

On the Symbolism of the Arms of John Caius and of the College Caduceus

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Fig. 1 The Grant of arms of January 1561

The Description

'**Golde semyed with flowre gentle** [the Amaranth], in the myddle of the cheyfe, sengrene [the Houseleek] resting upon the heades of ii serpents in pale, their tayles knytte together, all in proper color, resting upon a square marble stone vert, betwene their brests a boke sable garnyshed gewles, buckles gold'.

The Explanation

'Betokening by the boke, lerning; by the ii serpents resting upon the square marble stone, wisdom with grace founded and stayed upon vertues stable stone; by sengrene and flower gentle, immortalite yt never shall fade; as though thus I shulde saye, ex prudentia et literis, virtutis petra firmatis, immortalitas; that is to say, by wisdom and lerning graffed in grace and vertue men cum to immortalite'.

IT HAS often been observed that John Caius brought back with him from Italy an abiding love of symbolism, and his own grant of arms is one of the best examples of it. Caius left us an explanation of his splendid grant for all posterity to see, but fascinating as the explanation is it does not do full justice to the cleverness of its conception. Moreover, there is much which the design can tell us about the influences and interests of a distinguished son of the Renaissance.

John Venn observed that Caius probably designed the coat himself, arguing that it is unlikely to have been at the behest of a herald that the grant of arms contained such an explanation of its elements.¹ There are, however, even better reasons for believing Caius to be the author. Not least of these is the fact that in 1558, having obtained his new letters patent of foundation, he presented to the College a caduceus bearing two of the components which were later to appear on the shield.

The design of the caduceus is curious. It departs substantially from the Mercurial winged rod entwined with two serpents, which was so uniformly depicted in sixteenth-century art.² Caius' version has no wings, but four small snakes at the very end of the rod, not intertwined, supporting on their heads a shield. It has been argued that he ordered a standard Mercurial caduceus, but that the silversmith was unfamiliar with the correct form.³ A caduceus of virtually identical design, however, though clearly wrought by another hand, was presented by him to the College of Physicians in 1556. Such deliberate modification demands explanation.

The caduceus had two classical roles; apart from representing the god of art and eloquence himself, it was also the herald's staff of embassy. In the former context, the rod was said to symbolise eloquence of speech, and the snakes, wisdom.⁴ In the latter context, the two serpents, winding and crooking into each other along the length of the staff, stood for two embattled armies which assailed the upright understanding of the rod.⁵ The uncoiling of the embattled snakes dispels their belligerent connotations, so that they can only represent wisdom. The rod itself could signify both perfect and upright reason and the ability to express it. This would explain why Caius presented the caduceus to the Master of the College with the words 'We give you the rod of prudent governance'.

The wings at the top of the caducei were replaced by shields, which attached the wands to the institutions to which they belonged instead of to Mercury. The shield which surmounts the earlier caduceus is naturally the one which was granted to the College of Physicians in 1546, but the corresponding device on our caduceus is charged with a simple field of amarantus. Such a field was later to form the basis of the grant to Dr. Caius.



Fig. 2 The Caduceus

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It seems probable that the source of his inspiration was a book which at that time enjoyed an enormous popularity, although less so in England than on the Continent. The appeal of this book of emblems by Andreas Alciatus (1492–1550), published in a hundred and sixty-nine editions in various languages, was founded on the subtle and clever use to which he put the varied classical themes so well known to contemporary men of letters.⁶ Each emblem consisted of a simple illustration, beneath which, and forming an essential part of it, was an explanatory epigram.

It was in imitation of Alciatus that Caius devised his arms and gave them their own epigram. An emblem entitled 'The immortal fame of the vigorous' is especially interesting since the colour green, a marble stone and the amaranth are used together, as on the Caius arms, in a context of immortality. The epigram reads: 'You see the tomb of Achilles on the Trojan shore, which Thetis usually visits on foot. This stone is always covered by green amaranth, because the honour of the hero will never die. Here is the wall of the Greeks, the slayer of great Hector. He and Homer are equally indebted to one another'. Another emblem shows a serpent sitting erect upon an altar stone in representation of Asklepius. Here the epigram explains: 'Asklepius of Epidaurus, mild by character, dwells on the altars that have been set up, taking the form of a huge snake. The sick run to him, and pray to him that he will come bringing health. He consents, and makes their prayers effective'. (Fig. 3)

The emblems illustrated are taken from the finest and most widely circulated editions of Alciatus, published by Roville at Lyons from 1548 to 1566. In the address to the reader at the beginning of the book the publisher extols the virtue of the splendid woodcuts by Solomon Bernard, and suggests that they be copied, among other things, for wall paintings and arms.

