms granted to or assumed by the new men who came to power.

My focus here is on my native Denmark – a country which, like its Scandinavian brethren, in some ways is an outlier compared to much of the rest of Europe. Denmark had since 1660 been Europe’s only constitutionally ruled absolutist state, and hence with no powers delegated to elected or representative bodies. Despite this Denmark never experienced any French-style revolutions in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, and while some popular unrest and political turbulence occurred in 1848, in that year the last absolutist king, Frederik VII, seemed almost happy to hand over almost all his powers to a constitutional assembly. On 5 June 1849 he signed a new constitution with separation of powers, independent courts, a two chamber (predominantly, elected) parliament and an executive which limited royal prerogatives. While the next decades had constitutional conflicts, partisan infighting, and some popular demonstrations, first by liberals, and later by socialists and communists, Denmark was arguably among the politically most peaceful and gradualist states in Europe.

But the attitudes of those coming into power gradually changed – and so did their heraldry. For the present purposes I shall give some examples of new armorial bearings of political figures ranging from the 1770s until shortly before World War I. They are all derived from Danish politics. This will not constitute a comprehensive survey of, say, all Danish prime ministers, but will consider some of the more interesting or more widely known personalities. These individuals often made opposite or conflicting choices when it came to heraldry, taking different ‘tacks’ not only on personal values but also on aspects of social status.

Two counts of the Enlightenment: Struensee and Moltke

Let us begin with two Danish counts of the late eighteenth century whose very different backgrounds and outlooks had heraldic ramifications. They were both Danes of German background – one of them a burgher who rose quickly, the other a member of the ancient nobility, the *Uradel*. They were both counts – but where one was willingly so ennobled,

the other cared nothing for his title, and would have happily put it aside. The two men chose quite different armorial expressions.

Count Johann Friedrich Struensee (1737–1772)

The Prussian born Johann Friedrich Struensee studied medicine and was strongly influenced by Enlightenment thinking, in particular by Rousseau, and he was essentially a utilitarian and a deist. His antecedents were well-educated bourgeois, a family known since the fifteenth century, but which was not noble. His father, Adam Struensee (1708–1791) was a professor and Protestant priest from Halle in Southern Prussia who married the daughter of the personal physician to King Christian VI of Denmark-Norway. Johann Friedrich in his turn became personal physician to a king of Denmark-Norway – the less than capable and mentally unstable Christian VII, who seems to have been schizophrenic.

Due to Struensee's abilities and the king's disabilities the doctor quickly rose to being the king's foremost advisor, and from this position in 1770 he became the de facto head of government, and bore the important title of *Maître des requêtes*, i.e., in charge of all petitions to the king. In a short time Struensee initiated about 1,800 more or less wide-ranging, liberalizing reforms – designed by him, but implemented in the king's name. These included: improvements of due process and rule of law; prohibition against torture; abolition of all censorship (as the first state in the world); abolition of the death penalty for theft and of penalties for adultery; abolition of some public monopolies, and liberalization of trade; reform and downsizing of the military; the easing of forced labour for manorial tenants; reduction in public spending, and in the number of courtiers and civil servants – including a rule that public offices should be allocated exclusively on qualifications. He even implemented an informal moratorium on new admissions to the nobility and on awards of the royal orders – although in 1771 he and his close associate, Enevold Brandt (1738–1772), were both made counts and received the new, exclusive Order of Mathilda, named after the British born Queen, Carolina Mathilda.

