

Viking – Hastings Heraldry

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to suggest elements for someone wishing to design and register SCA armory in the Viking style; and (2) to discuss the state of heraldry at the time of what has been called “the last Viking raid”, the invasion of England by the forces of William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066, as shown in the Bayeux Tapestry.

Viking-Style Heraldry

There was no Viking heraldry.

That is, the Vikings had no system of personalized designs painted on shields as a means of identifying individual warriors — of telling friends from foes. Some of the post-Viking period Icelandic sagas mention Viking Age figures who carried shields with attributed "arms"-- just sketchy descriptions of the shield (Heimskringla, Laxdaela Saga, Njal's Saga, and the Olaf Sagas; see Radford, pp. 24f). However, most of these individuals, such as Magnus Barelegs (1073-1103), actually lived after the Viking Age, and the shields they carried are sometimes described as having points (Norman kite shields?) rather than the circular Viking shield.

The one exception to this rule is Sigurdr Hlodvisson the Stout, Jarl of the Orkneys, who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and whose story is told in sections 11-12 of the Orkneyinga Saga as well as in Njal's Saga (section 157). He possessed a personal standard that he had borne before him in battles, a magical banner embroidered by his mother, a sorceress, who told him that "[I]t will bring victory to the man it's carried before, but death to the one who carries it."

The banner was finely made, embroidered with the figure of a raven, which seemed to be flying ahead when the banner fluttered in the breeze (Orkneyinga Saga, 11, page 37). At the Battle of Clontarf (1014), Sigurdr couldn't find anyone willing to die for him by carrying the banner. He carried it himself. And died.¹

This use of armory for personal identification was invented around the middle of the 12th century. It developed most rapidly in Anglo-Norman England and in the region between the Loire and the Rhine rivers, but it reached Scandinavia by the 13th century.^{2,3} The earliest Swedish arms date to 1219, the identical arms of two brothers, Sigtrygg and Lars Bengtsson. Some thirty years later, a dozen other arms were known, belonging to a king, two chief judges, a jarl, and a constable.⁴

Vikings used rounds shields that were usually 80-90 cm. (31.5 to 35.5 inches) in diameter. The shields were flat, made of a single layer of seven or eight white pine planks butted together and with continuous gutter-shaped metal edge bindings.⁵ This shape, rather than the shape of a standard shield, should be considered in designing a device or badge.

In which case, what tinctures, field divisions, and charges could a person with a Viking persona use to design an appropriate coat-of-arms?

Tinctures

Most surviving Viking Age shields are single color, undivided fields. These colors are red (gules), yellow (Or), and black (sable). The Gokstad Ship, found in a ninth century Viking burial mound at Gokstad in Norway, contained 64 shields, painted solid black and solid yellow, and displayed alternately.⁶

Since a single, solid color device or badge is not registerable, we must look to Scandinavian arms of a slightly later age. Here are the figures for usage of individual tinctures from an extensive survey of 13th - 15th century European armorials.⁷ Totals are shown for Scandinavian arms as well as totals for all of Europe. Purple (purple), which was indistinguishable from gules (red) in early arms⁸, is notably missing.

Percentages of Use of Each Tincture (Single and Multiple Tinctures Included)		
Tincture	Scandinavia	Europe
Argent (White)	66%	48%
Gules (Red)	43%	61%
Azure (Blue)	34%	23%
Or (Gold)	32%	42%
Sable (Black)	25%	28%
Vert (Green)	2%	2%
Furs	1%	5%

Most early coats use only two tinctures, a metal (argent, or) and a color (gules, azure, sable, vert). Here is a similar comparison of Scandinavian and general European preferences. Again, there are differences.

