The Coat of Arms

Annual Journal of the Heraldry Society

Series 4 Volume 8 Number 242 2025

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The Society was registered in England in 1956 as registered charity no. 241456.

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Printed in Exeter by Short Run Press Ltd..

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ISSN 0010-003X

Cover illustration: submission drawing from the Maharajah of Rewah 1876, source *Taylor* supplement f. 15v, courtesy of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms, see pp. 160-1.

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THE ARMS OF ELIAS ASHMOLE

OLIVER D. HARRIS

Abstract

Here is presented the evolution of the arms of a famous herald, alchemist and astrologer

Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), in the words of Anthony Wood 'the greatest *Virtuoso* and *Curioso* that ever was known or read of in *England* before his time', is remembered above all as an antiquary and collector, whose donation of rarities to Oxford University laid the foundations for the Ashmolean Museum.[1] Among heraldists, he is known as an officer of arms, who served as Windsor Herald from 1660 to 1675, and in 1672 published a seminal volume on the Order of the Garter.[2] But his intellectual pursuits were wide-ranging, and he was also a devotee of alchemy (on which he published three works) and astrology. His interests converge in the story of his own coat of arms.

Ashmole was born in Lichfield into a respectable, but far from wealthy, yeoman family: his father, Simon, and grandfather, Thomas, worked as saddlers. Elias assumed that the family was not armigerous, and in 1646, during the Civil War, cast a horoscope to determine 'whether I shall obtain a coat of arms.'[3] No answer is on record, but at a later date he became aware of an armorial seal used by his grandfather.[4] This was the source of the bearings that he now began to use himself: *Quarterly gules and or, in the first quarter a fleur-de-lys argent*; and, for a crest, *A greyhound courant*. The arms can be seen on six different engraved plates that he patronised between 1654 and 1658 in the works of John Ogilby, Thomas Fuller and William Dugdale [**Figure 1**].[5] There are minor variations in the renditions, and the crest is not always present, but tinctures are indicated in all cases by hatching, tricking, or a combination of the two. Ashmole is also found using two seals based on these arms, one depicting the full achievement (the matrix possibly that inherited from his grandfather), the second showing the greyhound crest alone.[6]

1 Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, 2nd edn., 2 vols (London, 1721), vol. 2, col. 889.

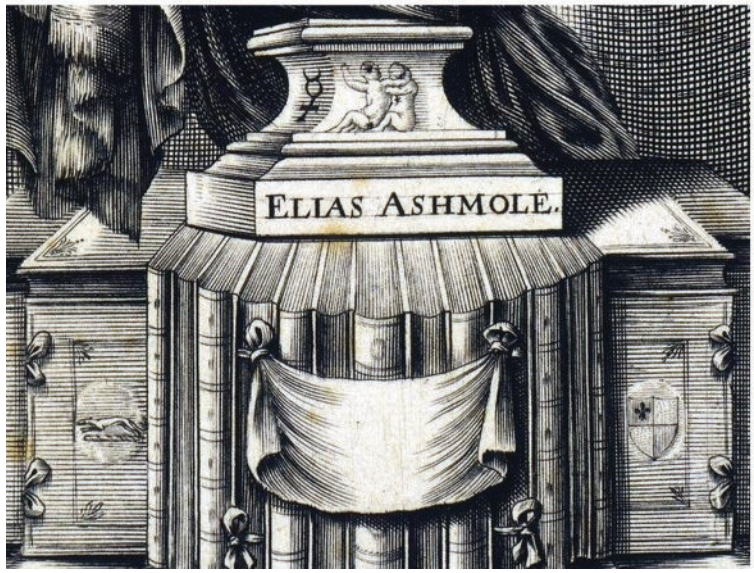
2 Elias Ashmole, *The Institution, Laws & Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (London, 1672). On Ashmole's heraldic activities, see C.H. Josten (ed.), *Elias Ashmole (1617–1692)*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 112–216 passim; Vittoria Feola, *Elias Ashmole and the Uses of Antiquity* (Paris, 2012), pp. 165–225; Vittoria Feola, *Elias Ashmole: the quatercentenary biography* (Rome, 2017), pp. 113–37; Adrian Ailes (ed.), *Elias Ashmole, Church Notes of Berkshire 1665–66*, Harl. Soc. n.s. vol. 23 (London, 2024).