In 1772 Struensee was, under dramatic circumstances, arrested, jailed, sentenced, and executed by a cabal led by prominent nobles, the king's stepmother and the king's younger half-brother. His downfall was partly a consequence of court factionalism, plus dissatisfaction with the reformist agenda; but a non-trivial element was the fact that Struensee since 1770 had been the young Queen's lover and was widely believed to be the biological father of her second child, Princess Louise Augusta.¹

When Struensee was made a count 30 September 1771, he needed armorial bearings. In fact, he already had something to build upon: his father had apparently assumed arms of *A ship on water* and for the crest an anchor with what appears to be a snake around it.² The arms were no doubt canting: Struensee can be translated as 'rough sea'. Struensee himself had used the ship in his own seals before being made a count (**Figure 1**). In the short period between January 1771, when he received the Order of Mathilda, and September 1771, when he was created a count, Struensee had no less than (at least) seven different signets made displaying a shield with the ship.³ The shield is surmounted with a coronet of somewhat indeterminate character; it does not precisely resemble any of those designed for the various grades of Danish nobility, and Struensee had at this point not yet been made a count. But rather than seeing this as usurpation by an upstart, we might see it as Struensee's rightful claim that he, through the offices held and their place



Figure 1: Seals used by Johann Friedrich Struensee in 1771, before and after he was granted the comital title. Danish National Archives. Photographs by Ronny Andersen.

in the Order of Precedence, already enjoyed personal nobility.⁴ It could be hypothesized that Struensee chose to use a somewhat indeterminate coronet given that his precedence already at this time was far higher than untitled noblemen, barons and counts.



Figure 2: Comital arms of Johann Friedrich Struensee from his letters patent of 1771 (Danish National Archives).

In Struensee's comital arms from 1771 (**Figure 2**) the ship was given first place as if it had been an ancient *Stamwappen*, albeit with the Danish national flag, the Dannebrog, flying.⁵ In the first and fourth quarters we see what might be interpreted as two streams – perhaps also canting on the name. The second quarter contains two keys – no doubt a reference to his charge as head of the king's privy council and his being in charge of access to the king. The third quarter contains palm leaves and a coronet.

The coat of arms has three crests: the central being a ship – corresponding to the family arms; the second is an owl – the bird of wisdom – holding a key, thus symbolizing how wisdom gives access to the state; and the third is a coronet and palm leaves between two eagle's wings. For supporters the utilitarian Struensee chose two beavers – an animal known for hard work, and often used to symbolize industry.

Two aspects of the arms are striking: firstly, aside from the beavers, and perhaps the owl, there is no visible reference to Struensee's worldview; secondly, the whole design of the coat of arms is exactly as if from a template for Danish counts over the previous century: a quartered shield with various pseudo-quarterings; the family's *Stamwappen* in the centre; supporters and three helmets – as was the near universal standard for Danish counts; the helmets with nine gold bars as reserved for counts, and the appropriate coronets of rank.

It seems incongruous that the great social reformer chose armorial bearings which in their structure and symbolism looked virtually identical to the arms of such families as say Ahlefeldt, Bernstorff, Moltke, Reventlow or Wedell, each of which were ennobled as Danish counts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This has been a source of wonderment to some observers, but it really should not be: Struensee although a classical liberal, was not an egalitarian, and certainly not a democrat.

Struensee's life and heraldry came to an abrupt end in 1772. When he had been found guilty of *lèse-majesté* and sentenced, he was taken to the Eastern Commons of Copenhagen, where his comital arms, painted on a shield, were broken into pieces, his right hand was chopped off, he was beheaded (in the third attempt), quartered, and finally the body parts put on public display.

Despite this his heraldry lived on. His very capable brother, the economist Carl August Struensee (1735–1804), who had originally shared in Johann Friedrich's downfall, was later rehabilitated, and in 1789 he was ennobled twice – first a 'confirmation' dated 1 March 1789 in Prussia, where he then lived and became minister of finance, and then a few months later (15 May 1789) in Denmark with the surname Struensee von Carlsbach.⁶ He used the same simple arms as their father, but for crest he used two eagle's wings – no doubt derived from his brother's crest. Their youngest brother Gotthilf Christoph Struensee (1746–1829) succeeded Carl August as bank director in Prussia and on 26 December 1803 was ennobled in Prussia with the same arms. Here one may note that the ship sails the opposite way to that of his brothers, but this may be accidental.

In 1820 a great-grandson of a cousin of Adam Struensee, (Georg Karl) Philipp Struensee (1774–1833), was also ennobled in Prussia. He was given quartered arms, where the first and fourth quarters bear a striking resemblance to those of his more famous great-grand-uncle.