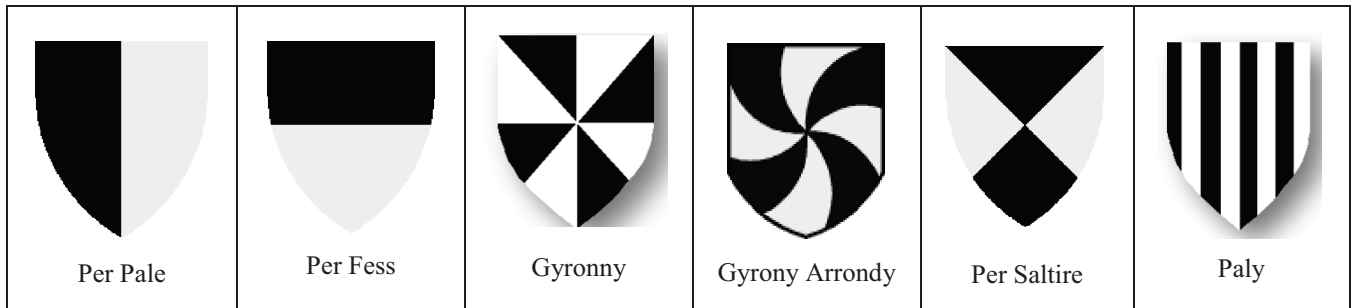
Percentages of Use of Two Tincture Combinations		
Tincture	Scandinavia	Europe
Argent & Gules (White & Red)	35%	27%
Argent & Azure (White & Blue)	18%	10%
Or & Azure (Gold & Blue)	15%	10%
Argent & Sable (White & Black)	14%	13%
Or & Sable (Gold & Black)	9%	11%
Or & Gules (Gold & Red)	8%	20%
Argent & Vert (White & Green)	1%	1%
Other	0%	8%

It should be remembered that each of the tincture combinations in the second table is actually two combinations. Thus, the entry "Argent & Gules", 35 percent of all Scandinavian combinations, stands for both an argent field with a gules charge or charge group and a gules field with an argent charge or charge group.

Field Divisions

In a large majority of early Scandinavian coats-of-arms, the field was painted a single color with a single charge or charge group painted a second color. Where a field was divided into two (or more) parts, there are more examples of fields divided 'per pale' (vertically down the centre of the shield) than of fields divided 'per fess'

(horizontally across the centre of the shield), but there are very few of either type.⁹ And even fewer of any other type of field division, although most of the field divisions of SCA heraldry were used.



A number of carved runestones and picture-stones from the Viking Age depict warriors bearing shields with the face inscribed with radiating lines, which would be described in formal heraldic terms as gyronny or, if the lines curve, gyronny arrondi.¹⁰



Gyronny Arrondi

Lillbjärs Picture Stone, Stenkyrka Parish



Per Saltire

Sketch of design from Oseberg Tapestry

The Viking Answer Lady suggests that this design at right¹¹ shows Viking shields divided per saltire. I think that this would be more a case of the use of a saltire ordinary. However, while some early (13th and 14th century) Scandinavian seals contain charges arranged in saltire:

- *In chief between two [pairs of] axes in saltire, a fleur-de-lis* -- Viking seal dated from 1300 or earlier
- *A tower charged with five roses in saltire* -- some early 14th century shields.¹²
- *Two crossed axes and a fleur-de-lys* -- (Jon Kollr, 1297)¹³

There are no examples of either a saltire ordinary or of charges in saltire in three lists of almost 100 medieval Swedish coats of arms.¹⁴ I would suggest that the small, triangular sections in the Oseberg Tapestry are actually representations of metal clips attaching the metal rims of the shields to the wooden bodies of the shields. They do not, I think, justify use of per saltire as a field division in proposed Viking-style devices.

Some people might also take inspiration from the stereotypic striped Viking Age ship's sails. In heraldry, a field patterned with vertical stripes is termed paly. Striped sails are mentioned specifically in Ólafs saga Trygvasonar ch. 101:

"Ekki er þetta konungsskip. Kenni eg þetta skip og seglið því að stafað er seglið."
 [That is not the king's ship. I know that ship by the colored stripes of cloth in her sail.]¹⁵

Finally, most of the examples use a single charge or charge group. In the more than 90 examples of medieval Swedish armory presented by Jonas Hjelm, there are only two examples of complex lines of division.



Stenbock

*Per fess embattled sable and Or, a demi-ram rampant Or*¹⁶



Ama

*Azure, issuant from dexter base, three piles embattled Or*¹⁷

If you do a device with a per pale or quarterly field division, remember the rule against apparent marshalling. Put the charge or charge group overall.

