



Heraldry in Ireland

There are three discernible strands within Irish heraldry: Norman, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish.

When the Normans arrived in 1169 they brought with them the new science of heraldry which was then in the process of adoption and evolution throughout Europe. The heraldry of Hiberno-Norman families is typical of early military heraldry. It had a simplicity of design which facilitated recognition of combatants in armour both on the battlefield and in the tournament.



Burke



Barry



Fitzgerald

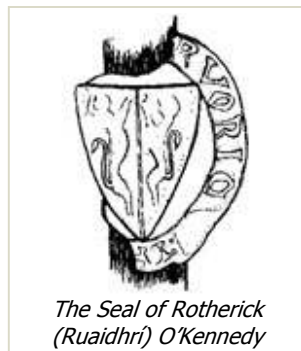


Bermingham

There are suggestions that heraldry may have been already in use by at least some of the Gaelic Irish by the end of the twelfth century. The arms of Domhnall and Donnchadh Mac Carthaigh, who travelled on pilgrimage through the continent of Europe around that time, are recorded in a Vatican necrology. Their arms incorporate an arm in armour and a demi-eagle. Our knowledge of Gaelic armory in the early period, however, derives almost entirely from seals. Aodh Reamhar Ó Néill, King of Tír Eoghain, who died in 1364, used a seal from which the later arms of Ó Néill apparently evolved.



The Seal of Aodh Reamhar Ó Néill of Tír Eoghain



The Seal of Rotherick (Ruaidhrí) O'Kennedy

The oldest surviving Gaelic heraldic artifact is a seal of Rotherick (Ruaidhrí) O'Kennedy, 'chief of his nation', attached to a treaty made with the Earl of Ormond in 1356. The treaty document and seal are in the National Library.

It may be that the use of heraldry by certain Gaelic families was linked to the adoption by some of them of inheritance by primogeniture, but this is uncertain. Certainly Hugh Reamhar Ó Néill introduced the practice into his family. The arms of Domhnall Riabhach MacMurrough Kavanagh, which appear on a sixteenth-century seal, were still in use by his grandson, Murrough Mac Murrough Kavanagh in 1515, confirming the use of the same arms through successive generations of a Gaelic Irish family. Gaelic arms are often quite distinctive, and often incorporate peculiarly Gaelic features such as the bile or sacred tree, and the boar.



Ó Catháin



Ó Conchobhair



Ó Ceallacháin



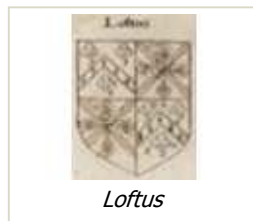
Ó Néill

While the Gaelic aristocracy at first assumed arms without reference to any heraldic authority, the registration of those arms in Dublin in the sixteenth century was undoubtedly related to acceptance of English rule, which was seldom wholehearted or long-lasting.

Some of the settlers of the Tudor and Cromwellian periods were already armigerous before coming to Ireland. Others, anxious to establish themselves as people of consequence, sought Grants of Arms from the office of Ulster King of Arms in Dublin. The style of their heraldry is much the same as that of England at the same period. Gaelic arms, while sometimes influenced by the English style, retained their distinctive features.



Two families of Golde



Loftus

Heraldry of the Provinces of Ireland - *Armas na gCúigí*

The four provinces of modern Ireland – Ulster in the north, Leinster in the east, Munster in the south and Connacht in the west – have their origins in pre-Christian Ireland and form the largest units of geographical reference in Ireland today. In the post-Norman period the historic province of Leinster and a fifth province, Meath, gradually merged, mainly due to the impact of the Pale which straddled both, thereby forming our present-day province of Leinster. In the Irish Annals these five ancient political divisions were invariably referred to as *Cúigí*, i.e. ‘fifth parts’, such as the fifth of Munster, the fifth of Ulster and so on. The English administrators and record-makers, on the other hand, dubbed them ‘provinces’, in imitation of the Roman imperial *provinciae* and occasionally used them as entities for official surveys of land and estates.

Munster

For over four hundred years now the historic Province of Munster has been heraldically symbolized by three golden antique crowns on an azure blue shield. While these arms are on record as appertaining to Munster as early as the sixteenth century, the motif, namely the antique Irish crown which inspired them, is without question considerably older.

Significantly, from the point of view of finding an explanation for the origin of the arms of Munster, a crown of the type now known as antique Irish, delicately crafted in burnished metal and resting on a blue enamel surface, forms an integral element of a thirteenth century crozier head found near Cormac’s Chapel on the Rock of Cashel, County Tipperary. This unique artifact of Gaelic Ireland can be viewed in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin.

Cashel was from early Christian times through to the fifteenth century the seat of the Kings of Munster, many of whom exercised spiritual as well as temporal power over the southern province. In the case of the ‘king-bishops’ of Cashel the placing of the antique crown on their crozier, as instanced above, can only be interpreted as a symbolic assertion of their right to the political sovereignty of Munster.

