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ASTRONOMICAL MOTIFS AS ARMORIAL CHARGES

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The mystery of the heavenly vault has fascinated man since time immemorial, so that it is no wonder that, from the very beginning of human history, man has strived to create some kind of a system of symbols characterizing the planets or whole constellations, which he named according to the phenomena of whose shapes they reminded him.

It is, therefore, no surprise that we come across these motifs also in heraldry, though it is often difficult to decide whether the armorial charge is truly an astronomical one. Thus, for example, if we had not learnt it from a blazon¹⁾, probably no one would have guessed that the seven stars and two crescents in the arms of the Faura family represent the constellation of the Pleiades. Far easier is it to recognize the heavenly vault and moon in the star-sown shield of the regimental surgeon Hopfenstock of Ehrenstein²⁾.

Frequently occurring armorial charges are the sun and moon, but I am omitting these in my study, as they are more a symbol of the Day and Night and, in the case of the moon, also of the Orient. The sun, moon and planets are also used in alchemy and occult sciences as symbols of metals, as has been noted already by Kekule von Stradonitz who, up to now, has been the only heraldist to deal with the astronomical theme in arms³⁾. Finally, all the celestial bodies are also of astrological significance, as can be seen in the well-known motif of the lion with a sword and the rising sun in the arms of the Iranian Empire⁴⁾.

Comets are to be found relatively often in heraldry, both as a celestial sign only, or symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem. In this connection, let me mention the unusual eight-pointed star of the Bohemian Counts of Sternberg, which was considered by the genealogists of the Renaissance as "proof" that the Sternbergs derive their origin from Kasper, one of the three Magi of Bethlehem. How strong was such a conviction is testified by the frequent occurrence of the name of Kasper in the Sternberg family and the motto "Nescit occasum" used with the arms. Here, too, of course, belong the legendary arms ascribed to the three Magi which are depicted in the cathedrals of Kaschau and Cologne, in von Grünenberg's Roll of Arms and elsewhere.

Now, however, we come to those heraldic charges whose derivation from the celestial bodies can be determined with certainty and which we shall divide into three groups, namely the symbols of the planets, the signs of the zodiac and the symbols of other celestial phenomena.

The planet of Mercury occurs rather often in arms. For example, the

Swedish family Scherlag in which, over generations, important events took place under the signs of Virgo and Gemini, bears the symbol of Mercury as the astrological "regent" of both these zodiac signs.

The arms of the present Chevaliers Kirchner von Neukirchen have undergone interesting changes. On May 20th, 1644, their ancestor, a baptised Jewish pharmacist from Königgrätz in Bohemia, was granted arms by the comes palatinus Dr. von Ruoff. In the shield we see a demi-figure of Mercury on whose breast is a heraldically unusual seven-pointed reversed star charged with the sign of the planet of Venus, while the same star is on the church steeple which appears in the crest. However, only four years later the new-born armiger applied for almost completely different arms which, this time, were granted to him by the comes palatinus Dr. Heppius. In these, the church - on whose steeple, however, there is no star - appears in the shield, while Mercury, now in the crest, wears on his breast a six-pointed star from which Venus's symbol has disappeared. It is thus only logical that during further augmentations in 1731 and 1892, in the end, even Mercury himself disappeared, while the church steeples are adorned by three crosses ⁵⁾.

The demi-figure of Mercury is to be found also in the arms of the mathematician Schölinus, granted by the comes palatinus Pontanus of Breitenberg, and of the Austrian Counts Stubikh of Khönigstein. In the crest of the latter, Mercury holds a bunch of sorrel, Stubikh being a corruption of a Czech word which means "sorrel".

Mercury's attribute - a caduceus or winged staff with two serpents - is to be seen very often in heraldry as, e.g., in the arms of Mayor, Metzel, Strial of Pomnaus, and von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. It can, however, scarcely be considered a symbol of the planet but rather of trade, as it appears in many variants in modern arms. Expressly astrological is the armorial figure of the Augsburg printer, Erhard Ratdolt, from the 15th century, where a naked man, whose sex is covered by a star gules, holds in his right hand Mercury's staff. Less usual are the other Mercurian attributes such as the winged sandal in the crest of the Wiesenhöfer family, and the winged cap in the arms of Wefeld or Wegener.

The planet of Venus is represented very rarely in arms. I have seen it only in an undetermined arms on a faience plate in the Kirschgarten Museum of Basle. Otherwise, the Westphalian town of Essenth has had the sign of Venus in its arms since April 6th, 1966, as an alchemic symbol of copper as an allusion to the mining of this ore in the environs.

The planet of the Earth in the form of a globe, is no rarity in arms. Since 1521 it is to be seen in the signet of Peter Liechtenstein, a German printer of Venice. In the arms granted by Rudolf II, on August 23th, 1590, to the brothers Sferyn of Sferyn (de Sphaerinis) we see as a cant-

ing charge a terrestrial globe or sphere surmounted by a cock ⁶⁾. As other examples let me mention the globe borne in the arms of Sir Francis Drake from 1581, James Cook from 1785, and Sven Hedin granted in 1902, in the arms of the Brazilian Empire or displayed in the flags of the United Nations Organisation and the World Health Organisation.