If Caius was so interested in this book then it is pertinent to ask why he did not die possessed of a copy, which he could have bequeathed to our College Library. It is clear that Caius owned certain books during his life which were not recorded in his will and inventory.⁷ He apparently liked to lend them out or to give them away so that others might have the benefit of them. There is a false tradition that Caius was a royal physician, first traceable to a reference of 1590.⁸ This misconception is most likely to have arisen as a result of a mistaken inference drawn by a person who knew Caius to have been closely connected with the royal court. Perhaps then it was he who gave a copy of the 1549 Roville edition in Italian to the ailing boy King Edward VI.

Each constituent of the shield would have been chosen for the various associations which it made in Caius' mind, some of which can be conjectured from our knowledge of where his main interests lay. He was, for instance, a keen zoologist, and a close friend and fellow

Fig. 3 Two plates from the Roville edition of Alciatus. These particular emblems were first published in 1546. The tomb of Achilles as depicted here is not at all dissimilar to the base of Caus' own tomb, which also has above it some crude but clearly recognisable amarantus.

Salus publica.



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

H O N O R.
Strenuorum immortale nomen.



Acacidæ tumulum Rhœtæo in littore cernis,
Quem plerunque pedes visitat alba Thetis.
Obtegitur semper viridi lapis hic amarantho,
Quòd nunquam herois fit moriturus honos.
Hic Graium murus, magni nex Hectoris, Haud plus
Debet Mæonidæ, quam fibi Mæonides.

worker of the great zoologist Conrad Gesner of Zürich (1516–1565).⁹ So we should expect to find something of relevance in the Natural Histories of Pliny and Aelian, which Caius possessed, and in the writings of Gesner.

The writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite clearly struck a chord with Caius, as these were among the few theological works which he owned in his later life, and he carefully stipulated that they should go to the College on his death. The pseudo-Dionysius was the chief source of the idea, taken up especially by the Florentine Christian Platonists, that all natural objects had a hidden meaning given to them by God as a means of teaching man the secrets of the Universe. The tales and images of the ancients which, being close to the act of creation, contained some of these secrets, were deemed to be similarly meaningful.¹⁰

With this in mind, let us now look at the various classical and Renaissance sources for the elements of the shield.

The green marble stone. This item is one of three that Caius chose which are not surprisingly unique in English heraldry. It appears to be a combination of the two emblems from Alciatus which have already been described. The idea of the Asklepiian snake resting on a marble altar has become fused with the marble tomb of Achilles, covered in amaranths, and signifying immortality. The choice of green then makes perfect sense, because the amaranths were perpetually green and so their colour in the emblem reminds us that they never die. A cube shaped stone upon which Mercury sits in another one of Alciatus' emblems represents 'the good arts', and perhaps this reinforced in Caius' mind the stone's attribute of virtue. Caius dedicated his College foundation stone to the increase of virtue and scholarship.¹¹

The snakes. The snake was intimately involved in the healing rites in the temples of Asklepius of Epidaurus and so stands for medicine.¹² Galen, whose texts Caius spent so much time collating in the libraries of Europe, was a devotee of the god. Just as in the shield a snake supports the houseleek on its head, so at Epidaurus the great statue of Asklepius rested its hand on a serpent in similar fashion.¹³

Need we therefore look any further for the meaning of the snakes? Failure to do so would be a grave mistake, since Pindar wrote a very popular ode about Asklepius and immortality. Pindar's poetry, which many well educated men of Caius' time would have read, must surely have been recollected by Caius, the noted scholar of Greek literature, when he was reading Alciatus. In this, the Third Pythian Ode, Asklepius tries to bring back a man from death, and is struck down by Zeus with a thunderbolt for his temerity. The conclusion of the poem matches closely the emblem on Achilles which it inspired: fame rests on poetry (that is, on literary skill) by which virtue is immortalised. Pindar cites Achilles as a classic example of this dictum.¹⁴

Conrad Gesner tells us in his 'De serpentium natura' that he had heard of a snake living about Padua (where Caius took his M.D.), and in many other parts of Italy, which was said to be so harmless that people could take it into their hands. This, he says, must be the snake anciently sacred to Asklepius. He goes on to describe its colour: grey upper surface, 'whitish-green' beneath. Interestingly, he refers his readers to Alciatus' emblem on Asklepius, and to another emblem in which a snake represents immortality.¹⁵ Modern descriptions of *Elaphe longissima*, the Asklepiian Snake, do not differ much from that of Gesner. It grows up to two metres in length, and does indeed have light-grey topside with a pale yellowish belly. This very adept climber is found in Greece and Italy, and is easy to catch since it tends to remain stationary when found. Furthermore it has no poison glands, and can be quite quickly tamed in captivity, even to the extent of appearing to enjoy being handled.¹⁶

