The Virgin Mary as the Arms of King Arthur

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Abstract

We present an account of how the Virgin Mary came to have a medieval heraldic association with King Arthur, and suggest a possible reason why the association began in England.

Writers on Arthurian heraldry and literature sometime mention that King Arthur used a depiction of the Virgin Mary as his coat-of-arms. Usually little detail is given, other than indicating that the arms are fictitious, and perhaps quoting Nennius, a supposed Welsh monk, as the authority to the claim that Arthur bore the image of the Virgin Mary. The ultimate source of the heraldic association of King Arthur with the Virgin Mary is the *Historia Brittonum*, which although appearing fanciful at times, is an account of the history of the British Isles from the time of its first settlers up to the Sixth Century. As well as a history, the *Historia Brittonum* also contains other material such as genealogies and place names. From textual arguments, it is thought to have been written or compiled in Wales, sometime in the Ninth Century by an anonymous author (Fitzpatrick-Mathews, 2015). The attribution of its authorship to a Welsh monk called Nennuis is now discredited. However, the *Historia Brittonum* is not a Ninth Century document as such, but comprises over forty enigmatic and confusing Latin manuscripts, all of which contain different versions of text. All the extant copies are medieval in origin and therefore date four to five hundred years after the estimated time of an original compilation. Although the Harlean manuscript (BL Ms Harley 3859) appears to be the oldest copy,[1] the original text of the *Historia Brittonum* is lost and to-date no published edition has attempted a reconstruction.[2]

The enigmatic narrative of the *Historia Brittonum*, couched in what could be described as intensely individualistic Latin, is well illustrated in its accounts of Arthur, who on two

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[1]The standard printed edition of the *Historia Brittonum* is by Mommsen (Mommsen, 1894) and is based on the Harlean manuscript.

[2]A good account of the difficulties in re-constructing a definitive version of the *Historia Brittonum* is given in the painstaking work of David Dumville (Dumville, 1975).

occasions is said in battle to carry on his shoulders various surprising objects. In one battle, Arthur carries the Cross of Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights; in another battle, he carries an image of the Virgin Mary. Carrying the Cross of Christ seems not to have been an issue for medieval audiences and does not appear to have been reinterpreted. As a metaphor for the expenditure of extraordinary physical effort and as a symbol of interaction between Arthur and Christ, its meaning was perhaps obvious in an age of belief. The occasion where Arthur carries an image of the Virgin Mary was however reinterpreted to mean that Arthur's shield carried an image of the Virgin. It should perhaps be noted that the Latin text does not describe the form or size of the image.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, Bishop of Asaph, appears to have been the first to make the imaginative transfer of the image of the Virgin Mary from Arthur's shoulders to the surface of his shield. Sometime in the 1130s he completed a history of the Kings of Britain, called *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which like the *Historia Brittonum* purports to be a secular history.[3] In his book, Geoffrey simply states that Arthur's shield, which he names as *Pridwen*, depicted an image of the Virgin Mary that forced Arthur "to think perpetually of her". The painting of a woman's portrait on the surface of a shield was not without precedent in the Twelfth Century. William IX, "the Troubadour" (1071–1126), Duke of Aquitaine – and a grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine – had a portrait of his mistress painted on his shield. This fact is recorded by William of Malmesbury, a contemporary of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and it is not impossible that Geoffrey knew of the story and it suggested to him an obvious way in which to clear up the confusion he may have noticed in the *Historia Brittonum* — especially so, if Geoffrey also knew that the Welsh words for shield *scuit* and shoulder *scuid* were confusedly similar. Geoffrey's clarification was quickly adopted by other writers, notably the Norman poet Wace and the Englishman Layamon.[4] Wace adds in his *Roman de Brut*, written about 1155, that the image was on the buckler, and Layamon in his *Brut* tells us that it was traced in red gold.[5]

Not withstanding Wace's added detail, the actual location on the shield of the image of the Virgin Mary is problematic. For Arthur to see the image readily, as Geoffrey of Monmouth suggests, it would have needed to be on the inside of the shield. And this is explicitly confirmed by Robert Holcot, the Fourteenth Century, English Dominican theologian, who also wrote that whenever Arthur was weary he looked upon the image to recovered his hope and strength. It is these qualities, together with virtue, that the Arthurian knight Gawain gains from his shield, which, too, has a picture of the Virgin on the inside surface (Waldron, 1970). On the front of Gawain's shield are the pentangle arms *or, a pentangle gules* described in the Middle English poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

[3]The standard Lain text is (Griscom, 1929), and a modern translation is (Thorpe, 1966).

[4]The standard text of Wace's *Brut* is (Arnold, 1938–1940) and that of Layamon's *Brut* is (Brook & Leslie, 1963). For simplicity, we do not use the yogh ȝ character and therefore transcribe the personal name according to modern practice as "Layamon", rather than the more accurate rendering "Laȝamon". Modern practice is itself likely to be incorrect since it would appear that ȝ should be transcribed as "gh" and not "y", see p.36 of (Denholm-Yound, 1964).

[5]In the Middle Ages, the metal gold was commonly described as red in colour, an appearance that probably resulted from impurities present during smelting.

