

COINS AS A HERALDIC RESOURCE

by David F. Phillips

Everyone who studies heraldry knows the importance of original sources such as manuscripts, seals and monuments. Since the revival of the scientific method in heraldic studies in the 19th century, these sources have been vital in documenting early heraldic practice and the development of style. But images from manuscripts are available to most scholars only through facsimiles. Seals are fragile and do not photograph well; facsimiles of seals in historical works are usually redrawn, with what distortions who knows? Coins are more durable and provide much of the same documentation – sometimes better, and for later periods substantially more. Images of coins are easy to locate and copy, and ambiguous details are relatively easy to clarify by comparison with other examples. But their use as an adjunct to heraldic research has largely been overlooked.¹



Coins documented state symbols for thousands of years before heraldry – the owl on the coinage of ancient Athens is one of the most famous examples. Documents fade and burn, but coins persist. The provenance, authenticity and fidelity to blazon of designs on paper, painted on walls and wood and canvas, woven into tapestries, and so on are open to question, but with a coin you know where you are. And, conveniently, dates of issue are often integral parts of their design – even undated heraldic coins can almost always be located within a single reign. Sometimes mint marks tell exactly where a coin was made.

Since the emergence of the art form in the 12th and 13th centuries, heraldic designs have been used to identify the state or other authority that issues a coin. A ruler's head commonly appears on the front, but in medieval times these portraits tended to be stylized rather than actual likenesses. Inscriptions of the period were hard even for the literate to read. But the ruler's arms, like the logos of today, were well-known in his realms, and recognized by money-changers across Europe. Even today they serve as identifiers for those versed in arms, while Islamic and South Indian coins of the same period, struck mainly with inscriptions, are unintelligible except to specialists.

There is a long-established scholarly tradition of using numismatic evidence for historical and artistic studies, backed up by a vast scholarly literature, important institutional collections, and many thousands of images – line drawings, photographs, and more recently digital images available in profusion on the Internet and elsewhere. With a reference to a coin, identifying the issuing authority and date (or reign), a heraldic scholar can co-opt the literature on the coin and (as with a blazon) ensure that every reader has the same image in mind. In this way it is more precise than a blazon – while a blazon

states essential elements and leaves the rendition to vary with the artist, a coin reference fixes the rendition also.

In this article I will suggest some uses for coins as a heraldic resource. The obverse of most of the coins shown bear the head of the ruler, so in the figures that follow the image is of the reverse of the coin unless otherwise indicated. The size of the images is determined by their detail – no attempt has been made to make them life size, or scale them in relation to each other. Thus Figure 23, a British half crown, is roughly the same size as Figure 24, a much smaller British shilling. All the illustrations come from the Internet – exact citations are given at the end.

Forgotten National Arms

Peru's struggle for independence from Spain was a long and difficult one. In 1821 General José de San Martín occupied Lima and declared Peru an independent state. San Martín established a national coat of arms and a national flag. But the war was not over, and the insurgent forces had to retreat. Peruvian independence was not finally won until General Antonio José de Sucre defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Ayacucho in 1824. The modern Republic of Peru was established the following year, with a second national emblem approved by Simon Bolívar, roughly the same one used today.

But what did the first pattern really look like? We have modern reconstructions of the flag, which bore the central element of the arms (a sun rising behind a range of volcanoes) on a field divided per saltire, and perhaps original flags can be found in South American military museums. Wikipedia has a muddy black-and-white rendition of the first arms of Peru.² But how official is that pattern? Wikipedia gives no original source for either image. It would be irresponsible to claim in any scholarly publication that the first arms of Peru were as described there.



But there is one source we know we can trust – the coins issued in 1821-23 by the first government of Peru (Figure 1). We know the design on the coins is official – it must have been. Other patterns may have been in use, interpreting the official blazon, but this one at least is certain to be authentic. We can even extrapolate that the motto found on the ribbon in the design on Wikipedia – *Renació el sol del Perú* (the sun of Peru is reborn) – belongs on the motto-ribbon shown on the coin.

Another example of a coin providing a clear official pattern of an ephemeral and almost-forgotten state emblem is this handsome 1925 five-lire piece of Italian Somaliland (Figure 2). The hatching even indicates the colors (blue above, red below).