Charges

In this section, all of the examples shown are from one of the three sites of medieval Swedish arms prepared by Jonas Hjelm, whose url is already given in the endnotes to this paper.

Some charges found in early Scandinavian armory include: fleurs-de-lis: roses with five or six petals; ships and boats; towers and castles; axes; swords and helms, sometimes held by human arms; mullets (stars), often with six points but sometimes with five or eight; birds, especially eagles; arrowheads; and various animals and parts of animals.¹⁸

The fleur-de-lis is especially common, though it's often reduced to just the left or right half of a fleur-de-lis. This kind of demi-fleur-de-lis is very characteristic of Scandinavian armory and very unusual elsewhere.

The examples below of the fleur-de-lis and demi-de-lys are from medieval Swedish heraldry.

Vinstor-
paätten

Marinason



Lillie



Halsten

The single most common period emblem for Vikings seems to have been the raven, possibly as a symbol of Odin. Other beasts known to them that would also make especially good choices include the northern brown bear the wolf, Thor's storm-goats, Freya's cats, or perhaps horses. Polar bears were only found in Greenland, which was discovered at the end of the tenth century, and would not have been used.

Wyverns, serpents, and other worm-like critters are also good; the College of Arms has registered some good examples of Norse critters over the years. Here are some monsters from Medieval Swedish Heraldry:



Drake från Sunnerbo



Snakenborg



Trolle



Grip äldre ätten

Also, three common charges in the examples of medieval Swedish heraldry are chevrons (uncharged), single and combinations; piles (uncharged); and seeblätter (See Table below).



Store



Staffansöernas ätt



Sparre av Ellinge



Sparre (av Skåne)



Uf



Banér



Gren



Königs-mark



Stenstaätten



Kagg



Ribbing



Vingätten

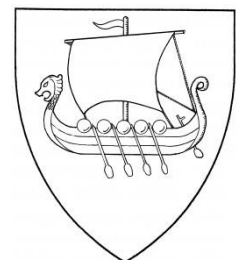
There doesn't appear to be any examples of a bordure or chief in any of the Jonas Hjelm examples.

The SCA also uses the drakkar or Viking longship, the furison, the Thor's hammer, and the valknut, a special charge unique to the Society. These and the seeblat, which appeared in two of the Swedish heraldry examples, are shown in the Table below.

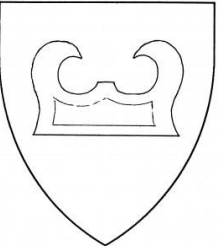
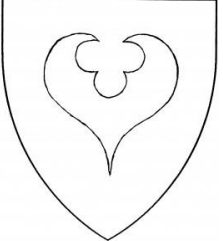
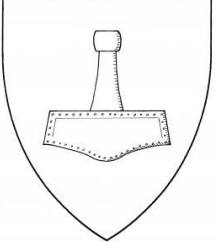
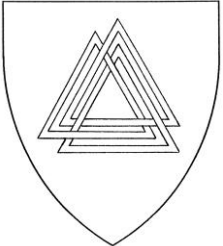
Charges Associated with the Viking Culture in SCA Heraldry¹⁹

Drakkar

In Society heraldry, one of the most common ship is the “drakkar”, or Viking dragonship: with the prow carved in a monstrous head (usually a dragon's), a square sail, and the ship's side lined with targes. Ships decorated with dragon's heads appear to have been used in period armory, in the arms of the Kings of Orkney. Matthew Paris, c.1245, attributes similar vessels to the arms of the King of Norway, as does Randall Holme's Roll c.1460; but we have no direct evidence that they were truly drakkar, or that the arms were actually in use. The drakkar is also blazoned a “Viking longship”; it's not enough to say simply “longship”, as Norman and Phoenician longships are also found in Society armory.