It could be said that for an image to be truly heraldic it has to be seen on the outside surface of a shield. Thus, once the association of Arthur with an image of the Virgin Mary was established, depictions of that image on the outside of the shield became frequent. For example, in a Thirteenth Century manuscript (BL: Royal MS. 20 AII, fos. 3v-4) there is a translation of Wace's *Brut* by Peter Langtoft[6] that includes an illustration of Arthur with the Virgin-Mary arms. He is shown as a confident figure astride his empire represented by a tableau of thirty crowns.[7] He wears a hauberk, leg armour and a surcoat. He holds a lance and carries a red heater shield, the front of which has a picture of the Virgin Mary, with an added feature in that here she is holding a child. It appears therefore that in only a few years after Geoffrey of Monmouth's original suggestion, the heraldry of Arthur had matured to the Virgin Mary accompanied by the infant Jesus. It is these subsequent arms that are attributed to Arthur by later mediaeval heralds, where they are often included with a cross or cross flory (Dennys, 1975). The cross embellishment must have been made before the end of the Fourteenth Century since it is directly referenced by the mysterious Johannes de Bado Aureo.[8] He writes in his *Tractatus de armis* that Arthur initially assumed the arms of his father Uther[9] Pendragon, namely *or, three dragons vert crowned gules*, but, after witnessing miracles at Glastonbury, changed his arms to *vert, a cross argent with the Virgin and Child in the first quarter.*

The allocation of the Virgin Mary to the arms of Arthur seems to have been a largely British affair; the more familiar device of three crowns was favoured by French medieval writers of Arthurian romances. Johannes de Bado Aureo neatly deflects this French tradition by claimig that *azure, three crowns or* were the arms of all the kings of Briton *before* Uther Pendragon. The Arthurian heraldic tradition of the Virgin Mary was known in continental Europe, however, where, for example, it is related in a late Fourteenth Century Breton chronicle, *Chronticon Briocense*, that the Virgin displayed on Arthur's shield wore a mantle of ermine.[10]

We have not considered here questions about the existence or otherwise of an historical Arthur; what is important is not whether Arthur actually existed but that people of later times – the Middle Ages in particular – believed he had existed.[11] It would therefore

[6]Peter Langtoft, or Peter *of* Langtoft, was an Augustinian canon who lived at the end of the Thirteenth Century. He may have been born in Langtoft, Yorkshire.

[7]Arthur himself seems never to have been depicted wearing a closed crown, which would be the appropriate choice for an emperor. For example a representation of The Nine Worthies from the manuscript: Paris, B.N., ms. français 12559, fol. 1, and reproduced in (Neubecker, 1976), gives closed crowns only to Julius Caesar and Charlemagne.

[8]Very little is known of Johannes de Bado Aureo and his identity is uncertain. His *Tractatus de armis*, completed before 1394, is considered to be the first British heraldic manual. A critical edition of the *Tractatus* was given by Professor Evan John Jones (Jones, 1943).

[9]We adopt the usual modern spelling of Uther (Pendragon). Evan John Jones (Jones, 1943) gives Urth (Pendragon).

[10]For the Breton tradition of Arthur's arms being ermine see (Lacy, 2021) and p.36 of (Brault, 1972).

[11]The arguments in favour of the existence of a Romano-British Arthur who maintained more or less in tact the imperial government of Fifth-Century Britain, by checking the advance of the English, were presented nearly fifty-years ago by the archaeologist Leslie Alcock (Alcock, 1971) and historian John Morris (Morris, 1973). These arguments were severely criticised at the time (Myres, 1975). An alternative argument but one that is largely ignored, places a proto-Arthur in First-Century Roman Britain (Whitehead, 1959).

not seem odd that Arthur should have a coat-of-arms. To people of the Middle Ages, there was no such thing as *attributed* heraldry; they did not regard what today we would label fictitious arms as having a lesser value or of being different. Indeed, the arms attributed to Edward the Confessor, *azure, a cross flory between five doves or*, which were of course never born by The Confessor, were sufficiently regarded as to be incorporated into the Royal Arms during the reigns of Richard II and Edward IV. And their misappropriation was the cited evidence that condemned the Earl of Surrey in 1547 on a charge of treason (Moore, 2001). However, whatever human image, if any, a real Arthur might have displayed on his shield, it is unlikely to have been the Virgin Mary. Until the time of the Norman Conquest, the Virgin Mary was venerated in Western Europe solely as an intercessor on the behalf of the poor and oppressed (Graef, 1985). During the Dark Ages, she had yet to have the Byzantium epithet of Queen of Heaven, which later became popular in the Middle Ages, particularly in England. As such, she is unlikely to have been associated with a great warrior, such as Arthur. It is more probable that a real Arthur would have carried a representation of a pagan goddess. Excavations of Dark Age burial sites show that both Christian and pagan symbols were used by Romano Britons (de Noort, 1993) so an ostensibly Christian Arthur would not have been precluded from carrying non-Christian tokens.

In compilations of the *Historia Brittonum*, it may be that Arthur's pagan goddess was later Christianized to the Virgin Mary in keeping with the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which, in England, "went hand and hand with the blossoming of the Arthurian legend" (Denholm-Yound, 1965). Indeed, such a gloss could have been inserted into the *Historia Brittonum* some time in the Twelve Century since it may not be a coincidence that the Harlean manuscript is written in a hand of the Twelve Century, at the start of the golden age of English Mariology. A full textual comparison between all the manuscripts of the *Historia Brittonum* might easily dismiss such a suggested source for the Arthurian heraldic tradition of the Virgin Mary. A ten-volume project was launched in 1985 by David Dumville (Dumville, 1985–) to publish critical editions of all the versions of *Historia Brittonum*, but only three volumes seem to have appeared.

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