Succession of Styles

Because coins are classified by series bounded by dates or at least reigns, they can fix the chronology of successor régimes. But this function is useful mainly to historians. For students of heraldic art, the main interest is in the succession of styles. In a series of coins the varying rendition of the same or similar arms provides a mirror of changing heraldic taste, itself an echo of changing taste in art generally.

A case study is the treatment of the Prussian eagle. The Prussian heraldic eagle was of course originally seen *displayed*, as most heraldic eagles were – wings raised, body and tail facing front, legs and head in profile. This form of stylization is very ancient, going back long before heraldry – different views of different parts highlight the characteristic features of each part. This traditional view of the eagle of Brandenburg-Prussia can be seen, for example, on the 1761 sixth-thaler piece issued by Russia for use in its East Prussian province (Figure 3).

But with changing tastes the eagle's stiffly hieratic posture was relaxed, and in coins such as the Prussian silver Friedrichsthaler of 1784 the eagle appeared in a somewhat more natural attitude (Figure 4). Of course it was still highly stylized, as shown by the crown on its head, the extended tongue, and the trophies in its talons; and the structure of its wings was poorly realized. But there was a pronounced movement away from the medieval displayed eagle.

Contrast this semi-natural eagle with that on the strikingly handsome silver three-mark coin issued in 1910 for the centenary of the University of Berlin (Figure 5). The attributes of the Prussian eagle have been superseded by those of the Second German



Empire. But more important, the *feeling* of the eagle is markedly different. Although its wings are addorsed rather than displayed, it has regained its former symmetry and high stylization, and seems more solid; the planes of the body foreshadow the Art Deco movement then just emerging.

The same progression can be seen elsewhere. In the United States some early coins bore a heraldic eagle on the reverse (Figure 6 shows the gold 10-dollar piece of 1797). A more relaxed eagle, in the Prussian style, appears on the reverse of early 19th century coins (Figure 7 is a dime from 1826); the succession of styles is not exact as similar eagles appeared on American coins as early as 1791. The eagle on the reverse of the beautiful quarter dollar by John Flanagan, first issued in 1932 (Figure 8) and still in common use, parallels the 1910 German piece.



Comparing coins illuminates stylistic choices. Figure 9, for example, a silver five-franc piece of 1856, shows the French imperial arms under Napoleon III. Many elements of this achievement, especially the scepters, link it not only to the first French Empire under Napoleon's more famous uncle, but to the old régime of the French kings. Figure 10, a 20-peso gold piece of the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, shows his very similar state arms. Although he was a Hapsburg (the griffin supporters are emblematic of this dynasty), the structure of the arms, including the crossed members, the rounded escutcheon, and the eagles on the crown, are remarkably similar to those of Napoleon III, on whose political support Maximilian's whole imperial project depended.



Heraldic detail on coins can document cultural penetration. For example, Figure 11 is a Cambodian four-franc piece dated 1860. Although it was perhaps not minted in that year (the type kept the same date for many years), Cambodia was then coming under French domination. The central elements of the arms are indigenous, but the spears crossed diagonally behind the escutcheon echo the scepters in the French arms of the time (Figure 9), as does the ermine-lined robe of estate. Of course there are no ermines in Cambodia, and the very idea of a fur-lined robe makes no sense in a tropical country. These heraldic features document European cultural penetration in a way that might be difficult to show or illustrate in other media. Figure 12, an 1883 silver dollar of the independent Kingdom of Hawaii, has similar elements. The arms were designed for King Kamehameha I by the English College of Arms in 1843.³ Elements of local regalia are presented as heraldic charges in a wholly European style, and an ermine-lined robe was added here too.



Sources of heraldic design

The most important way coins can be useful to the heraldist is as a gallery of excellence (and of course also mediocrity and failure) in heraldic design. Many such designs are pedestrian, and especially in earlier centuries even crude. But where they are good, they are sometimes very good. Figure 13 is an *ecu d'or* of Louis IX (1266), a masterpiece of the Gothic style, simple and perfectly balanced. The six fleurs-de-lys are an economical reduction of France ancient (*semé-de-lys*). Figure 14, a Milanese silver *pegione* of Gian Galeazzo Visconti issued around 1400, shows the famous *biscia* of the Visconti family (a serpent devouring a child). The serpent is skillfully modeled to communicate its strength and power, by artful use of the spatial relation between its coils and the space between them, and by allowing its body to touch the frame and the letters within the frame. Note how extending the child's arm beyond the frame gives the scene an extra measure of liveliness and immediacy.