Charges Associated with the Viking Culture in SCA Heraldry¹⁹

<p><u>Furison</u> A furison is a fire steel, used with flint to strike sparks for starting fires. It is also blazoned a “ferris” in mundane heraldry. The furison is a period charge, found in the arms of Grassawer, c.1340; but its most famous usage is as a badge of the Order of the Golden Fleece, c.1430. It is fesswise by default, with its flat edge (its “steel”) to base.</p>	
<p><u>Seeblat</u> A seeblatt is a Germanic representation of a water-lily leaf, drawn in a highly stylized manner: heart-shaped, with a cruciform or trefoil incision in chief. It is a period charge, found in the arms of Ribbing, 1295. Note that “seeblätter” is the usual plural form of “seeblatt”, including in blazons.</p>	
<p><u>Thor’s Hammer</u> A common variant form of the period charge, the “war hammer”, and unique to Society armory, the “Thor’s hammer” or “mjolnir”, is a token of the Norse thunder god. It alone among the hammers has its haft to chief by default. The illustration is a composite of Viking age mjolnir-pendants, from finds at Birka, Rømrødal, and Skåne.</p>	
<p><u>Valknut</u> A valknut is a Norse artistic motif, consisting of three triangles voided and interlaced. It was associated with scenes of Odin and the Valkyries (valknut, “corpse knot”), and may have represented the slain warrior’s soul. As a heraldic charge, it’s unique to the Society; its use is considered a step from period practice. The valknut has its point to chief as the Society default; valknuts inverted are no longer permitted. The illustration shown here is the one accepted for Society use and is based on the image on the Stora Hammars I stone, in Gotland.</p>	

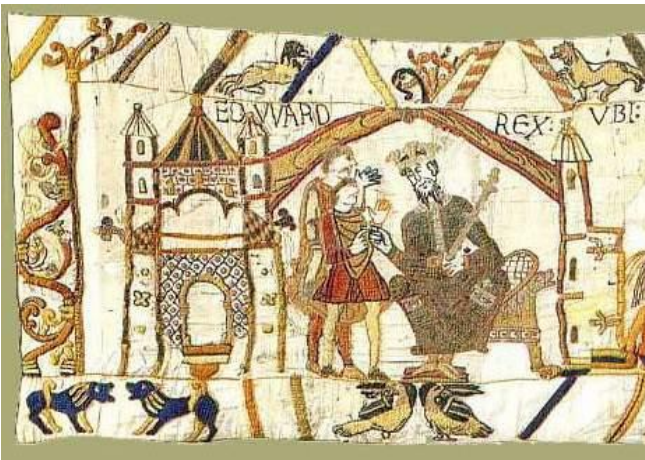
The State of Heraldry in 1066, As Shown in the Bayeux Tapestry

Was there heraldry at the Battle of Hastings?

No.

At least, not in the sense that we know it in the Society; each person, identified by a stylized, individual design, painted onto a warrior's shield. Any other representation that says, "This is **ME!**", and that is handed down within a family from generation to generation.

The best documentation for historical research is first person documentation, and, for the Battle of Hastings, we have that in the form of the Bayeux Tapestry. The tapestry is "the principal source of knowledge about the day that shaped England out of the remains of Anglo-Saxon culture and the Normans who were themselves recent settlers along the northwest coast of France and the bed of the Seine."²⁰ The tapestry was produced within twenty years of the date of the Battle of Hastings. Although some have suggested William's wife, Queen Matilde, or his granddaughter, Empress Mathilda, as the guiding force behind the creation of the tapestry, William's half-brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, who actually participated in the Battle of Hastings, is now considered the one who commissioned the work.^{21,22}

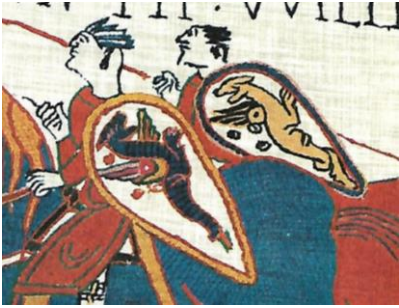


The tapestry is an embroidery, some 230 feet long by about 20 inches high, wool thread on a set of eight bleached linen sheets, tightly sewn together. Eight colors of thread were used: terracotta red, blue-green, sage-green, buff, dull blue, a darker green, yellow, and a very dark blue. Outline or stem stitches serve for single lines, while laid and couched work give color and texture to large areas. A foot or two are missing from end, and these probably show the coronation of William on Christmas Day, 1066.²³