3 Josten, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 378.

4 ibid., vol. 3, pp. 829–30. Ashmole may perhaps have first encountered the seal in 1652, when he regained possession of the family home in Lichfield: ibid., vol. 1, pp. 114–5.

5 John Ogilby (ed.), *The Works of Publius Virgilius Maro* (London, 1654), p. 334. Thomas Fuller, *The Church-History of Britain*, (London, 1655), bk 2, after p. 171 (two views of Lichfield Cathedral). Roger Dodsworth and William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 3 vols (London, 1655–73), vol. 1, facing p. 1. William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656), p. 184. William Dugdale, *The History of St Pauls Cathedral in London* (London, 1658), p. 169. See also Josten, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 787n.

6 Impressions from both seals (that of the full achievement in wax, that of the crest on wafered paper) are found in a volume of Ashmole's alchemical transcripts, Bodl. Ms. Ashmole 1419, f. 1r. The artistic rendition of the full achievement, with pavilion-like mantling, is almost identical to that on the plate in Ogilby's *Virgilius Maro*, and on the view of Lichfield Cathedral from the south in Fuller's *Church History*, suggesting that the seal had been the engravers' immediate source.



Above, *Figure 1*: Ashmole's arms from a plate in John Ogilby's edition of The Works of Publius Virgilius Maro, 1654, p. 334. Below, *Figure 2*: detail from a portrait of Ashmole engraved by William Faithorne, 1656. Ashmole's shield of arms can be seen to the right and his greyhound crest to the left; with, on the pedestal above, the astrological symbol for Mercury to the left, and the figures of Gemini, the heavenly twins, in the centre. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

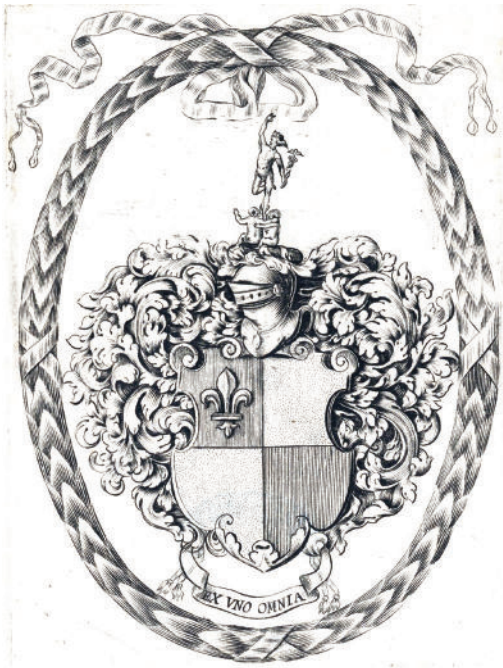
Figure 3: confirmation of arms to Ashmole, issued by Sir Edward Bysshe, Clarenceux King of Arms, 16 May 1661. Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1832. ©Bodleian Libraries.

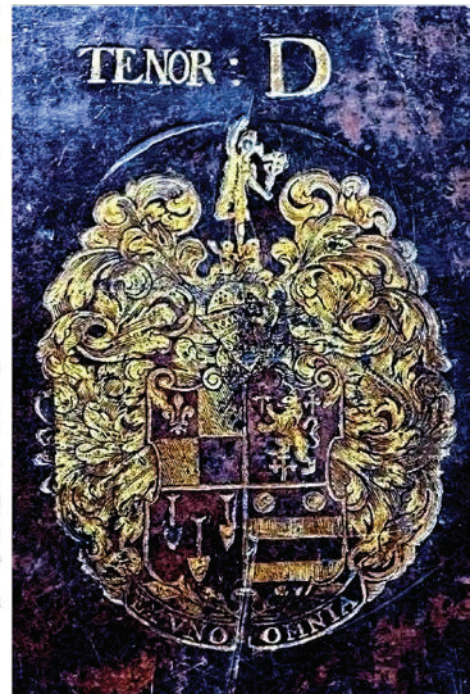
It would seem, however, that he became dissatisfied with his arms. Although inherited and distinctive, they were somewhat lacking in symbolism. This was an era in which much attention was paid to the symbologic aspects of heraldry, and Ashmole was a keen student of such matters.[7]

He had been born on 23 May 1617, under the zodiacal sign of Gemini, and in the domicile of the planet Mercury. In adult life, he identified closely with Mercury. In his personal memoranda, he used ☿ (the astrological and alchemical symbol for Mercury) as a cipher to denote himself; and elsewhere he styled himself '*Mercuriophilus Anglicus*.'[8]

7 Cf. Michael Maclagan, 'Genealogy and heraldry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in Levi Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1956), pp. 31–49 (at 42–3); David Carlson, 'The writings and manuscript collections of the Elizabethan alchemist, antiquary, and herald, Francis Thynne', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 52 (1989), pp. 203–72 (at 217–20).

