

The Attributed Arms of Charlemagne, 1200–1500

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To the medieval mind it was inconceivable that such a towering figure as Charlemagne, regardless of his pre-heraldic existence, did not have his own armorial bearings; heraldry had appeared in western Europe during the second quarter of the twelfth century. The result was that, like many other illustrious heroes (and later heroines) of the past, fictional or otherwise, he was duly attributed a suitably appropriate, though inevitably posthumous, coat of arms.

Charlemagne died in 814, and in 843 his vast territories were divided into what was eventually to become the Holy Roman Empire and what we now call France. Both entities naturally wished to capitalise on the sacral, military and royal authority of their common ancestor. Charlemagne's German successors clearly saw him as their great imperial predecessor, and in 1165 the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa organised his canonisation. Charlemagne was crowned by the pope in Rome as "Emperor of the Romans," and portrayed and styled himself as such. As part of his renewal of the old Roman Empire he placed an eagle, once used by the Caesars, on the gable of his imperial palace at Aachen and it was this powerful emblem of ancient Rome that during the reign of Barbarossa (1155–90) became the recognised heraldic symbol of the emergent western Empire.¹ A gold casket commissioned by Frederick II, then king of the Romans (the title used by rulers of Germany before becoming emperor), and completed in 1215 to rehouse Charlemagne's sacred bones, depicts an eagle above the emperor's tent, whilst his men-at-arms carry shields bearing the same device.²

Around the middle of the thirteenth century a new version, possibly a Byzantine or eastern invention, the *double-headed eagle*, was adopted by the Holy Roman Emperors. They may have appropriated the device to distinguish themselves, heraldically-speaking, from the kings of Germany who continued to use the single-headed bird. Not surprisingly Charlemagne,

¹ Michel Pastoureau, *Figures et Couleurs: Études sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévales* (Paris: Le Léopard d'or, 1986), 167.

² Rita Lejeune and Jacques Stiennon, *La légende de Roland dans l'art du Moyen Age*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Brussels: Éditions de l'Arcade, 1966), pls 147 and 148.

as the so-called founder of the revived empire in the west, was henceforth awarded the more grandiose imperial variety.³

For the French, however, Charlemagne was Frankish, if not French, and therefore, *their* great royal ancestor. Early Anglo-Norman and French literature sought to transfer “*our* emperor” to Paris and closely linked him to that other great French warrior, Roland.⁴ Even the new French royal house of Capet, which had wrested the throne from the Carolingian descendants of Charlemagne, was keen to associate itself with the growing cult of the king-emperor, and gradually more and more objects of the French coronation regalia kept at St Denis, including the coronation crown, were associated with him. Not surprisingly, from at least the second half of the fourteenth century, the French bestowed their own royal symbol of the fleur de lis upon Charlemagne, especially in his role as Frankish king before becoming emperor. An example is the scene depicting Charlemagne and his brother Carloman as joint rulers of France both dressed in fleury robes in the richly decorated volume of the *Mirouer historial abregié de France* produced in either Maine or Tours dating to c. 1451.⁵ The attribution of this particular royal symbol with its Christian virtues may have been prompted by a corruption of the popular legend whereby it was not Clovis (as was normally stated), who was presented with the fleury shield by an angel, but Charlemagne. It was an adaptation first noted in the 1390s, though Charles V of France, who died in 1380 and who venerated Charlemagne, may already have known of its existence.⁶

As Charlemagne in his after-life became something of a political football between the French king and the German emperor, so there was an inevitable division of opinion as to the symbols of his “national” identity. Fortunately heraldic help was at hand. From a surprisingly early period, heraldry was able to adapt to a variety of circumstances and reflect a range of alliances, dynastic mergers, family and tenurial relationships, and especially the union of a man and wife in marriage. It did so by two means:

³ David F. Phillips, *The Double Eagle* (Danvers, Mass.: Flag Heritage Foundation Monograph, 2014); *Rolls of Arms, Henry III*, ed., Thomas D. Tremlett and Hugh S. London (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1967), 15–16, 34, 36, 45, 167, 168; and cf. *Rolls of Arms of Edward I*, ed. Gerard J. Brault, 2 vols (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), i, 512 and plate III, and ii, 150, 192.