Count Adam Gottlob Detlef Moltke (1765–1843)

A generation younger than Struensee was another Danish count, also with German roots: Adam Gottlob Detlef Moltke (1765–1843). He was grandson of the most important member of the family in Denmark, Adam Gottlob Moltke (1710–1792), who had been King Frederik V's Lord Chamberlain and for two decades *de facto* first minister. He was also one of the largest landowners in Denmark.

Adam Gottlob Detlef was the oldest surviving son of Adam Gottlob Moltke's third surviving son and could easily have become his grandfather's primary heir. However, after having first been an officer and then studied law in Germany his life took a different path. He became influenced by Enlightenment ideals and following the French revolution he declared his opposition to nobility and inheritances. He supposedly did so c. 1790 during a dinner at his grandfather's estate – after which the old count called him into his

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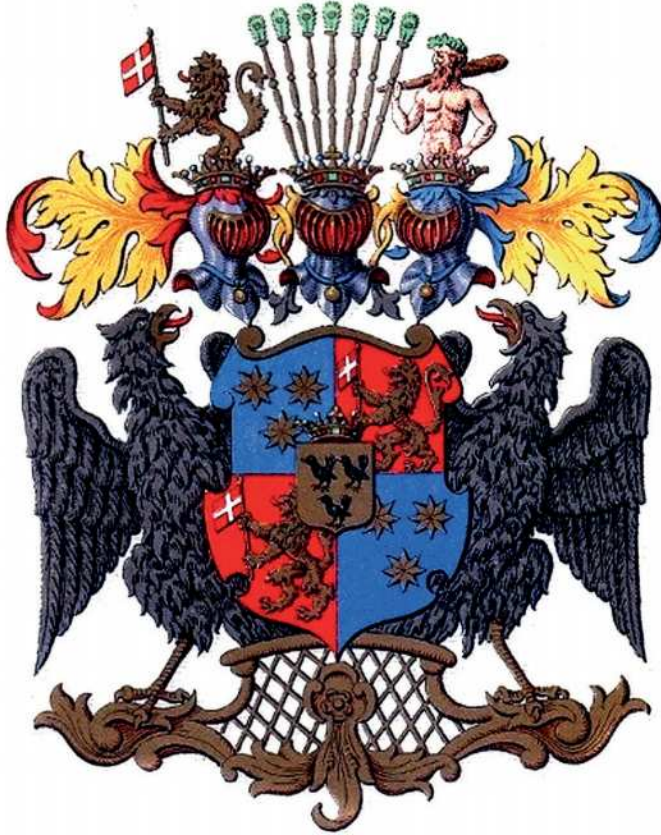


Figure 3: Coat of arms of the Counts Moltke af Bregentved, granted in 1750 (Danmarks Adels Aarbog).

office, quizzed him, and soon afterwards had him written out of the succession to the Bregentved county estates.⁷

The younger Moltke thereafter took the name “Citoyen Moltke” and became a poet and writer, but with the passage of time he gradually became less revolutionary and took over the family estates of Nøer and Grønwohld from his father. He also became the owner of several other estates in Holstein, including Nütschau.

The Moltke family had for centuries borne a coat of arms with three “black grouse” – originally in Germany always on a field *Argent*, but since the medieval period Moltkes in Denmark have occasionally used a field *Or*, and this was formalized in 1750 when the grandfather had been made Count Moltke af Bregentved and had the original arms “improved” as it was termed in those days (**Figure 3**).⁸ When the old count died his revolutionary grandson must have inherited and used his signet. We know it must be the old count’s because it has the insignia of both a knight of the Order of the Elephant and a Knight of the Order of the Dannebrog, which only he had. Close inspection of the signet reveals that “Citoyen” Moltke had it partially re-engraved – changing the three black grouses into three Phrygian caps, the well-known symbol of the revolutionary Jacobins



Figure 4: Signet originally made for Adam Gottlob Count Moltke (1710–1792) but modified for, and used by, his disinherited grandson Adam Gottlob Detlef Count Moltke (1765–1843), “Citoyen Moltke”, where the original three black grouse of the family were replaced with three Phrygian caps. Photograph by Elizabeth Moltke-Huitfeldt.

