

**Proceedings of the XXXII
International Congress of Genealogical
and Heraldic Sciences, Glasgow, 2016**

**The Trades Hall, 85 Glassford Street, Glasgow, G1 1UH
10 – 13 August 2016**



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From Original Sin to Pagan Symbol: the Complex Iconography of the Snake, Symbol of Good and Evil

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Few creatures have been perceived in such contrasting ways as the snake. Both vicious predator, and bringer of healing; the wise snake in the Garden of Eden gave Adam and Eve knowledge, and with it the ability to consciously sin.

In the beginning...

Now the serpent was more subtle than all the beasts of the field which God had made.
Genesis 3.1

God said to the serpent following the fall of mankind:

You are cursed above every other animal, upon your belly will you crawl, and eat the dust every day of your life.
Genesis 3.14

Christians came to associate the snake with Satan

1. Emblem of evil

It is to Northern Italy that we owe the genesis of the serpent as an heraldic device. The snake was rarely used as a charge in the medieval period, and the earliest recorded example is the Visconti viper (**Figure 1**), which belongs to the thirteenth century.¹ The Visconti were viscounts of Milan from the eleventh century. Their reason for adopting the snake has been lost in the mists of time. Michel Pastoureau has pointed out that the family were lords of Anguaria, and suggested that this was a canting device from the latin *anguis*, meaning serpent.² This attractive hypothesis cannot be the whole story. Their snake is devouring a naked human, and the message being given out seems clear: do not mess with us, we consume our enemies whole! The family lived up to their arms, the surname becoming a byword for cruelty and ruthlessness. The French word *bisse* is sometimes used for such a snake, signifying a serpent-



Figure 1 *Visconti*

monster.³ Later on attempts were made to mollify and justify the imagery of the Visconti serpent. Two stories were invented. In one, the snake is eating an enemy Saracen; while in the other, the evil reptile ingested a Visconti child while the head of the family was away fighting the infidel. He returned home and rescued his progeny. Either way the snake does not come out well, here is the feared predator of humankind.

The Visconti viper inspired various coats-of-arms recorded in the *Grünenberg Wappenbuch* of 1483, a source which also included a number of attributed arms containing snakes, including two for kings of India and one for Egypt.⁴ Among the authentic serpent arms are those of von Gara, *azure a snake belching flames or* and of Hassendorf, *or a snake sable*, both stylistically similar to those of Visconti. There were several Hassendorfs, one in Schleswig-Holstein, one of Saxony and one in Austria. Clemmensen considers the latter to be the most likely place of origin.⁵ More will be said of the Gara arms presently.

A rather different medieval example of the evil snake occurs in the arms of Whitby Abbey in Yorkshire. The cliffs on which the abbey stands are rich in ammonites, and anyone who walks along the beach today will see examples. A local legend was that the ammonites were snakes which had been turned to stone by St Hilda (d.680), Abbess of Whitby.⁶ It is uncertain whether this legend arose before or after the monastery placed three ammonites on its arms, giving them the heads of snakes. Pilgrims purchased the fossils with snake heads carved on, to enhance their authenticity.

The virtue of killing a snake as a personification of evil goes back to the legends of St George, who defeated and killed a colossal snake. There is an overlap between giant snakes and dragons, dragons being "the greatest kind of serpents".⁷ Certain birds were reputed to have a particular antipathy towards snakes, and to be frequently successful at destroying them. The eagle was said to be "always at war with serpents". Storks are equally well known as snake hunters, for which reason in Thessaly it was at one time illegal to kill a stork.⁸ The ibis fulfills the same function in Egypt. The depiction of these three birds defeating snakes have become widespread on both shields and crests. An interesting example is the coat of arms of Mexico dating back to the empire of 1864-67, and later incorporated into the national flag. An eagle sits on a cactus devouring a serpent. To the Spanish this represented triumph over evil. It is based on the legend that the Aztecs chose to found what is now Mexico City at a place where a golden eagle, equated with the sun god Huitzilopochtli, landed on a cactus. The eating of the snake by the eagle is based on a mis-translation of Aztec legend. To the native Indians the serpent represented the sun god's earth mother, and also wisdom. They would not have liked the image of the sun god eating his mother. The native American belief in the snake as an embodiment of mother earth and regeneration was shared by the Incas of Peru, and a modern shield has been invented for the Incas which has a rainbow connecting the mouths of two snakes.