When, therefore, the sovereignty of Munster came to be expressed in heraldic format, small wonder that the antique crown (in triplicate) came to be used as the arms of the province. Triplication of symbols in heraldic art is merely a convention for the purpose of achieving greater balance on the triangular surface of the shield.

Leinster

A silver stringed golden harp on a green background has long done duty as the arms of the province of Leinster. Possibly the oldest and certainly the most celebrated instance of the use of the harp device on a green field was the flag of Eoghan Ruadh Ó Néill. Eoghan Ruadh, nephew of Aodh, Earl of Tyrone, had, as a young man, after his uncle's defeat at Kinsale in 1601, entered the Spanish Service where he rose to prominence in the army of that country. In 1642 he returned to Ireland to assist the Irish Confederation in the war that broke out the previous year.

It is recorded that his ship, the *St Francis*, as she lay at anchor at Dunkirk, flew from her mast top 'the Irish harp in a green field, in a flag'. Because the Confederation's headquarters were located in Kilkenny, the principal city of Leinster 'without the pale, his flag must have had a special significance for that province. Moreover, the Confederation seal incorporated, among a number of other motifs, a representation of the Irish harp.

When Eoghan Ruadh died in 1649 the hopes of the Irish Confederation died with him. His flag, however, lives on to the present day in the form of the arms of Leinster: vert a harp or stringed argent.

Meath

The old province of Meath, which is nearly coextensive with the present day Diocese of Meath, is heraldically personified by a representation of a royal personage seated on a throne. This is an instance where iconography is doing duty for classical heraldry. Mediaeval royal seals invariably portrayed on the obverse a majesty and on the reverse the arms of the sovereign. The sceptre and outstretched right hand typified the royal prerogatives of power and justice, respectively. It is, of course, fitting that Meath, wherein stood Tara, the symbolic site of the Kingship of Ireland, should be shown heraldically by a representation of a royal personage, or majesty, seated on a throne. The arms of Meath were apparently used at one time as the arms of Ireland, i.e. a majesty on a sable (black) background, the provincial arms being displayed on an azure (blue) field.

Ulster

The arms of the historic province of Ulster are a composite achievement, combining the heraldic symbols of two of that province's best known families, namely the cross of de Burgo and the dexter hand of Ó Néill.

Active participants in the First Crusade (1096-99), which ushered in the heraldic era, among them members of the de Burgo family of Tonsburg in Normandy, fashioned crosses in fabric on their apparel before leaving for the Holy Land. One Walter de Burghe is recorded in a thirteenth century roll of arms (Walford Roll) as bearing a red cross on his shield.

When Walter de Burgh, Lord of Connacht, became Earl of Ulster in 1243 the de Burgo cross became inseparably linked with the province of Ulster. The seal of his son Richard, for example, appended to a deed dated 1282, shows the heraldic cross in triplicate together with what may well be a portrait head of the Earl himself.

The celebrated 'Red Hand' of Ó Néill may have been based on a mythological motif. On the other hand it may be based on the *Dextra Dei*, which had long been employed as a Christian symbol. In early Christian iconography God the Father was frequently represented by the open right hand, sometimes within a halo or nimbus. An example of this motif can be seen on the ring of the 10th century High Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice, County Louth. An early heraldic use in Ireland of the open right hand can be seen in the seal of Aodh Ó Néill, King of the Irish of Ulster, 1344-1364.

Connacht

The arms of Connacht – a dimidiated (divided in half from top to bottom) eagle and armed hand – are recorded as such on a map of Galway dated 1651, now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin. These arms approximate rather closely to those of the Schottenkloster or Irish monastery founded in Regensburg, Bavaria in the 11th century. The question is: how

did the arms of that Schottenkloster located deep in the heart of the Holy Roman Empire come to be associated with the province of Connacht in Ireland?

A somewhat unsatisfactory answer to this question will be found in Vatican Ms 11000 which contains a necrology of prominent Irish ecclesiastics and political rulers – with *floruits* mainly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – whose obituaries were recorded locally, apparently on the basis of their being substantial benefactors of the Schottenkloster at Regensburg. In the section of the aforementioned necrology headed 'KINGS', the initial entry relates to Donnchadh and Domhnall Mac Carthaigh, rulers of Desmond, to whom the arms of the Schottenkloster were apparently conceded, presumably as arms of affection. If we can assume that the arms of the Schottenkloster were similarly conceded to the other royal benefactors noted in the necrology, then an explanation of the origins of the arms of the province of Connacht begins to emerge because the final entry in the necrology refers to Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair, King of Connacht and last High King of Ireland.

Heraldry of the State

The Arms of Ireland are Azure a harp Or stringed Argent. They are used by the Government of Ireland, its agents, servants and representatives at home and abroad. It is engraved on the seal matrix of the Office of the President. The registration of these Arms by the Chief Herald of Ireland acting on behalf of the Government in 1945 forms the legal basis of the State's exclusive right to use and display it.

In order to protect its right at international level to the exclusive use of the State harp exemplars of it, approved by the Chief Herald, were deposited by the Government in 1984 with the International Bureau in Berne under the Paris Convention for the protection of industrial and intellectual property.

Exemplification of the State harp need not show the full complement of thirty strings provided that the number shown does not fall below nine. When used on writing paper, for example, the heraldic harp takes primacy of place, and should be shown freestanding and uncluttered, with no text appearing above it.

The State harp is invariably shown on a deep blue background. Here it is worth noting that *Gormfhlaith* appears in the early Irish texts as the name of several queens closely connected with dynastic politics (including the Kingship of Tara) in the 10th and 11th centuries. *Gormfhlaith* is a compound of *gorm* (blue) and *flaith* (sovereign). In early Irish mythology the sovereignty of Ireland (*Flaitheas Éireann*) was represented by a woman often dressed in a blue robe.

Brian Boru Harp

The model for the artistic representation of the State harp is the fourteenth century harp now preserved in the Museum of Trinity College, Dublin, popularly known as the "Brian Boru Harp". This exquisitely-worked harp, standing some thirty-two inches high, with fore-pillar of oak and sound-box of red willow, has thirty strings.

From mediaeval times the harp has been regarded as the heraldic symbol of Ireland. As such it is illustrated in the Armorial Wijnbergen, a thirteenth century roll of arms now preserved in The Hague. The same source gives the blazon, or technical description, of the Arms of Ireland as follows:

Le Roi d'Irlande: D'azure à la harpe d'or.

These arms may appertain to an aspirational High Kingship after the Norman invasion. Certainly they were never the arms of the Lordship of Ireland.

One of the earliest references in print to the arms of Ireland occurs in a book entitled *Introductio ad Latinam Blasoniam* by John Gibbon, printed in London in 1682. In a list of the heraldic bearings of twenty-five Christian states in Europe, the entry of Ireland reads as follows:

Hiberna, Citharam auream, cum chordulis argenteis caeruleo in Scuto depictam: Bl. a Harp Or. Stringed Arg.

From Lordship to Kingdom

When in 1534 Henry VIII formally rejected papal authority and subsequently declared himself King of Ireland in 1541, the upgrading of the constitutional status of Ireland from a lordship to a kingdom was marked by the appearance of the harp on the coinage of Ireland, effectively displacing the 'triple crown' motif which had been symbol of the lordship of Ireland.

Henry's daughter, Elizabeth, introduced the harp into the Great Seal of Ireland. The obverse of that seal show a 'majesty' flanked by two heraldic banners: that on the dexter bears the harp and that on the sinister three crowns in pale. The reverse of the Great Seal also carried, in base underneath the Royal Arms, a free-standing harp, with fore-pillar to the sinister.

On the accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England, the Royal Arms were marshalled to take account of the Stuart King's claims to the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and, of course, Ireland, a fact which was heraldically proclaimed through the introduction of the harp into the third quarter of the Royal Arms. The attitude of the harp – fore-pillar to the dexter – on the Royal escutcheon was prompted largely by the desire to keep the charge in sympathy with the curvature of the 'heater' shield.

The Jacobite claim to the Kingdom of Ireland was further reinforced by the placing of the imperial crown over the harp on the reverse of the Irish silver shilling minted c. 1603. Henceforward the harp so ensigned came to be regarded and indeed used as the mark of the authority of the English crown in Ireland. Conversely, Irish people who were not prepared to acknowledge that authority tended to make use of the symbol of the uncrowned harp or the harp ensigned with an antique Irish Crown.

Heraldry and the Diaspora

It was after the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 and the subsequent Flight of the Earls in 1607 that the Irish began to establish themselves abroad. The Gaelic and old English aristocracy scattered throughout Catholic Europe following the introduction of Penal Laws against Catholics and the widespread confiscation of their lands after the Treaty of Limerick in 1691. Many of the descendants of these émigrés are still to be found in the countries in which their ancestors settled, such as the O'Neills of Spain and Portugal and the Mac Carthys and Hennessys of France.

Following the Treaty of Limerick thousands of Irishmen followed James II to France and others took service in Spain, Portugal, Austria and elsewhere. With them went James Terry, Athlone Pursuivant, an Officer of Arms at Ulster's Office, who took with him to James' court at St. Germain-en-Laye the seal of Office and some heraldic and genealogical records. There he was appointed Athlone Herald by James and engaged in the granting and confirmation of arms to the Irish throughout Europe.

Arms and attested pedigrees were necessary as proofs of gentility for anyone seeking a commission in a European army of the time. While members of many Gaelic families had genealogies stretching back for a thousand years or more, their ancestors may never have attached importance to the use of arms. Many had to search for arms that may have been used at some earlier date by family members while others sought new grants, either from James Terry or, after his death in 1725, from Ulster King of Arms.

The tradition of the Irish abroad seeking grants of arms from home continues to the present. Responding to this demand is the expression of the Nation's "special affinity with those of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage", as set out in Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Constitution of Ireland.