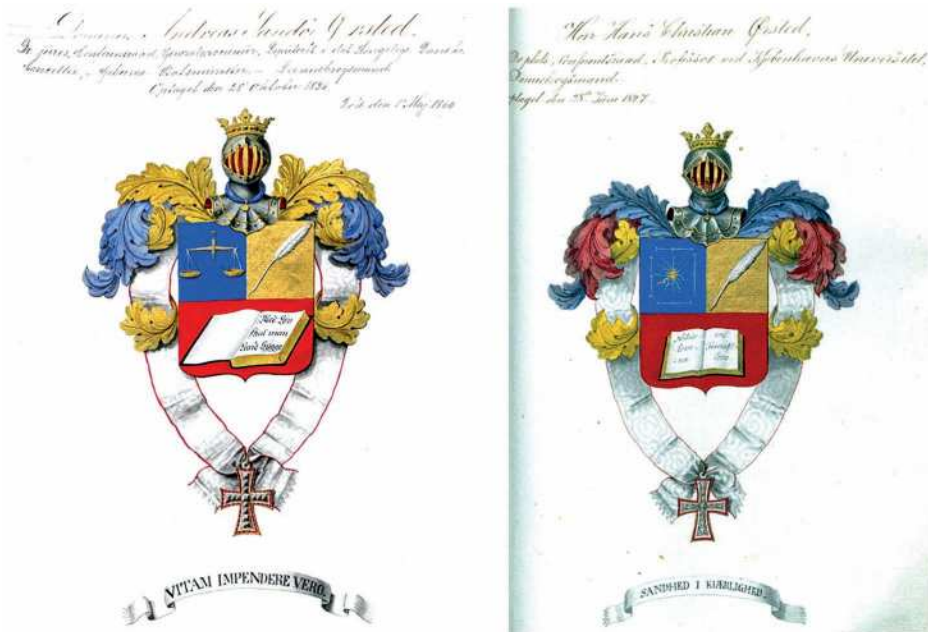
(**Figure 4**). In this fashion the disinherited, radical nobleman symbolically had the last laugh.

Two brothers during late-absolutism and the rise of the middle classes

Let us now turn to two remarkable brothers who played an important role in Danish intellectual life in the decades immediately before and after the abolition of absolutism in 1848. They were the legal scholar and politician Anders Sandøe Ørsted (1778–1860) and his brother, the scientist Hans Christian Ørsted (1777–1851). Both were influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant – in ethics, law, to some extent in politics, and certainly in epistemology. They lived during a period when Denmark was still an absolutist monarchy, in which all reforms – as evidenced by the Struensee experience – had to come gradually, carefully and from above.

Anders, the younger brother, had a career as lecturer, judge, civil servant, and member of parliament. He is seen as the father of Danish jurisprudence, with his career culminating with a period as prime minister, 1853–1854. He is considered to have been a pragmatic, moderate liberal, who defended freedom of the press during absolutism, and

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Left, *Figure 5*: Arms of the prime minister Anders Sandøe Ørsted (1778–1860) as Knight Grand Cross of the Dannebrog 1836; right, *Figure 6*: Arms of the scientist Hans Christian Ørsted (1777–1851) as Knight Grand Cross of the Dannebrog 1847 (Chancery of the Danish Royal Orders).

tended to be a gradualist reformer rather than a radical revolutionary. In 1831 Anders was tasked with designing a resurrection of the Estates General as an advisory body – the first semi-representative body in Denmark for more than a century and a half. Although a monarchist he was the proponent of a constitutionally limited monarchy, and in his constitutional design he supported broader popular representation. His older brother Hans Christian shared many of the same philosophical ideas, but was less political. Among his many contributions were the discovery of electromagnetism and the isolation of aluminium.