In Spain a common charge was the cauldron, emblematic of the ability of a nobleman to feed his dependents. In the sixteenth century *Armorial Le Blancq* are examples of such Spanish cauldrons containing serpents.⁹ The great family of Guzman, later dukes of Medina Sidonia (Figure 2), is variously given cauldrons with and without serpents.¹⁰

Snakes are not much eaten in Spain, but they do form a part of traditional Mexican Indian cuisine, and the insertion of snakes into the cauldrons appears to post-date the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521. The placing of the snake in the cauldron is presumably another way of depicting triumph over evil, perhaps in the sense of the "evil" snake-worshipping native Americans.

In the fifteenth century one of the fifteen noble tribes of Gwynedd in North Wales, that descended from Ednywain ap Bradwen, were given the attributed arms *gules three serpents interlaced in a triangular knot argent*.¹¹ No legend survives concerning the origin of the arms, but presumably the knotting of the snakes is intended to signify that they are in a state of captivity. In similar fashion Cermisona of Verona bore *argent four serpents interlaced in the form of a cross gringolé*.¹²

Snakes are not uncommon as a charge in Irish heraldry, even though snakes do not exist on that island, having been expelled, according to folklore, by St Patrick. One such example is *argent a chevron gules between three snakes vert*, for Cotter of Rockforest in Ireland, created baronets in 1763.¹³ The O'Connor Don bears a crest of a snake being smitten by a sword. An Elizabethan English herald invented a shield *argent three snakes embowed vert* for a fictitious Irish family, the barons of Idrone in County Carlow, to complement a fictitious pedigree of the Carew family who needed to establish title to the barony.¹⁴

A slightly disreputable aspect of the snake which does not appear to have found its way into heraldry is its association with fertility. The serpent was a form taken by the god Jupiter. Plutarch recorded a fable that Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great, was impregnated by Jupiter in his guise of the snake. Topsell in his popular seventeenth-century bestiary recorded male fantasies of virgins being ravaged by snakes.¹⁵ Indeed the German word for snake, *schlange*, has given rise through Yiddish to a similar slang word in the English language meaning the male member. We cannot exclude the possibility that some nobleman or other who adopted the snake for arms might have wished to celebrate his virility.

On the subject of original sin, numerous families have chosen to allude to the sin of Adam in eating the apple in the Garden of Eden, by having a serpent wrapped around an apple tree, or more simply, around an apple. Some such examples are effectively



Figure 2 Dukedom of Medina Sidonia

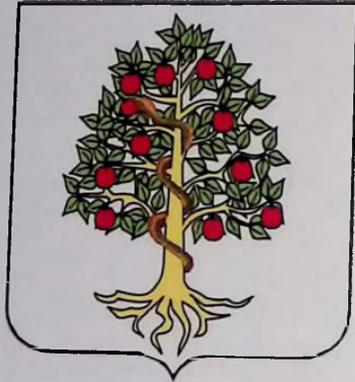


Figure 3 Adam of Saxony

canting arms: Adam of Saxony (Figure 3) has argent an apple tree surrounded by a serpent holding in its jaws an apple, all proper; Apfel of Austria and Appelman of Amsterdam both have something similar.¹⁶ From Switzerland the families surnamed Adam have taken the Book of Genesis as their theme. Adam of St Gallen adopted *azure a golden apple wrapped in a snake argent*; Adam of Cornol *gules on a bend argent between two apples or a snake ondoyant azure*, and Adam of Le-Chaux-de-Fonds took *Adam and Eve standing below an apple tree talking to a snake suspended therefrom*. Eve hold an apple, while Adam holds a shovel, perhaps undecided as to how best to deal with the snake.