8 Josten, op. cit, vol. 1, pp. 25–6; vol. 2, p. 355, 391, 403, 524–5. Feola, *Quatercentenary biography*, pp. 76–7.





Left, *Figure 4*: Ashmole's bookplate, c.1654–60. Although the arms include the Mercury and Gemini crest, this appears to be a late alteration, as suggested by the partial burnishing out of the ribbon immediately above. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Right, *Figure 5*: arms embossed on the back cover of a musical partbook donated by Ashmole to Lichfield Cathedral in 1662. The Ashmole arms are here quartered with those of Bowyer, Knipersley and Venables, representing Elias's maternal descent. © Clare Townsend, Lichfield Cathedral Library.

In 1651 he composed an ode to mark his alchemical 'adoption' by William Backhouse: it included the lines 'To prove each mie Descent, I neede not see, A byast Herrald for my Pedigree', and claimed that 'a ☿ in Crest I hold / Since my crude Mercury's transmute to Gold.'[9] A portrait engraved in 1656 by William Faithorne includes, in addition to Ashmole's arms and crest, a Mercury symbol and the figures of the heavenly twins, Gemini [**Figure 2**].[10] Several of the representations of Ashmole's arms mentioned above include the motto '*Ex Uno Omnia*' ('All things from one'), probably in allusion to the metal mercury as one of the three alchemical 'primes', of which all substances were supposedly composed.

Following his appointment as Windsor Herald, Ashmole was able to assume some of this symbolism more formally. In August 1660 and May 1661 he received two confirmations of his arms, issued respectively by Dugdale as Norroy King of Arms, and

9 Josten, op.cit., vol. 2, pp. 568–9.
10 ibid., vol. 1, pl. 10; vol. 2, p. 692.

by Sir Edward Bysshe as Clarenceux [**Figure 3**].[11] Both included the grant of a new crest, depicting the figure of Mercury flanked by the twins. Its blazon read:

> *On a wreath Sable and Or the Planet Mercury collocated in the midle of the caelestiall Signe Gemini proper his right hand extended toward heaven, and left holding a Caducan Rod Or.*

The rationale given for making this change was the greyhound's 'too neere likenesse' to the crests of other families; but it seems more likely that Ashmole had simply decided to abandon his inherited device for one with greater personal meaning. We can perhaps glimpse his strength of feeling on the matter in an engraved bookplate that he used, on which the greyhound has been erased and replaced with Mercury and Gemini [**Figure 4**].[12]

Left, *Figure 6*: Entry in the Ashmolean Museum's *Book of Benefactors*, c.1683. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Right, *Figure 7*: arms from a plate in Robert Plot's *The Natural History of Staffordshire*, 1686. Ashmole's arms are impaled with those of Dugdale: Elias married Elizabeth, daughter of William Dugdale, in 1668.

11 ibid. vol. 2, pp. 786–7; vol. 3, pp. 828–31. W.A. Littledale (ed.), *A Collection of Miscellaneous Grants, Crests, Confirmations, Augmentations and Exemplifications of Arms*, Harl. Soc. vol. 76 (London, 1925), frontispiece and pp. 8–10.

12 G.H. Viner, 'An unknown bookplate of Elias Ashmole', *Apollo*, vol. 21 (1935), pp. 98–9. Josten, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 682–3, pl. xxv; B.N. Lee, *Some Bookplates of Heralds and related Ex-Libris* (London, 2003), pp. 42–3. The arms are quartered gules and or, indicating that the engraving originated before 1660.