⁴ See Mariannne Ailes, “Charlemagne, Father of Europe: A European Icon in the Making,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 38 (2012): 59–76; Paul Adam-Even and Louis Carolus-Barré, “Les armes de Charlemagne dans l’héraldique et l’iconographie médiévales” in *Memorials d’un voyage d’études del al Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France en Rhénanie, juillet 1951* (Paris: Palais du Louvre, 1953), 289–308 (300).

⁵ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodl. 968 f. 117 illustrated in Kathleen Daly, “Picturing Past Politics: French Kingship and History in the ‘*Mirouer historial abregié de France*’,” *Gesta* 44/2 (2005): 103–24 (107 and fig. 5).

⁶ William M. Hinkle, *The Fleurs de Lis of the Kings of France 1285–1488* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1991), 21, 26, 50–51, 57, 58; Evan John Jones, *Medieval Heraldry: Some Fourteenth Century Heraldic Works* (Cardiff: William Lewis, 1943), 151.

differencing and marshalling. The former consisted of making certain changes in the colour or design of an original coat in order to distinguish the new arms from the existing coat whilst maintaining an obvious link with the original arms. Marshalling entailed the combination of two or more separate shields in a variety of ways, for example, by impalement or dimidiation, when two distinct coats of arms were portrayed side by side on the same shield, or by quartering, a practice adopted by the mid-thirteenth century when the two Spanish kingdoms of Leon and Castile quartered their punning or “canting” arms on the same shield, as a permanent reminder of their union.

In the case of Charlemagne the answer was to *dimidiate* the present imperial arms (a double-headed eagle) with the French royal arms (the fleurs de lis) thus creating a new single coat reflecting the shared identity and legacy of the king-emperor.



Above: Thomas of Saluzzo's *Le Chevalier Errant* (1403–1404), [BnF MS fr. 12559 f. 125r](#).

In heraldry *dimidiation* normally entails dividing two separate shields down the middle and joining half of one to the opposite half of the other, often with quite interesting results! Occasionally Charlemagne's bipartite coat is shown with the imperial eagle *impaling* the French fleurs de lis, in other words both arms are shown whole side by side on the same shield, the eagle keeping its two wings and heads.⁷

Whatever the exact form of marshalling that Charlemagne's bipartite arms took, they first appear in *Enfances Ogier*, a French work attributed to the poet Adenet le Roi who flourished between 1269 and 1285.⁸ He apparently created new coats of arms for the great man and several other epic heroes.⁹ The same arms decorate the king-emperor's tunic at court and his surcoat, shield, ailettes and banner in battle in a manuscript illumination produced in western Flanders between about 1325 and 1335.¹⁰ They also appear prominently on Charlemagne's surcoat and horse caparison illustrated in a slightly later miniature from one of the superbly illuminated royal annals of the French kings known as *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*.¹¹ It was this lively combination of the imperial double-headed eagle with the royal arms of France that was to remain the universally acknowledged arms of Charlemagne as king-emperor and one of the Nine Worthies throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.¹²

Nevertheless, despite the popularity of the bipartite coat, the French, doubtless for political and propaganda reasons, continued either to ignore quietly the imperial eagle half or subtly relegate its importance by careful use of artistic licence. Although usually recorded as the premier side of Charlemagne's coat in medieval rolls of arms, the imperial eagle was occasionally dropped entirely from manuscript depictions of the emperor including some late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *Grandes*

⁷ For example, in the Breton Armorial (Emmanuel de Boos, Marie-Françoise Damongeot et Françoise Vielliard, préface de Michel Pastoureau, *L'armorial Le Breton* (Paris: Archives nationales-Groupe Malakoff-Somogy, 2004), 61, dated to mid-1450s at 14; Adam-Even and Louis Carolus-Barré, "Les armes de Charlemagne," 297 and fig. 5b. For further examples see Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*. Very rarely the arms are shown quarterly (Adam-Even and Louis Carolus-Barré, "Les armes de Charlemagne," 297 and 298, fig. 5c).

