



An Introduction into Textual Heraldry

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Abstract: Evidently, a coat of arms is associated with an image, and heraldry is primarily a system of visual signs. However, not long after appearance of first coats of arms painted on shields, they started to be described by means of language and thus their verbal equivalent, blazon, appeared. Heraldic signs in a textual form easily found their way into contemporary narratives. The research of narrative heraldic sources started only in the early 20th century, and studies of blazon are relatively few compared to the massive of works on heraldry. However, heraldic narrations can become a source of completely new data. Modern heraldic science addresses deeper anthropologic issues, and besides the arms themselves, it investigates the cultural and social aspects of their application. Visual sources are not always able to fulfill such needs. Thus, the research of heraldry in literature of different epochs is a promising direction, further forming our idea of coats of arms in historical context.

Key words: heraldry, blazon, coat of arms

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Аннотация: В широком представлении герб ассоциируется в первую очередь с изображением, и это неудивительно, ведь геральдика является ничем иным как визуальной знаковой системой. Тем не менее, с самого момента появления гербы получили и текстовый эквивалент – блазон – выраженный посредством специального языка геральдики. А обретая вербальную форму, гербы сразу же попали в повествование. Исследование нарративных геральдических источников началось относительно недавно и работ, посвященных геральдике в текстах несравнимо мало на фоне основного массива исследований. Тем не менее, геральдические нарративы могут стать источниками принципиально новой информации. Современное гербоведение все чаще задается вопросами антропологического характера и интересуется не столько самими гербами

(уже достаточно хорошо изученными), сколько социальной и культурной стороной их использования, на что изобразительные источники не всегда могут ответить. Таким образом, обращение к нарративу являет собой перспективное направление исследования, позволяющее лучше встроить геральдику в контекст исторической науки.

Ключевые слова: геральдика, блазон, герб

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When speaking about heraldry, the first thing to come to our mind is, of course, a picture – a coat of arms. First coats of arms appeared in the 12th century to serve representation purposes on battlefields and tournament grounds. The images on shields and banners came to aid and later replaced the former way of identification by a battle cry. Thus a visual sign replaced a verbal one, so starting the era of heraldry.

Images constitute the bulk of heraldic sources: armorial seals, objects bearing their owner’s heraldic signs, coats of arms on manuscript pages and mural paintings. Four hundred years of study of these sources have formed our idea of heraldry as a visual phenomenon. The study itself (for more confusion called “heraldry” as well) seems to many to be confined to mere description, attribution and collection of those images. Heraldry as a science, however, has always been concerned with a wider range of historic, cultural, and anthropologic questions: Why did it appear? What did it mean to its contemporaries? Who were the people behind it? What made it so successful that it survived the centuries and conquered the entire world, making a coat of arms a national symbol of each country? The images are unable to answer these questions, they remain silent. Even though arms convey more information than a simple illustration or a portrait, it is still not enough. To continue our study of heraldry we need a text, turning from visual back to verbal.

The relationship of coats of arms and text is complicated. The first century of existence of heraldry was not documented. First heraldic documents (that would later be called rolls of arms, or armorials) date back to the middle of the 13th century and begin with first appearance of coats of arms in Mathew Paris’s works. It seemed unprecedented that a monk would show such a great interest and effort in comprehending heraldry (Vaughan 1958. P. 235–236). It has long been widely accepted that early heraldry was known and dealt with only by heralds (professionals whose job was to list arms and assist with them at tournaments or battles). The fact that they were most

likely illiterate explains why they left no documents (Denholm-Young 1965. P. 54–63; Староскольская 2019. С. 11–12).

Thus, Mathew Paris has begun the documented heraldry. He was the first to assemble and list arms of 400 people drawing them with great care scattered through pages of his eight manuscripts (London, Tremlett 1967. P. 1–78). The idea was accepted well, and soon armorial was established as a new genre of document. The remaining half of the 13th century produced more than 30 rolls of arms (Черных 2007. P. 90–110), and the next 14th century twice as many (Черных 2009. P. 212–241). Armorial created later are so numerous that they have not yet been properly counted. The majority of medieval rolls of arms consist of images only, while the earliest 13th century ones were actually in a text form.

Just as soon as heraldry had come into use, people of the 12th century realized that pictures were not always convenient and sometimes even difficult to deal with outside battlegrounds. Coats of arms faced the necessity of being discussed and therefore described. At first, it was easy to describe such things as, for example, “a white lion on a red shield”. However, as the arms became more numerous and complex, their fixation started to require a more formal approach. Thus appeared *blazon* – the specialized language of heraldry. The coats of arms achieved their textual hypostasis that soon became even more important than the original picture.