In Figure 15 we see both sides of a Spanish silver eight-real piece of Philip V (1731), sometimes called a Spanish dollar or piece of eight. This coin, the most beautiful of a long series, was minted in the same design as early as 1580. On the obverse, note the harmonious proportion between the shield and crown and the rest of the field. Although the Bourbon inescutcheon is at the center of the shield, the addition of the crown, and its extension to the top of the coin but not to the bottom, raises the visual center of the whole composition. The relation of the crown's arches to the top of the coin fits the whole design snugly within its frame. Note also how the cross at the top of the crown extends beyond the field into the border. This detail, often found in printed media as well, communicates that God is beyond all earthly bounds, and that the king's authority derives from an other-worldly source.

On the reverse, the charges are beautifully fitted within the lobes of the octofoil. The cross, more here than just a division of the field, relates back to earlier non-heraldic Spanish coins in which it was a principal motif.



Coins are usually round, and thus a persistent challenge for the designer of heraldic coins is inscribing the composition within a circle. The Frankfurt silver gulden of 1863 (Figure 16) presents a notably successful solution. The eagle gracefully and harmoniously occupies an invisibly bounded but perfectly round visual space. Note the exuberant elaboration of the tail feathers and the uppermost wingtips. For balance, where there are gaps in the inscription the outer tips of the wing feathers extend slightly beyond the invisible circle.

The beautifully modeled Ethiopian silver birr of 1897 (Figure 17), by Jules-Clément Chaplain of the Paris Mint, illustrates a different response to the challenge of the circle. This Lion of Judah was Ethiopia's state emblem under the Solomonic Dynasty; its attributes are the staff and banner and the Ethiopian crown. Here the lion stands on a grassy compartment, which also defines the coin's exergue. His outermost back foot fits snugly in the join between the exergue and the rim; this and the base of the staff anchor him firmly in place. The diagonal line of the staff and the horizontal line of the exergue form a triangle within the circle, the apex of which lies just outside the frame; Chaplain has left a gap in the inscription where it passes through the rim. The superposition of these two forms gives the design its dynamic and adds to its visual interest.



Not all heraldic designs are of a full achievement or even a state emblem – some are based on smaller details. Figure 18 is a 1629 silver thaler from the German state of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. In the arms of the state (which were also the arms of the duke), the shield is supported by wild men with clubs, familiar figures in German heraldry. The coin shows one of the supporters from the arms.

Figure 19 is a 1928 Italian 20-lire piece. Italy had a Fascist government when this coin was issued to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the end of the First World War. The emblem of Fascism, a *fascis* or Roman lictor's rod with a lion's head above the axe, had been thoroughly integrated into Italian state and royal heraldry. This coin shows a close-up of part of the *fascis*, revealing details not usually so clearly visible. The broad

plain surface of the axe-blade, drawn in a different scale than the bound rods, is filled with a motto. This design blends the formal elements of state heraldry with an Art Deco sensibility typical of the period.

The 1951 Australian Jubilee Florin (Figure 20) commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Australian federation. On the reverse by Leslie Bowles, the Southern Cross, in the distinctive pattern used on the Australian flag, stands beneath the Crown. In the base is the seven-pointed Commonwealth Star, taken from the crest of the national arms, also seen on the flag in a slightly different form – the points stand for Australia’s states and territories. The sword and scepter are traditional emblems of royal power. The sword is a symbol of the state’s monopoly of the use of force; but crossed *over* it, in place of the royal scepter, is the mace of the Australian parliament, standing for the replacement of royal power by democratic institutions. The whole design is tightly composed while remaining remarkably open.



Sometimes a heraldic coin is interesting mainly for the questions it raises. For non-hereditary principalities the inescutcheon changes with each reign, and usually a new die is prepared for the new coinage. Figure 21 shows a 1719 silver reichsthaler of Wolfgang von Schrattenbach, Prince-Bishop of Olmütz in Austria. Why did the designer choose to project this complicated blazon onto a completely round shield? It should have worked, tempering the distortions of narrowing fields in the lower half of the shield. But the finished product is unsettling and unsatisfying. Why? Would a less cluttered background have yielded better results? Might the pattern have been more successful if the vehicle were itself not round, that is, not a coin? How much of the effect is due to the off-center strike? This ungainly design gives the heraldic artist much to think about.