The astronomical sign of Mars - in alchemy the symbol of iron - is popular predominantly in Scandinavian heraldry. It usually accompanies the principal charges, often of a military character. Thus it is to be found in the arms of the Bergenstrahles and Falckenheims, barons Nordenfalk, The Wrangels counts of Adinal, and barons Ornsköld, Tamm and Manestråle. The symbol of Mars appears interlaced with a laurel branch and sword in saltire in the chief of the baronets Stockenström of the Cape of Good Hope. The last family whose arms display the sign of Mars is that of the Austrian knights Winkler von Forazest, whose crest bears the demi-figure of a warrior holding a shield with this charge. The Winklers were honoured by the title of "Imperial and Royal Supplier of Iron" so that here the sign of Mars again symbolizes this metal ⁷⁾.

The symbol of the planet of Saturn is to be found three times on the bend in the first quarter of the shield of the Moravian physician Valenzi. The Austrian family of Pley von Schneefeld has the sign of Saturn in its arms evidently as a canting symbol of lead, Pley being a corruption of Blei, which in German means lead. This charge has the same meaning in the arms of the Westphalian town of Bleiwäsche, granted as late as in April 6, 1966.

The planet of Uran, known since 1781, is to be found only in the arms of Sir William Herschel, the man who discovered it. Neptune and Pluto have not as yet appeared in heraldry.

The second group of astronomical armorial charges consists of arms where two or more of these symbols are to be found. The oldest are the arms of Horžiczký of Tepenec, alias Sinapius, Rudolf II's personal physician, which show a hand grasping the unusual combination of the symbols of Mercury and Mars - "signum Mercurii conjunctum cum Marte"⁸⁾. From Rudolf II's time also date the arms of Basilius of Deutschenberg, a professor of astronomy of the Charles University of Prague, granted in 1594 and confirmed thirty years later⁹⁾. Apart from the globe, sun and moon - considered as planets - they show the symbols of all the then known true planets Mercury, Mars, Sa-



turn, Jupiter and Venus - therefore, altogether eight heavenly bodies. The arms of the family von Bradke, ennobled in Sweden on November 17, 1718, display a caduceus as well as the relatively rare charge of Jupiter. Combined with Saturn, this planet, now, however, in an almost naturalistic representation with its satellites and rings, is to be found also in the arms of the famous Pierre Laplace who was created a count by Napoleon on February 11, 1809.

Apart from planets, also the symbols of the zodiac and other constellations appear in heraldry. The grantees were usually learned men such as Professor Šúd of Semanín, astronomer of the Bohemian and Hungarian king Louis, whose arms, granted on September 14, 1525, bear a Capricorn and five stars forming the constellation of Libra¹⁰⁾. The Italian family Fadinelli bears in its arms, three zodiac signs - Aries, Libra and Aquarius.

In an unusual form, often to be met in the Rudolphian period in Bohemia, are the charges in the arms of a rector of the Charles University of Prague, Bacháček of Nauměřice. This is the constellation of Pegasus, depicted in the manner of the celestial atlases of the 16th century, i.e. a winged horse argent sown with nine stars or, whose position is precisely described in the diploma and the demi-figure of Sagittarius in the crest¹¹⁾.



The oldest image of the constellation of Taurus in heraldry I know is in the grant of Kolský of Ochsenstein¹²⁾. Even clearer is it to be seen in the arms of Dr. Polenta of Šudet, as also here the charge is executed in the manner of the contemporary astronomical atlases, i.e. a black bull whose body, issuing from the clouds, is sown with seven stars or¹³⁾. Similar are the arms of the Wagners of Bremgarten, Switzerland, from 1546. And in the shield of the family von Hagn, ennobled on February 25th, 1769, we see this symbol twice: as a zodiac sign and as a bull's head proper.

I shall not mention the other zodiac signs, Leo, Virgo, Aquarius, Gemini, Pisces, Libra, or Scorpion, as I do not know any cases when they would be expressed as principal charges by astronomical signs. Widely used in Swiss heraldry, the ibex can be taken as the astronomical symbol of Capricorn only when documented as such in the grant of arms, as it is by the Moravian family Waczetínský of Waczetín, where the Capricorn is accompanied by stars with an unusual number of eight points¹⁴⁾. Also the arms of Šturm of Hranice bear the Capricorn with a fishtail as it is usually depicted in celestial maps, accompanied in the crest by a star

and a caduceus¹⁵). The zodiac sign of Cancer is to be found in the arms of the family of the French barons Regnard de Lagny. Otherwise, of course, an ordinary lobster is a frequent armorial figure.

The last constellation of the zodiac to be found as a heraldic charge is Sagittarius, issuing from the clouds as a hippocentaurus, on the armorial tombstone of Kasper of Wykrantice in the deanery church of Čáslav in Bohemia¹⁶) or in the arms of the Prussian family von Milich.