There are 626 human figures on the tapestry, 190 horses, 35 dogs, 506 other animals, 37 ships, 33 buildings, and 37 trees or groups as trees (sometimes used as dividers between scenes). The Textiles Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum has estimated that the team of embroiderers who worked in the tapestry could have easily completed the work within two years.²⁴ At the end of the 19th century, the members of the Leek Embroidery Society of Staffordshire were asked to produce a full-sized replica of the tapestry. In a little over a year, thirty-five women completed the reproduction.²⁵

The fighters on the tapestry are often shown carrying kite shields charged with what would seem to be heraldic shapes. As Foxe-Davis describes them: "rude figures of dragons or other imaginary animals, as well as crosses of different forms, and spots.... [I]t requires little imagination to find the cross *patée* and the cross *botonnée* of heraldry prefigured on two of these shields."²⁶ A Norman banner shows a raven, showing the Normans' Norseman ancestry.²⁷





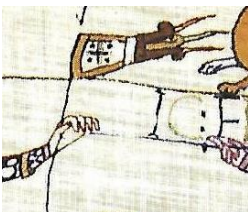
And the Normans were not the only one with charged shields or banners. Harold marked his command post with the dragon standard of Wessex. His personal banner was the Fighting Man.²⁸ William took the Saxon dragon as a symbol for his followers' shields to deliberately express his claim to the English [Saxon] throne.²⁹

Yet, these charges are not armory, not individual arms, in the sense that the term is used today. Again, as Foxe-Davis says, “[W]hile the most prominent figures of the time are depicted, most of them repeatedly, none of these is ever represented twice as bearing the same device, nor is there one instance of any resemblance in the rude designs described to the bearings actually used by the descendants of the persons in question. If a person so important and so often depicted as the Conqueror had born arms, they could not fail to have had a place in a nearly contemporary work, and more especially if it proceeded from the needle of his wife.”³⁰

If not individual armory, then what were all these banners and charged shields? Robert Wace, an Anglo-Norman poet who wrote in the time of Henry II said that the Normans “had shields on their necks and lances in their hands and all made cognisances that one Norman might know another by and that none others gore, so that no Frenchman might perish by the hands of another.”³¹ The website dictionary.com defines “cognizance” as “in heraldry: a device by which a person or a person’s servants can be recognized; a badge.”³²



The various charged items, shields and banners, were, effectively, serving as unit badges.



There was one personal device (of sorts) at the Battle of Hastings. Pope Alexander II sent William a personal banner that he carried into the battle. In the tapestry, this banner was a red or gold cross on a white background and surrounded by a blue bordure: *Argent, a cross Or (or gules) and a bordure azure.*³³

The Bayeux Tapestry was made almost a hundred years before the first use of heraldic emblems as signal devices for the recognition of friend or foe in battle.³⁴ Before the 12th century, a personal device on a banner, lance-flag, and shield are unknown. These were used for identification, but no case of inheritance has been traced.

English heraldry, as we know it, can be traced back to 1127, when Henry I of England presented a shield to Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, on the occasion of Geoffrey’s marriage to Henry’s daughter, Matilde. The shield was blue with four golden lions (azure, four lions rampant Or).³⁵ Geoffrey was the founder of the Plantagenet line, and this same combination of gold lions on a blue background was used by his son, Henry II.³⁶ The earliest English Roll of Arms was painted by Matthew Paris, monastic historian (d. 1259).³⁷