Caius may well have seen these creatures and discussed them with Gesner. He would thus have taken care to have them painted correctly on his grant of arms. There is an amusing story that he considered an animal which he saw not to be an elk because Caesar had said that the beast had no joints: for him the ancient authorities clearly took precedence over modern observation.¹⁷ He would therefore have depicted the snakes as the ancients described them. The old authorities seem to favour a yellowish colour, and indeed entirely yellowish-white variants are known to occur, and would presumably have been especially venerated and propagated. Pausanias writes that a form of the snake which occurred only at Epidaurus was entirely yellow in colour; Pliny alludes to their immortality; while Aelian says the snakes were 'flame-like yellow', or so he had read.¹⁸

It was customary in the sixteenth century for heraldic snakes to be painted green, as in the later grant of arms to the College made in 1575, after Caius' death.¹⁹ In the original grant to Caius himself, however, the snakes are mysteriously painted white, with a small strip of green along their upper surfaces. This is intelligible if we accept that Caius believed the creatures to be whitish-yellow in colour. On a gold background the snakes could not be painted yellow, so white was the next best thing. The strip of green was perhaps added by the herald to prevent a serious breach of contemporary heraldic conventions.

*The sempervivum, sengrene, great houseleek, or Jupiter's beard.*²⁰ The plant is represented on the shield as a basal rosette of succulent leaves. Pliny and Aelian both considered sengrene to be immortal because it seemed to keep on growing endlessly through summer and winter. The Elizabethans knew it as a medicinal plant useful for inflammations (for which purpose indeed my great-grandmother still used it), especially for the eyes; for shingles and for St. Anthony's fire. Galen apparently recommended it for the 'rheumes and fluxes'. We know it today as *Sempervivum tectorum*. (Fig. 4).

The amaranth or floramor. Another symbol of immortality, this plant was also occasionally used medicinally as an astringent, a diuretic and for 'the bitinges of serpents'. In addition to this it became an enormously popular garden plant during the sixteenth century, a fashion which rapidly spread across Europe to England. Pliny gave a very good account of it: 'Without doubt no effort of ours can compete with the amaranth. Yet it is more truly a purple ear than a flower, and is itself without scent. A wonderful thing about it is that it likes to be plucked, growing again more luxuriant than ever. It comes out in August and lasts into the Autumn. Its special characteristic is implied in its name, because it will not wither'.²¹

The name amaranth has been applied to a variety of different plants, but the form it takes on the grant bears a close resemblance to the first good English drawing of the 'purple amaranth', in Gerard's Herbal of 1597; and both can be matched with a plant which is found in India. The species to which it belongs has now become a cultivated sport, and this unfortunately makes an already complex taxonomy even more difficult. Mr. C. Townsend of the Royal Botanic Gardens, and specialist on this group of plants, advises me that Gerard's *amaranthus purpureus* was probably what is now *Celosia argentea* L. *fa. cristata* (L.) Schinz., in the form which Linnaeus called *coccinea* (Fig. 5). Linnaeus' *Celosia coccinea* probably spread throughout the Ancient Greek world, with other varieties of amaranth, as a legacy of Alexander's conquests in Asia, and moved into an ever harsher northern environment from the Mediterranean during the Renaissance.²²

A part of the skill of the shield's design lies in the way that each constituent, except the book, has at least a dual symbolism. The plants, for instance, simultaneously represent both medicine and immortality. The conjunction of the snakes, the stone and the amaranth gives the basic message that virtue through the written word is immortalised. The addition of other elements modifies the message, and leads us to read the shield like one of the cartouches of hieroglyphics which the Christian Platonists saw as so full of ancient wisdom.

If the shield is looked at in this way, the stone at the base, whose attributes of virtue and permanence have now been explained, forms an appropriate foundation stone for our College. Supported by this ageless monument are the Asklepien snakes. Symbols of Caius' vocation, they also chart out the path which he himself followed, and which he exhorts others to follow. The basis of all is a kind of virtue which the College is designed to instil.²³ It leads us to the desire to obtain wisdom by the reading of books. The central position of the book on the shield is a sign that literary pursuits were the central activity of the life of John Caius, and also of the College. Finally, the snakes hold aloft the prize which such enterprise can produce as a crowning wreath, immortality.