2. Emblem of Good.

In 1416 Nicholas II von Gara (d.1434) Count Palatine of Hungary was on his way to England with his brother-in-law Sigismund, King of Germany and Hungary better identified as (d. 1437) **King of Hungary and Bohemia, future Holy Roman Emperor**, to attend a peace conference in Canterbury. While Gara was in Paris, under the joint authority of Sigismund and of Charles VI of France, he was granted an exemplification of his arms *azure a crowned snake or, holding in its mouth a golden orb*.¹⁷ (Figure 4 a, b) Gara was Sigismund's right hand man in Hungary, created a founder knight of the Order of the Dragon in 1408. The count's snake is protecting the royal orb and must therefore be regarded as beneficent. The tomb which his father the Palatine Nicholas I von Gara (d.1386), commissioned for himself in the Augustinian church at Siklos shows different arms of *two crowned snakes entwined and regardant, each carrying in the mouth a sphere*. It might be unwise to assume that the spheres were orbs. They might have been apples, or pearls. As to whether the snakes were fighting, or supporting each other, we can only speculate. The version recorded much later in the Grünenberg Wappenbuch with the snake belching flames is perhaps an evolution connected with membership of the Order of the Dragon.

We must return to north Italy for the next phase of the evolution of the snake as an heraldic symbol, a development inspired by the Milanese lawyer Andrea Alciato (d.1551). Alciato revived ancient sources for the study of law, and was famous for his book of emblems, first published in Augsburg in 1531, in which he utilised classical mythology to produce enjoyable combinations of poetry and iconography.¹⁸ It quickly became a source of inspiration for those wishing to design their own coat-of-arms, a practice which was encouraged by Claude Mignault's new introduction to the 1577 edition, entitled: "a treatise on symbols; on the theory of coats of arms and figures which are commonly called insignia or family badges; and on emblems." He cited numerous examples of how the ancient Greeks and Romans used what he believed to be

heraldry, giving as an example Alexander the Great's use of the horn of Amun. This was actually a ram's horn, but he took to be a snake, used by Alexander because the Egyptian priests told him that he was fathered by Jupiter-Ammon in the form of a snake.¹⁹

Alciato co-dedicated his book to a friend from Augsburg with whom he had studied law at Padua, and to the "illustrious "Maximilian, duke of Milan. This was Maximilian Sforza (d.1530), whose arms were illustrated as being the snake inherited from the Visconti dukes of



Figure 4a Gara

Figure 4b Gara

Milan. The snake appears in numerous guises in the emblemata, encompassing virtually all of its classical associations, and its frequent illustration in the book is undoubtedly a mark of respect to the dukes of Milan.

One of the most important classical allusions of the snake is as the attribute of Asklepius of Epidaurus, god of medicine, traditionally shown winding itself around a rod. The snake clearly found favour with the medical graduates of the University of Padua, then the premier place to study medicine, attracting scholars from all over Europe. At the medical school can be seen many examples of the snake in arms from the sixteenth century. One of their number was the Englishman John Caius (d. 1573) who was at Padua from 1539 to 1544. He was a close friend of the Swiss naturalist and physician Conrad Gesner, who wrote a book on serpents. Caius made contributions to Gesner's books on natural history, being a distinguished anatomist and friend of the father of medical anatomy, Andreas Vesalius, with whom he shared a house in Padua.²⁰ Following his return to England Caius was asked by King Henry VIII in 1546 to begin anatomical demonstrations for the Barber-Surgeons of London, which he continued for the next twenty years. He was a noted scholar of the Roman physician Galen, himself a devotee of Asklepius. He became president of the Royal College of Physicians, to which he presented a silver rod topped with four snakes in 1556. He also re-founded Gonville Hall in Cambridge as Gonville & Caius College, for which another snake wand was created in 1558. His personal grant of arms of 1561 (Figure 5) included two snakes as its most conspicuous feature.

