

Eagle Heraldry On Coinage of the World

By David B. Ashe

Birds, of course, play a large and prominent part in heraldry. Those which have been impressed into the service of heraldic emblazonment comprise almost every species known to ornithologists.

Though the earliest roles of arms give us instances of various other birds, the one which makes the most prominent appearance is the eagle, either in heraldry or as an armorial bearing, and in all the early representations this will invariably be found "displayed".

In the 12th and 13th centuries the eagle appears with the head raised and the beak closed, the sachsen (bones of the wings) are curled up at the ends, and the pinions (like the talons) take a vertical downward direction. The tail, composed of a number of stiff feathers, frequently issues from a knob or ball. With the end of the 14th century the head straightens itself, the beak opens and the tongue disappears, and the claws form an acute angle with the direction of the body; at this period also the claws occasionally receive the hose covering the upper part of the leg. Furthermore, the feathers of the tail spread out sicklewise.

The 15th century shows the eagle with sachsen forming a half circle, the pinions spread out and radiating therefrom, and the claws more at a right angle. The 16th century draws the eagle in a more ferocious aspect, and depicts it in as ornamental and ornate a manner as possible. The double eagle occurs in the East as well as in the West in very early times. Since about 1335 AD the double eagle has appeared sporadically as a symbol of the Roman-German Empire, and under Emperor Sigismund became the settled armorial device of the Roman Empire. King Sigismund before his coronation as Emperor, bore the single-headed eagle. The earliest instance of the eagle as a definitely heraldic charge upon a shield made its appearance upon the Great Seal of the Markgrave Leopold of Austria in 1136 AD where the equestrian figure of the Markgrave carries a shield so charged.

More or less regularly, subsequently to the reign of Frederick Barbarossa, elected King of the Romans in 1152, and crowned as Emperor in 1155, the eagle with one or two heads seems to have become the recognized heraldic symbol of the Holy Roman Empire; and the seal of Richard, Earl of Cornwall, elected King of the Romans in 1257 AD, shows his arms displayed upon the breast of an eagle.

The origin of the double-headed eagle has been the subject of endless controversy, the tale one is usually taught to believe being that it originated in the dimidiation upon one shield of two separate coat of arms. The Imperial eagle was not one eagle with two heads, but two eagles, the one laid upon the other, and their heads separated, looking different ways, which represented the two heads of the Empire after it was divided into East and West. The whole discussion is an apt example of the habit of earlier writers to find or provide hidden meanings and symbolisms when no such meanings existed. The real truth undoubtedly is that the double-headed eagle was an accepted figure long before heraldry came into existence.

It may perhaps be as well to point out, with the exception of the two "displayed" (i.e. wings open, Ed.) and "closed" (wings folded) very little if any agreement at all exists amongst authorities either as to the terms to be employed or as to the position intended for the wings when a given term is used in a blazon. Practically every other single position is simply blazoned "rising", this term being employed without additional distinctive terms of variation in official blazons and emblazonments.

Nor can one obtain any certain information from reference to the real eagle, for the result of careful observation would seem to show that in the first stroke of the wings rising from the ground they pass through every position from the wide outstretched form, which are termed "rising with wings elevated and displayed", to a position practically "closed". As a consequence, therefore, no one form can be said to be more correct than the other, either from the point of view of nature or from the point of view of ancient

precedent.

It must be pointed out that heraldry is not in service in all countries, Therefore, it is incorrect to refer to or term certain blazons heraldry, but rather in certain instances, armorial bearings, as they originated with the science of armory, which appropriated them ready-made, together with their symbolism.

For those who are interested in further study of eagle heraldry or armorial bearings, the following countries will be of interest, especially in their coinage: France, Austria, Germany, Russia, Mexico and the United States. There are of course other countries, and while many conventional eagles will be found, they will invariably fall under the classifications of "displayed" or "closed".

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