It is generally accepted that blazon emerged around 1200 during tournaments, due to the necessity to comment the activities on the lists. As ornaments on shields were getting more and more complicated to avoid misunderstanding between knights and heralds (and even audience), blazon rapidly underwent formalization and codification. A nomenclature of terms was set to distinguish between various geometric forms and figures. Blazon soon became a precise and accurate tool to register arms which, by the time of first armorials, became equal and even prior to the picture.

Blazon have accompanied visual heraldry through all epochs, and witnessed and reflected the historic reality around it. The first blazon was in French, as lords from Northern France hosted most of the tournaments during the prohibition period (Рыжова 2017), and were actually trendsetters of the sport. The first attempts to translate blazon into English went along with radical changes of political course during the Tudors’ reign in England. The problem of translation of blazon into Russian (not fully solved as yet) highlighted the gap between Europe and Russia before Peter the Great’s reforms. And there are many more similar examples. Thus, blazon, if approached in a general historic and anthropologic way, possesses undeniable potential for further studies, presenting us with the verbal evidence we seek.

Starting chronologically, it is hard to believe that nothing preceded the genius work performed by Mathew Paris, and that the idea to include arms into a narrative came so suddenly. Taking a closer look on the texts of the 12th century, it is easy to spot the appearance of arms and blazon. A good and well-known example is Geoffroy Plantagenet granted with a shield of three golden lions – *clipeus, leunculos aureos ymaginarios* – mentioned by Jean de Marmoutier in his chronicle, *c.* 1170 (*Historia Gaufredi* 1913). Supported by the image on his tomb this case is often considered as one of the first. But there are even earlier examples.

A French scholar Louis Bouly de Lesdain gathered descriptions of shields from chansons de gestes and earlier French romances. 11th-century shields, according to contemporary authors, were decorated with metal elements only. In the second and third quarters of the 12th century shields started to be painted in different colors and wear some kind of ornaments or figures (Bouly de Lesdain 1907. P. 185–244). For example, Benoît de Sainte-Maure in his *Roman de Troie* (*c.* 1150–1160) portraying his antique characters as contemporary knights endowed them with corresponding attributes:

L'escu soz la boucle li part
Ou il avait peint un lipart.
(v. 11359–11360)

This is not a blazon yet, and might be not even a heraldic shield. The authors of the 12th century were generally very careful about heraldry and seem to have tried to avoid it (Adam 1963. P. 18–29). Nevertheless, their works are full of hints and allusions. A recent research has highlighted the attitude of one of the most famous medieval authors, Chretien de Troyes, to heraldry (РЫЖОВА 2018. P. 36–58).

Chretien de Troyes is the author of five romances created consequently in 1170–1190. During those 30 years his interest in heraldry steadily developed. In his first romance of the Arthurian cycle, *Erec et Enide*, Chretien, like other contemporary authors, didn't go farther than mentions of the shields color.

Erec le fiert de tel angoisse
sor l'escu qui fu tainz an jaune.
(v. 3602–3603)

However, heraldic allusions are numerous in the text. It is clear from the narration that Chretien's characters use some kind of color based sign system to recognize and refer to each other.

The plot of the second romance, *Cliges*, is partly based on the idea of recognition (or misrecognition) that again is done by “the arms”.

The third romance, *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lion*, seems to contain a heraldic hint in the name, however, there is nothing heraldic in the story itself. On the contrary, Yvain deliberately has no visual signs as he is an incognito hero. The book also contains a passage about Yvain carrying a lion on a shield – and some might consider it a heraldic lion – but in fact Yvain was literary carrying a wounded animal on his shield (“Ensi an son escu l'en porte”). Was it a mere coincidence or a witty word play we might never know.

However, it might be important to note that Chretien was working on *Yvain* at the same time as on *Lancelot*, in 1176–1181 (Frappier 1969. P. 13). And *Lancelot* contains the famous passage that lists arms of the knights:

Antr'ax dient: “Veez vos or
 Celui a cele bande d'or
 Parmi cel escu de bernic?
 C'est Governauz de Roberdic.
 Et veez vos celui après
 Qui an son escu pres a pres
 A mise une aigle et un dragon?
 C'est li filz le roi d'Arragon <...>
 A cel escu vert d'une part,
 S'a sor le vert point .i. liepart
 Et d'azur est l'autre mitiez?
 C'est Ignaurés li covoitiez <...>
 Et cil qui porte les feisanz
 An son escu poinz bec a bec?
 C'est Coguillanz de Mautirec <...>
 As escuz d'or as lyons bis?
 Li uns a non Semiramis
 Et li autres est ses conpainz,
 S'ont d'un sanblant lor escuz tainz.
 Et veez vos celui qui porte
 An son escu pointe une porte,
 Si sanble qu'il s'an isse uns cers?
 Par foi, ce est li rois Yders.
 Ensi devisent des les loges <...>
 Ou vos veez ces .ii. arondres <...>
 Sel porte Thoas li Meschins
 Ensi devisent et deboissent
 Les armes de ces qu'il conoissent.
 (v. 5773–5824)