Both brothers, who were scions of a burgher family, had need to devise arms in consequence of having each received the Grand Cross of the Order of the Dannebrog (in 1836 and 1847 respectively), while Anders was also created a Knight of the Order of the Elephant in 1847. Accordingly, they had their heraldry recorded in the rolls of arms of the Royal Orders and put on display in the Chapel of the Royal Orders at Frederiksborg Castle in Hillerød. Anders chose a shield partitioned into three (**Figure 5**) with the quarters 1, *Azure the scales of justice or*; 2, *Or a quill pen in bend sinister argent*; 3, *Gules with an open book proper*. The three charges signify his background as a writer and academic and his legal career. The book contains the opening line of the legal Code of Jutland (1241): *Med lov skal land bygges*: “With law the country shall be built”.

Hans Christian chose a very similar coat of (**Figure 6**), the key differences being that the book gives a Kantian instruction: *Naturlove ere fornøftslove*: “The laws of nature are

laws of reason”, and the first quarter contains something resembling a sun or energy burst surrounded by four arrows each pointing in one of the directions of the compass. This must be seen as representing the force of electromagnetism, which he had discovered.

Both brothers used the helmet and the coronet of an untitled nobleman, as designed in the second half of the seventeenth century. This warrants explanation since the family had never been ennobled by letters patent. They lived through an era where the nobility’s privileges were declining. Anders was very well aware – because he had actually published on the topic – that since 1808 Danes who held certain high offices and appointments which placed them in one of the three first classes of the Royal Table of Precedence enjoyed *rangadel* – i.e., “nobility-by-precedence”. This entailed personal nobility, for themselves, their spouses and children – a concept going back to the privileges of royal officers of 1679. It is still in existence today, even if of no practical importance.⁹ Both brothers had royal appointments giving them precedence in Class I, which also gave them the style of excellencies.

The new political class

When in 1848–1849 Denmark transitioned from being what was perhaps the only constitutional absolutist autocracy in the world to a constitutional monarchy with popular representation, the resulting separation of powers and rule of law meant that the old nobility gradually lost their political influence. The new men who rose up to high office such as prime minister or cabinet member would be awarded the Order of the Elephant or the Grand Cross of the Order of the Dannebrog, and coming from burgher families like the Ørsted brothers they needed new coats of arms. Many of them chose symbols and mottoes signifying their political or moral beliefs – something that has continued to this day.¹⁰

Jacob Brønnum Scavenius Estrup (1825–1913)

Arguably the most important profile in Danish politics in the second half of the nineteenth century is that of the conservative Jacob Brønnum Scavenius Estrup (1825–1913), who served as member of parliament for half a century, and who with nineteen years in office remains the longest serving prime minister in Danish history. Estrup was a controversial figure who became the founder of conservatism as a political party, opposed an extended parliamentary vote, and for decades controlled executive power even while a majority of the lower chamber was held by the liberal *Venstre*, “the Left”. Most members of this broad coalition of radical reformers had a background in the peasant class, and to a smaller extent, the middle class of the cities.

Estrup’s own family had for some generations been academics, but his father had acquired an estate and married into the nobility, as did the politician himself, followed by all his children and grandchildren.¹¹ It has been claimed that the king offered to ennoble Estrup and make him a count – and that he declined this offer.¹² It might be seen as unlikely that he would have declined the honour, as he had already accepted decorations, was a large landowner related to the nobility, and to all practical purposes ranked as a peer of the aristocracy. There are, however, some indications that he was somewhat hesitant to receive honours: he is known, throughout his two decades as prime minister, to have declined all foreign orders offered during state visits, except in the case of a

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Portuguese decoration which for some reason he felt he could not decline. Aside from this he only accepted those from his own king.