⁸ *Les Oeuvres d'Adenet le roi*, ed. Albert Henry, vol III *Les Enfances Ogier* (Bruges: Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, 1956)

⁹ *Enfances Ogier*, vv. 5004–6; Adam-Even and Carolus-Barré, "Les armes de Charlemagne" where the poem is dated to c. 1275; Gérard J. Brault, "Adenet le Roi et l'héraldique médiévale," *Olifant*, 25/1–2 (2006): 141–9 (144).

¹⁰ Miniatures from Jacob van Maerlant, *Spieghel Historiae* (The Hague KB KA 20 ff. 208r, 211v, 213v, 216r, 217v); Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*, pl. LV.

¹¹ BL Royal MS 16 G VI f. 168v, produced in Paris, c. 1332–40.

¹² Adam-Even, and Carolus-Barré, "Les armes de Charlemagne," 291ff. I am grateful to Steen Clemmensen for having furnished me with details of entries for Charlemagne from his extensive database of medieval rolls of arms.

Chroniques.¹³ Even in England, Edward III, after his formal claim to the French throne in 1340 and adoption of the French royal arms, portrayed the emperor using just the fleurs de lis, thus heraldically linking himself with his great French ancestor and predecessor as king of France; Edward's mother was a French princess.¹⁴

Such depictions of the king-emperor using only the French royal symbol were relatively few, with illuminators sometimes resorting to more subtle means to emphasise the fleury side of his more commonly accepted double coat of arms. The obvious way would have been to put the lilies in the first half of the shield and demote the eagle to the less honourable side. This did occasionally happen, though one suspects more in error and ignorance than through deliberate policy. An example in the heraldic record features in a mid-fifteenth century portion of the Breton Armorial.¹⁵ Another is an heraldic treatise dating to c. 1470 and c. 1475, which somewhat oddly shows both versions (the lilies before the eagle and vice versa) without explanation; perhaps the correct version was added towards the end.¹⁶

Otherwise, to witness *douce France* taking precedence over the Holy Roman Empire we again need to turn to the illuminated manuscripts. These did not come more sumptuously decorated than that produced in Rouen for John Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, as a wedding gift to Margaret of Anjou on her marriage to Henry VI of England in 1445. One miniature in this work, the so-called "Shrewsbury Book," clearly portrays Charlemagne bearing the bipartite coat with France occupying the more honourable half.¹⁷ A small banner in the background repeats the arms, though in unusual style since it divides them *horizontaly* (*per fess*) in much the same way as they appear on the famous reliquary of a bust of Charlemagne made around 1350. Whilst the banner does place the eagle above the fleur de lis, the position of the banner in the miniature is relatively insignificant and overall much greater emphasis is given to the fleur de lis especially as it decorates the whole of Charlemagne's tunic. Other miniatures in the same manuscript depict the emperor bearing only the fleurs de lis.¹⁸

¹³ *Grandes Chroniques*: Bnf fr. 2813 f. 121r (c. 1375–c. 1380) illustrated in Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*, pl. XLI A; Hanover Staatsbibliothek MS IV 578 ff. 46r, 83r, 84r (early 14th century); Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodl. 968 f. 117 (Daly, "Picturing Past Politics," 107 and fig. 5); Aix en Provence, Bibiothèque Arbaud ms M.O. 63 f. 70r (c. 1375) illustrated in Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*, pl. 196.

¹⁴ British Library Egerton MS 3028 f. 115v (late 1330s). The illustrations in this manuscript and the earlier Hanover Staatsbibliothek MS IV 578 are closely related. See below for later examples in a book given to Margaret of Anjou.

¹⁵ See above note. 7.

¹⁶ BnF 24381 ff. 157v & 187v.

¹⁷ British Library Royal 15 E. vi, f. 25r; Jade Bailey, "An Edition and Study of *Fierabras* in Royal 15 E VI," unpublished PhD, University of Bristol, (2014), 81–3. I am grateful to Dr Bailey for lending me a copy of her unpublished thesis.

¹⁸ British Library Royal 15 E. vi, ff. 43r, 70r, 155r; Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*, pl. XX.



Above: Charlemagne in fleury mantle, with shield of France dimidiating the Empire, and banner per fess the Empire and France (1444–45), © The British Library Board, British Library Royal 15 E. vi, f. 25r.

More usually artistic licence was employed to give greater emphasis to the lilies by deliberately obscuring the imperial half of Charlemagne's arms. This could most easily be achieved by showing the king-emperor either in profile or three-quarters whereby prominence was given to the French half of his arms. This can be clearly seen, for example, in several miniatures contained within Jean Fouquet's mid-fifteenth century, *Les Grandes Chroniques*.¹⁹



Right: Jean Fouquet, *Grandes Chroniques* (Tours, c.1455–c.1460), [BnF fr. 6465 f. 78v](#).

The *Mirouer historial abregié de France* likewise focusses attention on the French fleurs de lis to the detriment of the imperial eagle. In one miniature the emperor embraces the future St Louis. Both men wear fleury mantles. The bipartite arms are depicted in the same scene but are placed in the

¹⁹ Jean Fouquet, *Grandes Chroniques* – Tours, c. 1455–c. 1460 (BnF fr. 6465 ff. 78v, 89v, 96).

background and then partly obscured, or in a seemingly insignificant small shield above the emperor. In a second miniature from the same work Charlemagne sits enthroned, clad in a mantle of his bipartite arms. However, once again the imperial eagle is obscured by a much more prominent fleurs de lis side which on this occasion the emperor lifts in front of him as he supports an orb with this left hand. The fleurs de lis are repeated on the mantles of his three sons.²⁰ A similar effect is achieved in Grisaille's *Renaut de Montabaun*, where Charlemagne seated in a tent, which is covered in large fleurs de lis, wears a double-headed eagle on his breastplate, but the imperial arms are obscured by his mantle.²¹ The overall impact achieved by this emphasis on the French royal symbol in all these pictures is the same, namely the continuity of the office of French kingship down through the centuries, despite the change in dynasty.

Such heraldic sensitivities appear not to have worried France's imperial neighbour. Initially, as we have seen, emperors were content to attribute the eagle alone to their predecessor, and there was good historical evidence that Charlemagne had actually used this device, unlike the fleurs de lis. The arrival of the newly-invented bipartite coat depicting both the Empire and France does not seem to have troubled the Germans since the eagle generally took pride of place on the shield, the Holy Roman Emperors heraldically-speaking trumping even those most Christian kings of France. Moreover, whilst succeeding emperors could and did question Capetian claims to the great man, it would have been difficult, even for them, to have doubted Charles's Frankish origins.

In conclusion, Charlemagne's arms provide a neat example of the ways in which heraldry was able to demonstrate a variety of circumstances and situations, and could be manipulated to focus on particular aspects of its owners, whether alive or dead. The great man's composite coat succinctly sums up his shared identities and legacies and in many ways the conjoined arms encapsulate his posthumous role as the epitome of a united western Christendom. Coupled with the occasional twists of artistic licence, they also provide a high profile example of the flexibility of this highly decorative and sometimes highly charged medium of display and symbolism. Finally, arms attributed to former heroes and legendary figures also allowed heraldry to break into the distant past and even pure fiction; Charlemagne – king, emperor, Worthy, and still today a European icon – appears to have been equally at home in both.

²⁰ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodl. 968 ff. 185, 150, illustrated in Daly, "Picturing Past Politics," figs. 6, 7.

²¹ Pommersfelden, Bibl. Palat. MS 312 f. 3r; illustrated in Lejeune and Stiennon, *La légende de Roland*, pl. 195.

An expanded version of this paper will be published in the Actes of the 19th Colloque of the Académie internationale d'héraldique, held in Saint-Jean-du-Gard (France) in 2015.

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