The passage looks nothing like was ever done before. Although it might seem erroneous as the shields described do not look like real arms (the arms of Aragon's heir shows an eagle and a dragon instead of red pallets on gold, another shield which is partly azur and sinople violates the main

rule of combinations of tinctures), we shall not forget that the narration is semy-fantastic and judge Chretien too strictly. Perhaps, the mistakes were done on purpose: to add an air of antiquity and mystery. It is important that the author not only lists the arms of the participants but also mentions some more general heraldic details. We read that the arms are blazoned aloud to the ladies watching the tournmanet by the knights who were not participating. Then Chretien mentions that the companions of knights bear the same arms as their masters. And this is what a 12th-century tournament must have really looked like.

We know little of Chretien's life but we might expect that he tried to imitate the work of heralds which he could have seen and heard at a real tournament. For example, in 1179 King Phillip August hosted a tournament in Lagny, attended by Philip I, Count of Flandres, who soon became Chretien's patron. Lagny was also the home town of Chretien's apprentice who finished the work on *Lancelot*. And again, was it a mere coincidence or a fateful occasion? It is evident that Chretien (willingly or not) had to deal with heraldry. His last (and unfinished) romance is more esoteric than corteous and marks a different intention of the author. However, it also contains a description of a heraldic shield, this time almost perfectly blazoned:

Guinganbresil parmi la porte
de la sale, et si aporte
.i. escu d'or, s'ot an l'escu
une bande qui d'azur fu.
(v. 4725–4729)

The comparison of heraldic passages in the five Chretien's romances proves that the tournamnet episode in *Lancelot* was not a sudden addition to the narration but the culmination of author's inquiry into heraldry (Рыжкова 2018. С. 36–58). It became a new literary fashion, that was later caught up by other authors.

By the beginning of the 13th century such heraldic passages became more numerous as did the coats of arms themselves (Brault 1972). It is not surprising that Chretien's literary successor Huon de Mery borrowed from him not only the plot but also the idea of blazoning of arms in his narration (Busby 1983. P. 505).

Li Tournoiementz Anticrit ('The Tournament of Antichrist') is an Old French poem written in 1235–1240, combining courtly romance with allegory. The plot of the poem is simple, however innovative for the 13th-century literature: the retinue of Antichrist consisting of human vices and sins accompanied by devils and ancient gods challenge Jesus Christ and his army of virtues, angels and Knights of the Round Table. And they all have heraldic arms.

Max Prinnet who investigated the blazons from the poem concluded that they were mostly erroneous and too complicated for the first half of the 13th century (Prinnet 1922. P. 52). However, a linguistic investigation has proved that the mistakes were made on purpose. The author, this time without doubt, parodies the real blazon, to add a comic effect to the allegoric personifications of vices and sins using stylistic devices of pun and alliteration. Such parodies could only be possible if the author knew well what he was doing (Староскольская 2020. С. 130–137).

C'ert uns escuz a iii. torteaus
Moisiz d'orgueil, crostelevez,
D'un trop levant levin levez.
(v. 1006–1008)

The fact that Huon de Mery decided to include coats of arms into his narration testifies that heraldry and blazon not only had become popular among warriors but also gained attention of wider audiences. The interest was cultivated by tournaments, where knights and their arms were on display for everybody. And such events were large attractions and source of entertainment in the Middle Ages. The fact that the author dared to include so many heraldic terms (though disguised as puns) into his narration implies that his readers (or listeners) could understand the polysemy. There was a social demand for heraldic literature. Thus, Huon's *Tournoiement* became another milestone on the road of blazon's development marking new social reality and adapting to social demand.

The second half of the 13th century is marked by the appearance of blazoned armorials (mentioned above). However, at times they achieved a peculiar literary form. Some armorials were composed in the form of poem describing the event that had gathered armigers together (see, e. g., *Tournois de Chauvency* and *Armorial du tournoi de Compiègne*, describing the whole run of the tournaments [Staroskolskaya 2019], or *the Siege of Caerlaverock*, a poem praising the victors of the Scottish war and rhyming the blazons of their arms).

The history of blazon and its appearance in literature can be traced further along the timeline of its consequent development, discovering and adding new sources and bringing new evidence of how blazon was interwoven in the language, and thought and even gave rise to new phenomena.