Left, *Figure 8*: arms from Ashmole's ledger stone in St Mary-at-Lambeth church, London (now the Garden Museum), probably carved by John Reynolds, *c*.1694; re-cut, c.1852. Right, *Figure 9*: arms embossed on the cover of a volume of Ashmole's notes. The Ashmole arms are here quartered with those of Bowyer, Knipersley, Venables and Grosvenor, again representing Elias's maternal descent. Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 864. ©Bodleian Libraries

The patents of 1660 and 1661 both, while claiming to confirm Ashmole's shield of arms, in fact altered its tinctures. The first and fourth quarters were changed from gules to sable, and the fleur-de-lys from argent to or. As the arms had originally been sourced from Thomas Ashmole's seal, the tinctures may well have been uncertain: perhaps new evidence had come to light. But it seems distinctly possible that this change too was prompted to some extent by symbological concerns. Gerard Legh, in The Accedens of Armory (1562), had expressed the belief that gules joined with or (the original tinctures) signified 'a desire to conquere', and or with gules 'to sheade his owne blud for the ritches of this worlde, and liberally to spende it'; but that sable with or (the new tinctures) signified 'honor with long lyfe', and or with sable 'constant in every thing, also in love'.[13] These latter concepts may have appealed more to Elias's aspirations and ideals.

Ashmole used the sable and or arms with the Mercury and Gemini crest for the rest of his life. They are found, for example, on a set of musical partbooks that he donated to Lichfield Cathedral in 1662 [**Figure 5**]; on a pedigree drawn by Gregory King in about 1680; in the Ashmolean Museum's *Book of Benefactors* of c.1683 [**Figure 6**]; on a plate in Robert Plot's *Natural History of Staffordshire* of 1686 [**Figure 7**]; and, finally, on the ledger stone set over his grave in the church of St-Mary-at-Lambeth, probably in

13 Gerard Legh, *The Accedens of Armory* (London, 1562), ff. 4r (*recte* 6r), 11r, 14r.

about 1694, and thought to have been carved by the stonecutter John Reynolds, who had married Elizabeth, his widow [**Figure 8**].[14] At some point Ashmole also acquired a new seal, depicting the Mercury and Gemini crest.[15]

That is still not quite the end of the story, however. In some representations of his arms Ashmole can be seen to have further modified the crest, reducing the full-height figure of Mercury to a demi-figure, and moving the twins down to the bottom of the shield. In this form, the arms appear on the bindings of some of the volumes in his own library [**Figure 9**], and on the frame to a 1682 portrait of him [**Figure 10**].[16] Many years later, in 1925, the bindings inspired a stained glass window commissioned for the Old Ashmolean building [**Figure 11**]. This final change to the design never received formal authorisation, but seems to have been an artistic choice made in the interests of proportion and style. In the standard representations, the full-height Mercury, balanced on one foot and stretching far above the helm, had looked both precarious and unheraldic; while the twins were so diminutive as to be in danger of being overlooked. The alternative arrangement made Mercury more stable, and the twins more prominent, recasting them as Baroque putti – or perhaps, in a further boost to Ashmole's prestige, as unofficial supporters.

What is clear is that Ashmole always seems to have perceived his heraldry, not merely as an indicator of family or status, but as a reflection of his personal identity, and as such felt that it should be allowed to evolve over the course of his life.

14 Josten, op. cit., vol. 1, frontispiece, pp. 300–301; vol. 3, p. 851; vol. 4, pp. 1896–7; Elias Ashmole Stamp on British Armorial Bindings database; G.J. Armytage and W.H. Rylands (edd.), *Staffordshire Pedigrees ... by Gregory King*, Harl. Soc. vol. 63, (London, 1912), p. 8. Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire* (Oxford, 1686), pl. 35.

15 H.S. Grazebrook (ed.), *The Heraldic Visitations of Staffordshire in 1614 and 1663/1664,* Collections for a History of Staffordshire vol. 5.2 (London, 1885), pp. 13–14n; citing CA C.36, Visitation of Staffordshire, 1663–4, office copy.

16 Michael Hunter, *Elias Ashmole 1617–1692* (Oxford, 1983), frontispiece, pp. 50, 62–3, 92. Elias Ashmole Stamp 1 on British Armorial Bindings database. On the additional quarterings on the bindings and in the derivative window, see E.A. Greening Lamborn, 'The arms of Ashmole', *N & Q*, vol. 188 (1945), pp. 230–31.

Left, *Figure 10*: Arms from the frame to Ashmole's portrait by John Riley, carved by Grinling Gibbons, *c*.1682. The figure of Mercury originally held a caduceus in his left hand: a slot for it survives. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Right, *Figure 11*: window in the Old Ashmolean building (now the History of Science Museum), Oxford, 1925. The mullet for difference in the second quartering (Bowyer) should properly be sable. Photograph by the author.