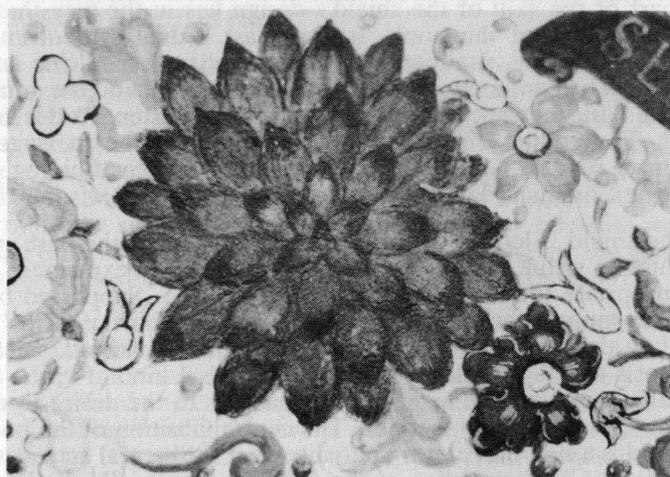


Fig. 4 Above: The Sengrene from the border of the Grant. Below: *Sempervivum tectorum calcareum*.



Amaranthus Purpureus.
Purple flower Gentle.

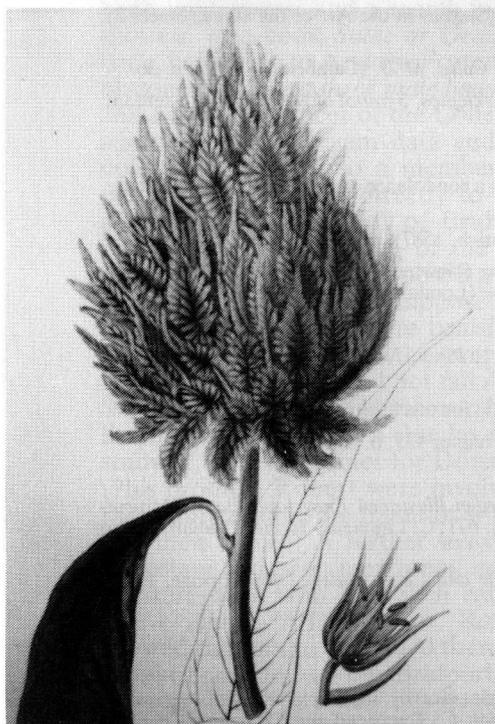


Fig. 5 Above: An amaranth from the Grant of Arms. Below left: *Celosia coccinea* as depicted in the Botanical Register of 1836. Below right: *Amaranthus* from John Gerard's Herbal.

Notes

1. J. Venn, *Caius College* (London, 1901), p. 63.
2. H. Green, *Andrea Alciati and his Book of Emblems* (London, 1872), Preface; A. C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, revised by J. P. Brooke-Little (Chichester, 1985), p. 193.
3. G. N. Clark, *History of the Royal College of Physicians*, I (London, 1964), p. 105.
4. See the emblem 'Virtuti Fortuna Comes' in Alciatus (n. 6).
5. Suidas' encyclopaedic *Greek Lexicon*, a standard work of reference during the Renaissance, quotes this from the Scholia on Thucydides, 1, 53.1.
6. A. Alciatus, *Emblematum liber* (Augsburg, 1531 and Venice, 1546). The two were combined in 1547. See H. Green, *Andrea Alciati and his book of Emblems* (London, 1872).
7. P. Grierson, 'John Caius' Library' in *Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College*, VII (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 521, 523.
8. I owe this information to Dr. Vivian Nutton of the Wellcome Institute.
9. C. E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Neckham to Ray* (Cambridge, 1942), Chapter 8.
10. E. H. J. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (Studies in the Art of the Renaissance, 2), London, 1972.
11. J. Venn, Introd. to *The Works of John Caius, M.D.* (Cambridge, 1912), p. 30.
12. J. Schouten, *The Rod and Serpent of Asklepios, Symbol of Medicine* (Amsterdam, 1967).
13. Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae* II, 27.
14. The ode was written about 474 B.C., as a condolence to Hieron, King of Syracuse, during a severe illness.
15. C. Gesner, *Historia Animalium*, V (Zürich, 1587), pp. 22, 26-7.
16. J. W. Steward, *The Snakes of Europe* (Newton Abbot, 1971); D. Street, *The Reptiles of Northern and Central Europe* (London, 1979).
17. Raven, *English Naturalists*, p. 145.
18. Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae* II, 28.1; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXIX, 4, 72; Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* VIII, 12.
19. I am indebted to Mr. John Brooke-Little for this information.
20. J. Gerard, *Herbal*, 1st Edition, 1597, Chapter 135, p. 411.
21. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* XXI, 47.
22. T. H. Everett, *New York Botanic Garden Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Horticulture*, II (New York & London, 1981), p. 671; C. Linnaeus, *Species Plantarum*, 2nd Edition (Vienna, 1764), p. 297.
23. C. N. L. Brooke *A History of Gonville and Caius College* (Woodbridge, 1985), pp. 65-7.

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