Blazon not only gave its name to a new form of poetry, it actually originated it. A literary *blazon* (or *blason*) catalogues the physical attributes of an object. Probably the most famous example is William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. The genre is believed to stem from Petrarch's *canzoniere* describing the face of Laura. However, the first poetic blazon was composed by a German

poet who actually described the face of a lady as a heraldic shield using features of real blazon. It appears in a German allegoric poem *Minneburg* ('A Castle of Love') of the late 13th century where we also meet allegorical knights with their allegorical coats of arms (Wandhoff 2005. P. 65). In addition to that, the author included a description of a lady's face which was actually a blazon:

Die will ich hie visiren,
Gar weppenlich gloyren
Reht in dines andutz schilt;
Wann sie sint eben dar gezilt
In dines anlutz forme.
(v. 2411–2415)

According to the rules of heraldry, first goes the field, it is the face itself and it is white, in the field there are the charges – lips – a band of ruby, and eyes – diamonds. The shield is bordered by gold of the hair. And the whole face is crowned like a heraldic shield of the 14th century (Wandhoff 2005. P. 65). Heraldic terms had later vanished from the description but the principle and the name remained.

William Shakespeare also made use not only of literary blazon. He supplied his historic plays with many heraldic signs. His noble characters all possess coats of arms as befits English gentlemen. However, they are not always obvious as the author refers to them often in his poetic manner. For example, Richard II is described as "The lion dying thrusteth forth his paw" which is evidently an allusion to the English arms. Some of the passages deal not with pictures but rather with the rules of heraldry:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My feromation, glittering o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes,
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
(I Henry IV, I, 2)

What is it if not an allusion to the heraldic rule that metal cannot be placed on metal, and tincture upon tincture?

Heraldic passages in Shakespeare's works mark another important step in the development of heraldry, the appearance of heraldic badges that became widespread by the 15th century. The sun of York that made winter of discontent a glorious summer is only one example among stags, boars, bears, and other signs from the heraldic inventory of the 15th-century English nobility (Scott-Giles 1893) giving us an idea of how such signs were used during their heyday.

Moreover, recent research proved that Shakespeare's interest in heraldry was not an ingenious but a practical one. Heather Wolfe has found evidence that Shakespeare made great effort to get the arms granted to his father (and to himself). His urge for a coat of arms was his own struggle for a social status, impossible without a noble genealogy.

While William Shakespeare was recollecting the social meaning of arms, a priest and lawyer John Donne was trying to comprehend its spiritual aspect in a poem *A sheaf of snakes used heretofore to be my seal, the crest of our poor family*:

Adopted in God's family and so
Our old coat lost, unto new arms I go.
The Cross—my seal at baptism—spread below
Does, by that form, into an Anchor grow.
Crosses grow Anchors; bear, as thou shouldst do
Thy Cross, and that Cross grows an Anchor too
But He that makes our Crosses Anchors thus,
Is Christ, who there is crucified for us
Yet may I, with this, my first serpents hold;
God gives new blessings, and yet leaves the old. <...>

The changes of the signs refer to the changes in his life. The author felt a deep spiritual connection with the signs he used (Simpson 1965. P. 140–150). This new symbolic attitude towards heraldry became ubiquitous as the arms had lost their primary function with the end of the Middle Ages, and thus became more personal and even intimate.

However, how sincere was Donne when talking about the “old arms of his family”? The arms he claims to be his really belonged to the Donnes since the beginning of the 15th century. *Louthe Hours*, known also as *Donne Hours*, contains an image of Sir John Donne with an *Azure, a wolf salient argent* arms and a crest with the sheaf of snakes. However, genealogic evidence makes it doubtful that the two Donnes were relatives (Colclough 2021).

The adoption of arms of a family with the same surname seems to have been a usual practice among the new gentry as the examples are numerous. The question remains whether it was just a legal trick in an attempt for social rise, or a sincere genealogic belief that is still to be investigated. But again, an appearance of heraldry in a literary passage reflects the social and historical reality of the author.

These are just some examples of textual heraldry. They show that we deal not just with a mere description of pictures. A whole story lies behind each passage, revealing opinions, attitudes, ambitions and skills. The potential of heraldic textual sources presents the scope of work to be done in future. Starting from the Middle Ages, heraldry has got interwoven into the

text so deeply that at times we do not even see it there. The timeline of the history of heraldry in the text can be drawn up to the modern times, although it might seem that coats of arms have lost their importance and influence. Something made even Vladimir Nabokov title one of his works with a heraldic term: *The Band Sinister*. The book is not about heraldry but this piece of blazon conveys much more meaning than just a description of a picture. The study of heraldic instances in the narratives of different epochs not only helps us to reconstruct the history of coats of arms and fill the gaps of our knowledge, but also contributes to our understanding of each historic period.

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