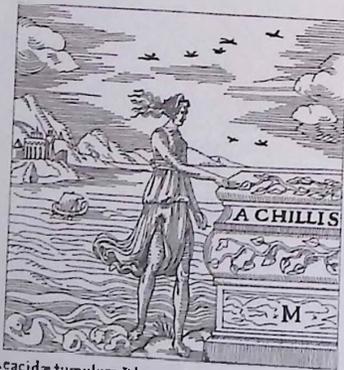
He took as his source of inspiration for these arms a very recent edition of Alciato's Emblems, published in Paris in 1558. The field of the shield is of purple amaranths on a gold field, which he placed at the top of the 1558 wand given to Gonville Hall.



Figure 5 Caius arms

Amaranths are a type of everlasting flower representing immortality according to an emblem by Alciatus first published in Venice in 1546, but the woodcuts which inspired Caius first appeared in the 1558 edition. Amaranths were placed on the tomb of Achilles to show that the honour of his fame would never die. (Figure 6) Caius' own tomb, which he designed himself, is not dissimilar to that of Achilles, and also has an amaranth above it. In the centre of the Caius shield are two snakes adorsed, their tails knotted together, taken from the frontis of the 1558 edition. (Figure 7) They rest on a green stone, inspired by another woodcut from the same edition, showing Asklepius as an erect serpent on an altar stone. (Figure 8) At the temples of Asklepius in Epidaurus non-venomous snakes were released during the night to bring healing to sleeping supplicants. The snake as a symbol of healing is partly a consequence of its connection with mother earth and the healing power of nature. In the letters patent granting arms to Dr Caius their symbolism is elucidated, which is an extremely rare occurrence. Here the snakes are said to represent wisdom, which comes not from Alciato, but from the Bible; Jesus said "be wise as serpents" (Matthew 10:16).

Strenuorum immortale nomen.



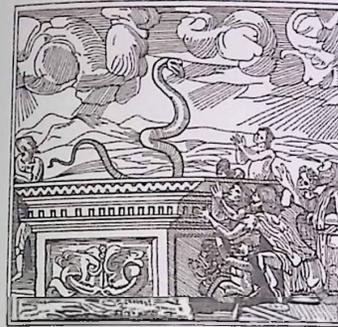
Acacidæ tumulum Rhœtæo in littore cernis,
Quem plerunque pedes visitat alba Thetis.
Obtegitur semper viridi lapis hic amarantho,
Quod nunquam heros sit moriturus honos.

Figure 6 Alciato 1558 amaranths



Figure 7 Alciato 1558 frontis

Salus publica.



Phœbigena erectis Epidaurius infidet aris,
Mitis, & immani conditur augue Deus.
Accurrunt ægri, veniârque salutifer orant:
Annuit, atque ratas efficit ille preces.

Figure 8 Alciato 1558 Asklepius



Figure 9 Froben

Sir William Cavendish (d.1557) a prominent Protestant at the court of King Henry VIII, ancestor of the Dukes of Devonshire, and participant with Thomas Cromwell in the destruction of the English monasteries, certainly had the Bible in mind when he chose the snake as his crest.

Caius' snakes support a book between them, to denote learning, and on their heads hold aloft the sempervivum, a medicinal plant which, like the amaranth, represented immortality. The combined message of these various elements was that through the foundation stone of learning wisdom can be achieved which lead to immortal fame.