Of perhaps greater significance is his attitude towards personal heraldry. Two of his relatives had earlier assumed arms. These were his great-uncle, the Danish state councillor Lauritz Christian Estrup (1753–1826), and his uncle, the medical doctor Peter Jungersen Estrup (1791–1830), who became a Russian district doctor, and as such ranked as imperial councillor. The former used a seal, which seems not to have survived, but supposedly comprised a half man holding a book and a crest of three roses. The latter's shield (**Figure 7**) was *Purple a book displayed and upon it a snake*. The snake's layout resembles an E and may, aside from a reference to the symbol of medicine, be a play on the first letter of the family name.



Left, *Figure 7*: Seal used by Dr. Peter Jungersen Estrup (1791–1830), uncle of Conservative prime minister Jacob Brønnum Scavenius Estrup (1825–1913) (Danish National Archives, photo: Ronny Andersen); right, *Figure 8*: Arms of Liberal prime minister "I.C." Christensen (1856–1930) as Knight Grand Cross of the Dannebrog 1905 (Chancery of the Danish Royal Orders).

When J.B.S. Estrup was made a Knight Grand Cross of the Dannebrog (1869) and later a Knight of the Elephant (1878) he could easily have chosen to build on these precedents, but he did not – he chose, as one of the few Danish knights of both orders, never to let a coat-of-arms be painted in the armorials of the orders. When he was made a member of the exclusive Royal Copenhagen Shooting Society (*Det Kongelige Kjøbenhavnske Skydeselskab og Danske Broderskab*) in 1886 he could also have chosen, as many members have done, to have armorial bearings painted on his membership plate. Instead, he chose to have a naturalistic painting of his estate, Skaføgård.

I.C. Christensen (1856–1930)

My final case example is one of the first men to succeed Estrup as head of government – a man of quite different temperament who for some years was an active opponent: the schoolteacher Jens Christian “I.C.” Christensen (1856–1930). For many years he was the *de facto* leader of the major opposition party, *Venstre*, which had a majority in the lower house of parliament, the *Folketing*. In 1901 the King gave in to political pressure and finally appointed a non-conservative government based in this social-liberal, predominantly agrarian party. Four years later “I.C.” Christensen became prime minister, and the following year (1905) he received the Grand Cross from the king – and had to assume arms. It should be noted that only a few years before this his party, while still in opposition, had been in favour of abolishing all orders and all titles of nobility, and a large part of the party remained republican.

But with the political ascent of the socialists, the liberals gradually moved right on some issues, and Christensen accepted his king’s order and for a coat of arms he chose *Azure three wheat sheaves two and one and in chief a lark ascending argent* (**Figure 8**). The charges are very natural symbols for the son of a humble farmer. Blue may have been chosen as the primary tincture due to it often being seen as a colour representing (among other things) liberty, and historically many liberal parties have adopted blue as their colour.¹³ It is worth noting that, unlike many other “upstarts” – including the Ørsted brothers – Christensen chose to have neither the helmet nor the coronet of an untitled nobleman that he could have used.

Summary

These examples of coats of arms of political figures from Denmark over a century and a half do not represent an exhaustive survey but are intended to illustrate how through a period of dramatic political change new ideals crept into heraldry – and how attitudes towards the design of new armorial bearings changed.

In essence we have seen

- A radical reformer – who strove for the heraldic trappings of a count;
- A radical count – who changed his arms to seem revolutionary;
- Two moderate, Enlightenment intellectuals who used the trappings of noblemen in an age where the nobility’s privileges were being diminished and abolished;
- A conservative politician who deliberately did not want arms and noble trappings;
- A radical, reforming politician – who accepted decorations from his king, albeit with a ‘modern’ look.

The times they were changing, and heraldic usage changed with it – sometimes in unpredictable ways.¹⁴

¹ Among the numerous descendants of Princess Louise Augusta are German Empress Augusta Victoria, King Constantine II of the Hellenes, King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden and King Felipe VI of Spain.

² Olaf Kirstein, ‘En borgerlig pendant til det gamle adelslexicon’, *Heraldisk Tidsskrift* vol. 3, no. 28 (1973), pp. 345–371 (366–7) contains an unpublished nineteenth century manuscript by Svend Grundtvig with a draft of a roll of burgher arms and arms of non-noble families. What in the drawing of the crest resembles a snake wrapped around the anchor might simply be a rope.