The English coinage offers many outstanding heraldic designs. Figure 22 is an undated gold sovereign of Henry VII (reigned 1485-1509), with the royal arms at the center of a Tudor rose. The Tudor rose is a heraldic badge, formed of the imposition of the rose of York upon that of Lancaster. Henry, a Lancastrian, adopted it in 1486 when he married Elizabeth of York. It symbolized the definitive end to the Wars of the Roses and the merger of both houses' claims through the new dynasty. The Tudor rose, so beautifully executed here, derives much of its visual power from the

rotation of the five-petaled inner rose a tenth of a turn from the outer one, aligning it with the barbs on the outside. The rounded lobes in the margin beyond the outer rose resonate rhythmically with the petals on both flowers.

In Figure 23 we see the half crown of George VI, first minted in 1937. The design, by the master heraldic artist Kruger Gray, improves on a similar design for the half crown of George V. Note, for example, the suspension of the shield from a ring at the top, a detail found in medieval seals that gives the shield reality as an object rather than just as an abstract vehicle for executing blazon. Note also the intricate relations of the lions to the portions of the field where they are placed, and the solidity of the harp and especially the harp-strings. The scalloped edge of the shield is ornate without being fussy, and the cyphers are drawn with grace and economy.



Comparing a recent, nearly perfect design with an earlier coin very similar in design, but well short of perfection, can teach an observer a lot about heraldic art. In the beautiful Scottish shilling of Elizabeth II (Figure 24), designed by William Gardner, observe first



the pleasing proportions of the figure relative to the ground, how the curve at the bottom of the shield echoes the curve of the crown's arches, how the vertical lines marking the sides of the shield are continued by the sides of the crown (making the two parts into one unified



figure), how the lion's paws and tail are spaced relative to the flowers of the tressure surrounding it, how elegantly the tail fills the space available for it. The palar line, extending from the top of the crown to the bottom of the base, passes through the lion's eye, a medieval technique for aligning animals on a field; the cross, the central arch of the crown, and the center of the lion's body unite into one strong vertical element. An equally strong horizontal element, composed of the date, the O and G in the inscription and the lion's head (all about the same height) balances the vertical element and leads the eye to their intersection at the shield's honour point. Note that the eight flowers of the tressure project similar visual lines – vertical, horizontal and diagonal – that intersect at the fess point. The cross on the top of the heraldic crown is larger than it would be on an actual crown, but matches the size of the lettering in the inscription, echoing the practice on medieval coins and seals of beginning the inscription with a cross at the top.

Gardner designed a very similar shilling for the English coinage, with the arms of England instead of those of Scotland. His Scottish coin perfects a design used in the 16th century – Figure 25 is a silver ryal of James VI, minted in 1578 when the pattern had been in use for more than 30 years. Observe how the designer of this coin approached Gardner's solutions to the finial cross, the sides of the crown, the bottom curve of the shield, and the horizontal axis of the composition, but did not actually solve any of them. In the earlier coin the placement of the lion's lower body and back leg throws the vertical axis off center, while in Gardner's version it completes it.



It's not all elegant symmetries and fancy engravers from London or Paris. Modern heraldic artists could learn a lot from the direct, indeed naïve simplicity of the 1839 Peruvian half-escudo (Figure 26), based on the shield of the national arms adopted in 1825 and still in use.

Uncounted myriads of heraldic coins have been minted since the 13th century, and thousands of them could repay this kind of close attention. I could have written an article twenty times this long without running out of subjects, and it has been uncomfortable to have to leave out so many beautiful examples. But this is not a treatise or catalogue, just an attempt to bring to the notice of heraldic scholars, and to practitioners and *aficionados* of heraldic art, an easily available and nearly boundless resource.

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NOTES

- ¹ The headpiece is a Dutch bronze 2½ cent piece from 1884.
- ² *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coat_of_arms_of_peru#First_version*
- ³ See Meiric K. Dutton, “Hawaii’s Great Seal and Coat of Arms,” Honolulu, 1960, at pp. 3-4.