Alciato's own personal favourite device, of which more later, was the caduceus with its entwined snakes, which was carved on his tomb at Pavia.²¹ He was not the first to use it, John Froben of Basel (d.1527), the friend and publisher of Erasmus, having used a version topped with a bird from 1519²² (Figure 9). The caduceus with its two embattled snakes wound around a rod was borne by the god Hermes-Mercury. It is illustrated three times in the 1558 Emblems, and from the sixteenth century onwards became increasingly popular in use on coats of arms across Europe. Alciato in his emblem *Virtuti Fortuna Comes* stated that the caduceus signified how wealth blesses men of powerful intellect who are skilled in speaking. (Figure 10)

The caduceus is one of the most ancient symbols still in use. It can be found in Sumerian art from four thousand years ago, being an attribute of the god Ningishzida, about whom little is known. In the Louvre is a famous green steatite vase carved for King Gudea of Lagash which bears the caduceus. The god and the caduceus were passed down to the Babylonians and then the Hittites, and became an attribute of the



Figure 10 Alciato Paris 1539

Greek messenger god Hermes, who is presumed to have shared certain attributes of Ningishzida. The interlocked snakes were said to stand for two embattled armies, and the central rod the voice of reason keeping them apart.²³ When the ancients observed two snakes thus preoccupied they did not necessarily realise that this is how snakes reproduce.²⁴ According to Aelian's Natural History snakes were generated from the backbones of dead men.²⁵

Although Alciato knew exactly how a caduceus should be represented, his contemporaries remained confused on the subject. Neither of the two so-called caducei created for Caius should correctly have been called such. They both have four uncrossed snakes around a rod, their heads supporting a shield. In the case of the Gonville & Caius College caduceus (Figure 11) the snakes are very similar to those on the Caius arms, but turned outwards, whereas those on the College of Physicians version are irregularly coiled. In calling them caducei he wished to attribute to them the power which they possessed in the emblem *Virtuti Fortuna Comes*. Each of Caius' two caducei has a unique symbolism. For the College of Physicians the snakes must be seen as standing for medicine. On the Gonville & Caius caduceus the snakes, here standing for wisdom rather than medicine, carry on their heads a shield semy of amaranths, giving a symbolism close to that found on the grant of arms.

When the London apothecaries wished to set up their own guild in the early seventeenth-century they were fiercely opposed by the College of Physicians. Their arms, granted in 1617 have Apollo, the "inventor of physic", trampling a huge snake or dragon, said to



Figure 11 Caius caduceus

represent the evil of disease. It might equally be said to represent the evil of the College of Physicians, whose President carried the snake as a wand of office!

Of similar date, the arms of the Guild of Barber Surgeons of Dresden show two hands grasping a caduceus which is topped with a fleur de lis.²⁶ Such usages have resulted in both the caduceus and the rod of Asklepius being linked to medicine. Mythologically there is some justification for linking the caduceus to medicine. By the time of Herodotus, Hermes, messenger of the gods and conductor of souls, had become equated with the Egyptian god Thoth, god of medicine. The use of the caduceus by the medical profession has now become firmly entrenched, with many hospitals and medical corps having adopted this device. As an attribute of Hermes it is frequently used as a metaphor for communication and industry, reflecting the more traditional associations of that god. The caduceus has become increasingly popular with the passage of time. One of the many who adopted it was the French composer Jean Baptiste Lully (d.1687), who came not from a medical family, but from a Milanese family of millers.²⁷

Another aspect of the snake occurs in Alciato's emblem "immortality won through literary pursuits". Here the snake was depicted biting its own tail. This is the Greek Ouroboros, a snake which consumed itself and was reborn in an endless cycle, symbolising immortality. The regular shedding of a snake's skin is another aspect which made the ancients link it to rebirth, transformation, immortality and healing. Both the skin and the snake itself were used as medical cures. The Ouroboros appears in many coats of arms. Examples include Cronstedt, created baron of Sweden in 1718, and Cabestany of Rousillon in France where the snake encircles a Moor's head.²⁸ The latter seems intended to imply immortal fame achieved in crusade against the Moors.