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³ On Struensee's signets, see Nils G. Bartholdy, 'Greveligt signet endte som urlod', *Siden Saxo* no. 4 (1997), pp. 36–39.

⁴ On the coronets and helmets of the Danish nobility see, Nils G. Bartholdy, 'Ranghelme und -kronen wahren des älteren Dänischen Absolutismus', in Hans-Ulrich von Ruedprecht, Jürgen Arndt, Constantin Dichtel & Heinz F. Friederichs (edd.) *Kongressbericht: 12. Internationaler Kongress Für Genealogische Und Heraldische Wissenschaften, München 1974* (Stuttgart, 1978), pp. 9–22.

On the Danish nobility-by-precedence and its accompanying heraldic implications, see, Nils G. Bartholdy, 'Adelsbegrebet under den ældre enevælde', *Historisk Tidsskrift* vol. 12 no. 4 (1971), pp. 577–65; Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, 'Armorial rights and customs of Danish knights', in Guy Stair Sainty & Rafal Heydel-Mankoo (edd.), *Burke's Peerage & Gentry: World Orders of Knighthood and Merit* (London, 2006); Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, 'The Danish nobility-by-precedence (Rangadel): An introduction', in: *Actas I. Coloquio Internacional Sobre La Nobleza, Madrid, 21–24 Octubre 2015* (Madrid, 2017), pp. 307–314.

⁵ *Adelige Patenter C7*, Danish National Archives; in Sven Tito Achen, *Danske Adelsvåbener: En Heraldisk Nøgle* (København, 1973), p. 570.

⁶ *Adelige Patenter C7*, Danish National Archives; in Achen, op. cit., p. 239.

⁷ On this, see Poul Holstein, 'Slægten Moltke', in Knud JV Jespersen, Carsten Porskrog Rasmussen, Hanne Raabyemagle & Poul Holstein (edd.) *Moltke: Rigets Mægtigste Mand* (København, 2010), pp. 391–413 (400–403).

⁸ The first and fourth quarters are of Moltke's wife's family, von Brüggemann, while the lion with the Danish flag in the second and third are augmentations symbolizing royal favour. On the heraldry of the Moltke family, see Poul Holstein, 'Stamtavle med våbenafbildninger og portrætter over slægten Moltke', in Knud JV Jespersen & Leon Jespersen (edd.), *Danmarks Adels Aarbog* (København, 1994), pp. 521–909.

⁹ On the *rangadel*, see the sources cited above in note 5; see also his own commentary on the topic, Anders Sandøe Ørsted, 'Om de Rangpersoner tilkommende adelige Rettigheder, med Hensyn til den nyeste Lovgivning', *Juridisk Arkiv* no. 23 (1810), pp. 208–250.

¹⁰ Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, 'For frihed i fred og fællesskab': Storkorsvåben for Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in *Heraldisk Tidsskrift* vol. 11, no. 103 (2011), pp. 137–140.

¹¹ His mother was a Scavenius; his wife a baroness Holsten-Charisius; his children-in-law were a Juel, a Skeel and a de Neergaard; his grandchildren's spouses included another Skeel, a baroness Wedell-Wedellsborg, a Bornemann, a countess Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs, and a count Scheel – all Danish noble families.

¹² This is a story retold among the descendants but has not been documented.

¹³ On blue as a colour of liberal parties dating back to the seventeenth century, see, Graham Lippiatt, 'Liberal party colours', in *Journal of Liberal History* no. 84 (2014), pp. 37–40. Of the five subsequent Danish Liberal Party chairmen who have received the Grand Cross and have had to adopt armorial bearings all five have chosen blue as one of the primary tinctures (Madsen-Mygdal; Eriksen; Hartling; Ellemann-Jensen; Fogh Rasmussen), see Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2011, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁴ The author is grateful to archivist and heraldic consultant Ronny Andersen (A.I.H.) for useful suggestions and help with illustrations.