Apart from the signs of the zodiac, also other constellations have become heraldic figures. The most popular of these, the Wagon or Great Bear - a canting charge in the arms of Marshal Bernadotte - is to be seen incorporated in the pretence shield of the Swedish Kingdom to this day. It is also in the Swedish arms of Vesterbotten and Vesterbottenlän, and of the archbishop of Upsalla, Magnus Beronius. Under the Hapsburg monarchy, I know this charge in the arms of the barons von Pohlberg, chevaliers von Fritsch and chevaliers Stofella d'Alta-Rupe, all granted in the 19th century. The Italian poet d'Annunzio, created Prince di Montenevoso in 1924, displays in his shield the wagon with stars of seven points, something almost unknown in heraldry. Also the prince of musicians, Richard Wagner, chose this constellation for his assumed canting arms.

The Southern Cross is to be found in several arms of the southern hemisphere, for ex. in the state emblem of Brazil, in the arms of Australia, New Zealand and West Samoa and - with the Star of Bethlehem - in the municipal arms of Pietermaritzburg, granted two days before the secession of South Africa from the Commonwealth. In Europe I know of the Southern Cross (with a kangaroo) only in the arms assumed by the Bohemian family Reich-Kuráž.

Further constellations occur in heraldry only rarely, as e.g. the Corona, expressed by a circle or and eight small stars argent in the arms of Dr. Hájek of Hájek, alias Nemicus, the astronomer of Rudolf II¹⁷), or the astrological Trigon in the shield of Maximilian's personal physician, Dr. Stodola of Požov, recte Stodolius¹⁸).

Also my last two arms with their undoubtedly astronomical charges belong to professors of the Charles University of Prague. In the field azure of Kolín of Chotěřina, recte Collinus, we again find the Pegasus argent, issuing from the clouds and sown with stars or whose positions are precisely described in the Latin charter and correspond with the engravings in the celestial maps of that period¹⁹). The merits of Dr. Zelotín of Krásná Hora, alias a Formoso Monte, as astronomer and mathematician are documented by his arms in which the constellation of Perseus is depicted in the same manner. This hero of antiquity is shown wearing 16th-century armour and winged sandals, holding in his right hand a sword, in his left Medusa's snake-covered head with a star on her forehead. The

figure of Perseus is sown with a further eleven stars²⁰⁾.

However, the stellar theme in heraldry is much richer and so I have mentioned neither the state arms of Ecuador with as many as four zodiac signs, Aries, Taurus, Gemini and Cancer, nor the eight Finnish communal arms with the signs of Mars or Venus, which have originated within the past two decades²¹⁾. And, therefore, I shall not be surprised to discover still further arms with this theme which, despite its indubitably interesting, even romantic character, has been completely overlooked by world heraldry up to now.



Notes:

- 1) J.B.Rietstap: "Armorial Général" (1884) Vol.I. p.651.
- 2) Central State Archives of Prague (CSAP) Grant of Arms of 13-6-1789, Saalbuch 250 fol.367v.
- 3) Dr.S.Kekule v.Stradonitz: Etwas über astronomische Wappen. "Das Weltall" Vol.26, No.5/78-9. (By courtesy of Baroness v.Koskull).
- 4) Dr.O.Neubecker: "Neue und veränderte Staatswappen". Vol.2, p.64
- 5) CSAP Vol. "Palatinat" fol.289r-290 and 272r-273.
- 6) CSAP Grant of Arms of 10-1-1654, Saalbuch 32b, fol.1018v.
- 7) Adelsarchiv Vienna, Diploma of 2-8-1823.
- 8) CSAP Grant of Arms of 20-10-1608, Saalbuch 12b, fol.931r.
- 9) CSAP Confirmation of Arms of 21-10-1624, Saalbuch 32a, fol.96v.
- 10) Archives of the Town of Nymburk, Municipal Green Book, fol.286r.
- 11) CSAP Grant of Arms of 7-12-1591, Saalbuch 12a, fol.321v.
- 12) CSAP Grant of Arms of 8-4-1534, Saalbuch 283, fol.66v.
- 13) CSAP Grants of Arms of 3-4-1557, 6-12-1558 and 8-1-1595, Saalbuch 286, fol.95r and 161r, and Saalbuch 12a, fol.435v.
- 14) CSAP Grant of Arms of 2-12-1573, Saalbuch 89, fol.29v.
- 15) CSAP Grant of Arms of 16-2-1568, Saalbuch 287, fol.323r.
- 16) CSAP Grant of Arms of 8-5-1554, Saalbuch 286, fol.17r.
- 17) CSAP Grants of Arms of 14-9-1554 and 22-11-1595, Saalbuch 286, fol. 27v and Saalbuch 12a, fol.481r.
- 18) Adelsarchiv Vienna, Grant of Arms of 1-7-1575.
- 19) CSAP Grant of Arms of 15-5-1542, Saalbuch 284, fol.127r.
- 20) Adelsarchiv Vienna, Grant of Arms of 25-10-1570.
- 21) Encyclopedia "Mitä, Misä, Million", Helsinki 1967, p.139-154.