3. Canting snakes.

There are some examples of snakes used as canting arms, for instance Jean Baptiste Colbert (d.1683) the finance minister of Louis XIV bore *or a couleuvre (grass snake) ondoyant in pale azure*.²⁹ But perhaps he was granted the arms because he was a good adder (**comptoir**)! The Snakenborg family of Sweden bore the arms *azure on a bend or a snake ondoyant gules* from the fourteenth century, as shown by the seal of Gerhard Snakenborg (d. bef 1402).³⁰ One of the last members of this family, Helena Snakenborg (d.1635) became a lady in waiting to Queen Elizabeth I of England, and ultimately Marchioness of Northampton.

A final, somewhat surprising example of snake heraldry is that of Spielenberg of Levoca in Slovakia, *sable a lion rampant or, wrapped around the lion's neck a snake vert, crowned or* (Figure 12). At first sight the snake appears to be strangling the lion, a strange metaphor for a family of doctors. The arms were granted to the physician Samuel Spielenberg in 1615, and can still be seen today on the front of the house in Samuel Spielenberg in 1615, and can still be seen today on the front of the house in Samuel Spielenberg, another doctor, in 1677.³¹ The Levoca built by Samuel's son David Spielenberg, another doctor, in 1677.³¹ The snake is in fact benign, he represents medicine, and acts as a friendly guide for the lion.

Figure 12 *Spielenberg*

Notes

1. Edward Burman, *The Visconti*, being chapter 1 of *Italian dynasties*, Frome 1989.
2. Michel Pastoureaux. *L'art héraldique au Moyen Age*, Paris 2009 pp 207, 226.
3. Gerard Brault. *Early Blazon*, 2nd ed, Woodbridge 1997 p.129.
4. Steen Clemmensen, Conrad Grünenberg's *Wappenbuch* nos 651 and 1118. www.armorial.dk, nos 249, 253 and 340. The latter is not labelled but known from other sources.
5. Clemmensen, Grünenberg op cit nos 651, 1118.
6. James Parker. *A glossary of terms used in heraldry*, London 1894, p. 529.
7. Topsell *A history of four footed beasts and serpents*, London 1658 p.591.
8. Topsell op cit pp. 609-10.
9. Clemmensen *Ordinary*, Gauna 1, Herrecuelo 1.
10. Clemm *Ord Guzman* 1.
11. Michael Siddons. *The development of Welsh heraldry* vol 2 p.131.
12. J.B.Rietstap. *Armorial Général* vol 1 p.394.
13. Rietstap vol 1 p 470, *Burke's Peerage* 1869 ed p.245.
14. J. Horace Round. *The origins of Carew*. *The Ancestor* vol 5 (1903) pp.19-53.
15. Topsell p.594.
16. Rietstap vol 1 pp.8, 57.

17. Stanko Andric. *The noble Garay (Gorjanski) family: an outline political history*. *Zbornik Muzeja Dakovštine* 2015 pp.7-40. Ivan Bojnicic. *Der Adel von Kroatien und Slavonien*, Nürnberg 1899 p.50, plate 37.
18. All the important editions of Alciato can be viewed online at www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/.
19. Claude Mignault. *Omnia Andreae Alciati emblamata*, Antwerp 1577 p.35.
20. Vivian Nutton. *John Caius (1510-73)* *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
21. H.Green. *Andrea Alciati and his book of emblems*, London 1872 p. v.
22. Charles Heckethorn. *The printers of Basle in the 15th and 16th centuries*, London 1897 pp. 87-112.
23. Topsell p.627.
24. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXIX.12
25. Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* I.51.
26. Gustav.Seyler. *Berufswappen*, Nürnberg 1898 p.45 plate 52. The Guild's seal is attested in 1663.
27. Rietstap vol 2 p. 111.
28. Rietstap. Vol 1 pp. 350,490.
29. John Woodward, *A treatise on heraldry*, London 1896, vol 1, p.289.
30. Henrik Klackenbergh. *Hästholme, Medeltidsstaden* 59, Stokholm 1984.
31. Geza Csergheo. *Wappenbuch des Adels von Ungarn*, Nürnberg 1885-7, p 595, plate 422.