Footnotes*Viking-Style Heraldry*

- ¹ Priest-Dorman, Carolyn (Mistress Thóra Sharptooth “Personal Display for Viking Age Personae: A Primer for Use in the SCA”, accessed online on May 14, 2018 at www.cs.vassar.edu/~capriest/display.html. The site has a lot of useful information about heraldic display, including recommendations of field divisions and charges. As to Sigurdr, there is, of course, no way of knowing how true this story is, but, as Mistress Thóra notes, it makes a rattling good song!
- ² Scott, Brian; Benicouer, Arvil; and Beaumont, Adelaide *Academy of Saint Gabriel Report 2696* (June 28, 2003) is a detailed discussion of SCA-suitable Viking names and devices (tinctures and charges). The report may be found online at www.panix.com/~gabriel/public-bin/showfinal.cgi/2696.txt.
- ³ Draconarius, Baron Bruce, Batonver. “Regional Style Class”, Known World Heraldic & Scribal Symposium 2015. discusses how to style heraldry for personas from a number of cultures which did not use heraldry, including a section on suitable Viking charges. The article may be found online at heraldry.sca.org/kwhss/2015/.
- ⁴ “The Swedish Way”, Svenska Heraldiska Föreningen (Swedish Heraldry Society), accessed on May 14, 2018 at www.heraldik.se/english_3.html/.
- ⁵ Beatson, Peter “The ‘Viking Shield’ from Archaeology,” was found online on May 15, 2018 at members.ozemail.com.au/~chrisandpeter/shield/shield.html.
- ⁶ Priest-Dorman, Carolyn (Mistress Thóra Sharptooth), “Personal Display for Viking Age Personae: A Primer for Use in the SCA.
- ⁷ Scott, Benicouer, and Beaumont, *Academy of Saint Gabriel Report 2696*. The tables are from Pastoureau, Mucelle. *Traité d’Héraldique*, second edition. (Paris:grands manueles Picard, 1993); tables III and IV, pp. 117-9.
- ⁸ Wise, Terence; Hook, Richard; and Walker, William. *Men-at-Arms Series: Medieval Heraldry*. (London: Osprey Military Books, 1980). p. 11.
- ⁹ Scott, Brian; Benicouer, Arvil; and Beaumont, Adelaide *Academy of Saint Gabriel Report 2696*.
- ¹⁰ The Viking Answer Lady, “Heraldry for a Non-Heraldic Culture: Viking Coats of Arms in the SCA.” The Lillbjärs Picture Stone. This site is a wonderful source with information on many, many aspects of the Viking world. This section of her site, related to heraldry, is under the dropdown menu for “Arts”, which was accessed online on May 14, 2018 at vikinganswerlady.com/vikheraldry.shtml.
- ¹¹ The Viking Answer Lady website: The Oseberg Tapestry.
- ¹² Both seals are described in Huitfeldt-Kaas, H.J. *Norske Sigiller fra Middelalderen*. 3rd and 4th parts (Kristiana: Aktie-Bogtrykkeriet, 1902); pp. 1-4, Pls. 1-2. cited in *Academy of St. Gabriel Report 2696*.

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- ¹³ Huitfeldt-Kaas, H.J. m. fl. *Norske Sigiller fra Middelalderen*, Oslo 1899-1950, No. 2, 4, and 31, cited in “Norwegian Heraldry” available online May 14, 2018 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norwegian_heraldry.
- ¹⁴ These three sites are the sources of the Swedish coats-of arms discussed in this document:
- Hjelm, Jonas. *Medeltidsvapen (Medieval Swedish Coats of Arms)*. *Adelsvapen.com* (Noble Coats of Arms) Website, accessed online on May 14, 2018 at www.adelsvapen.com/medeltidsvapen/;
 - Hjelm, Jonas. *Vapensköldar (Medieval Swedish Coats of Arms, Part 2)*. *Adelsvapen.com* (Noble Coats of Arms) Website, accessed online on May 14, 2018 at www.adelsvapen.com/medeltidsvapen/medeltid/
 - Hjelm, Jonas. *Medeltidsvapen Del 3 (Medieval Swedish Coats of Arms, Part 3)*. *Adelsvapen.com* (Noble Coats of Arms) Website, accessed online on May 14, 2018 at www.adelsvapen.com/medeltidsvapen/del3/
- ¹⁵ The Viking Answer Lady website: “Paly”.
- ¹⁶ Hjelm, Jonas. *Medeltidsvapen (Medieval Swedish Coats of Arms)*.
- ¹⁷ Hjelm, Jonas. *Vapensköldar (Medieval Swedish Coats of Arms, Part 2)*.
- ¹⁸ Draconarius, Baron Bruce, Batonver. “Regional Style Class” for lists of Viking charges, and Scott, Brian; Benicouer, