

Czech Heraldry through the Centuries

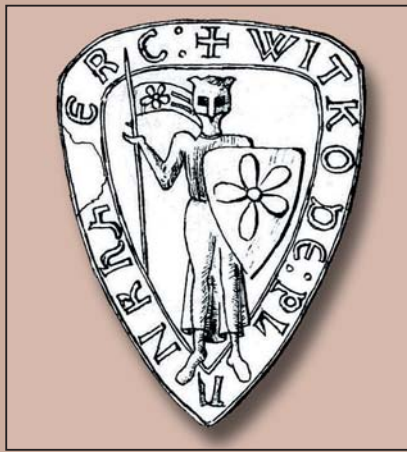
For thousands of years humans have communicated by way of various systems of pictorial symbols. One of the most venerable systems of this kind is European heraldry, which arose in the western part of Europe in the twelfth century as part of the culture of chivalry. Various geometric shapes and depictions of animals began to be painted on the broad area of knights' shields, thus identifying the bearers or their lords, conveying information and sending a message, whether at a tournament or in the field. Throughout Western Europe heraldry became all the fashion.

Over time the fashion persisted and became institutionalized. Those early days were the period in which a hereditary nobility was taking shape. The emblems became the symbols of the aristocracy; family emblems passed down through the generations. Only later were coats-of-arms adopted by countries, towns, universities, religious orders, guilds and other institutions.

In the Kingdom of Bohemia the first forerunners of aristocratic heraldry appeared at the end of the twelfth century. The seal of the feudal ruler Hroznata, who was later beatified, dates from 1197. His symbol (three sets of antlers) continued to be used by his line, the Counts of Vrtba, until the family died out in 1830. The second-oldest noble emblem appeared in 1220 on the seal of Vítek of Prčice. It consists of a shield with a rose – the same symbol that would be used by his descendants, the Lords of Rožmberk, one of the most important Czech noble families, who died out in 1611. A few of the oldest Czech noble families traceable to the twelfth century continue to this day, for example the Šternberks and the Wallensteins (Valdštejns).

Gothic heraldry valued simple and striking subjects, like the star of the

Drawing of the seal of Vítek of Prčice, 1220, by August Sedláček



A Wild Man fighting with a heraldic lion, from the Wenceslas IV Bible (also known as the Vienna Bible, the Royal and the German Bible), around 1390



The coat-of-arms of Karel of Liechtenstein, Duke of Opava, 1618

Lords of Šternberk or the crenellations of the Lords of Cimburk. Escutcheons composed of several fields appeared for the first time in the sixteenth century. The Valdštejns, for example, divided their emblem into quarters, and into each quarter they placed their original symbol of a lion. In the sixteenth century, with increasing numbers of people raised by the sovereign to noble estate, heraldic symbolism expanded to include evermore-exotic animals, or various objects meant to symbolize the original profession of those whose ambitions had been achieved.

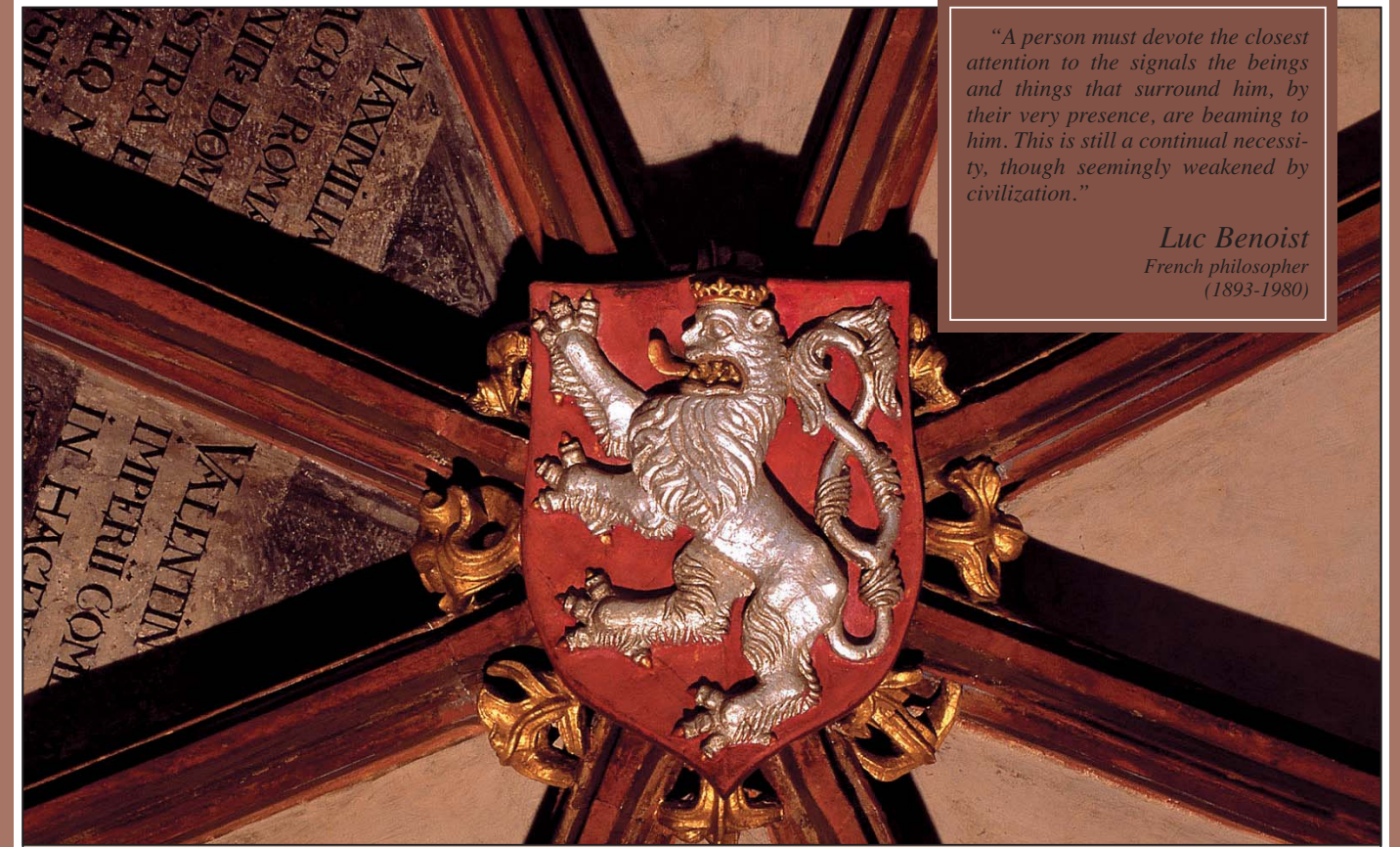
At that time the aristocracy was divided into the lower nobility – the knights – and the higher nobility, the lords. The lords' estate consisted of just a few dozen families and remained a closed group rarely joined by outsiders. In the seventeenth century, the Emperor Ferdinand II took advantage of the uprising and subsequent defeat of the Czech estates to end the traditional practice in the Czech lands. He replaced the ancient Czech aristocratic system with the hierarchical system as it existed in the German lands. The rights of the nobility were curtailed, while the property of many aristocrats was confiscated and then sold or distributed to families not part of the old Czech nobility.

This led to the appearance of Spanish, Irish and French elements in Czech heraldry. Complex compositions proliferated, as original family symbols were joined by those of other families linked by marriage, of estates newly acquired or of great deeds performed.

For example, the famous general Albrecht of Wallenstein began to combine his family shield with those of his estates in Mecklenburg, Frýdlant, Sagan, Wenden, Schwerin, Rostock and Stargard. In Moravia, the escut-

cheon of the Lords of Liechtenstein, originally composed of a simple gold and red divided shield, was updated in the seventeenth century when the Liechtensteins held the principalities of Opava (Troppau) and Krnov in Silesia and boasted family relations with the lords of Kuenring and of East Frisia. Today this coat-of-arms is also used as the great arms of the Principality of Liechtenstein.

Late Gothic coat-of-arms of the Kingdom of Bohemia from the bedroom of King Vladislav in Prague Castle



"A person must devote the closest attention to the signals the beings and things that surround him, by their very presence, are beaming to him. This is still a continual necessity, though seemingly weakened by civilization."

Luc Benoit
French philosopher
(1893-1980)

The most important nobles of that era included the Lobkowitz family, the Eggenbergs and their heirs the Schwarzenbergs, the Slavata family and their heirs the Černíns, the Colloredo-Mansfelds, the Kinskýs, the Dietrichsteins and others. Most of these families enjoyed the title of prince; below them stood the counts, followed by the free lords (barons) and knights.



An example of Renaissance heraldry: the coat-of-arms of Michal Rytršic of Rytršfeld, 1626

The number of new noble titles grew over the years, until by the nineteenth century a title was little more than a decoration bestowed by the state.

The awarding of orders of merit or the completion of a certain number of years in the military was automatically linked with being raised to the nobility. Newly-titled families immediately received complicated coats-of-arms depicting services rendered to the ruling Habsburg dynasty. For example that of the famous painter Václav Brožík, awarded a title in 1897, comprised a star as the symbol of fame and a trio of shields, the centuries-old symbol of the painters' guild.

Over the centuries the real advantages of belonging to the nobility gradually faded, until in 1848 they were limited to the mere existence of a noble title and a coat-of-arms, both protected by law. In the new Czechoslovak Republic after the fall of the monarchy in 1918, the official use



Coats-of-arms of medieval Czech nobles drawings by Petr Tybitancl

of aristocratic titles and coats-of-arms was abolished.

Coats-of-arms of the Czech lands

Around 1175, the princes of the Přemyslid family, who ruled the Czech lands until 1306, began minting coins bearing the figure of a lion. When heraldry was invented this lion wound up on the shield and became the device of Bohemia. The lion is one of the two most popular symbols in European heraldry, the other being the eagle, which the Přemyslids also adopted as a family device at a later date. Sometime during the mid-thirteenth century the Czech lion gained a second tail, just as the eagle in the coat-of-arms of the Holy Roman Empire was given a second head. A silver (or white) two-tailed lion wearing a crown on a red field became the emblem of Bohemia; it was combined with the emblems of Moravia, Silesia and Lusatia, the other lands of the Kingdom of Bohemia at the time. The symbol of Moravia dates to around 1260, and consists of a silver- and red-chequered crowned eagle on a blue field.



with the coat-of-arms of the region's major town.

Coats-of-arms of towns and villages

Besides regional coats-of-arms, there is also a living tradition of municipal coats-of-arms, which caught on later than that of the nobility. Coats-of-arms were awarded to towns by the nobility or the monarch. In many municipal coats-of-arms we find elements of territorial and aristocratic motifs. The most frequent heraldic symbols are castle walls, which symbolize the right of the town to fortify itself. Smaller communities did not enjoy the right to their own coat-of-arms; even so they made use of symbols similar to those of existing heraldry. After 1990 the informal practice of town and village coats-of-arms was given an institutional framework. The Czech Parliament's commission on heraldry (officially the Sub-Committee for Heraldry and Vexillology [the study of flags] of the



Chamber of Deputies) will, upon request, issue to a self-governing municipality a coat-of-arms, which in most cases is rooted in its ancient symbolism and corresponds fully with the rules of heraldry.

Today in the larger towns, the old municipal coats-of-arms are gradually being replaced in public use by logos. Modern logos lack historical roots and symbolic sub-texts; for that reason, however, they are probably better suited to the needs of today.

Jiří J. K. Nebeský
Photos: author, taken from Michal Fiala, Coats-of-arms Documents in the Archives of the National Museum, Jiří Lapáček and Břetislav Passinger, The Bečva River District down the Years, Václav Bednář, Bohumír Indra and Jiří Lapáček, Chroniclers of the Town of Hranice, CzechTourism



Drawing of the seal of the small Moravian town of Drahotuše, 1782



Coat-of-arms of the Moravian town of Hranice, nineteenth century

It is interesting to note that the conflict between Czech and German nationalism in the nineteenth century left its mark on the local heraldry: German-speaking Moravians used the gold- and red-chequerboard eagle awarded to Moravia by the Emperor Frederick III in 1462, while Czech-speaking Moravians refused to recognize the imperial grant and continued to favour the original silver-red chequered eagle. Silesia, most of which became part of Prussia in the eighteenth century, identified itself through the centuries with a crowned black eagle, its breast marked by a silver crescent, on a gold field. Silesia in turn had been divided since the middle ages into a number of duchies that had their own devices.

In 1920 the Republic of Czechoslovakia adopted its own coat-of-arms, in which the lion was accompanied by the small arms of Slovakia, a double cross on three hills.

The coat-of-arms of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1960-1990 represented an attempt at a ra-

dical alteration of the rules of heraldry. Communist ideology claimed to follow in the "Hussite revolutionary tradition", and so the shield was replaced by the pavise, the full-length shield of the Hussite warriors. The traditional crown on the lion's head was replaced by a Communist star, while the emblem of Slovakia was changed completely. After the overthrow of the Communist dictatorship, the state in 1990 returned to the original symbols. Today the official coat-of-arms of the Czech Republic exists in two variants: the small coat-of-arms has only the lion, while the large coat-of-arms combines it with the symbols of Moravia and Silesia.

For centuries the Czech lands were divided into regions, but these were of mostly administrative importance and people did not identify with them. The reform of local government in the Czech Republic in 2000 divided the country into fourteen regions, each of which adopted its own coat-of-arms. Most combine elements of the old territorial device



Provisional coat-of-arms of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1920



Middle-sized coat-of-arms of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1920



An attempt to change the rules of heraldry: the coat-of-arms of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1960



The current coat-of-arms of the Czech Republic, drawing by František Štorm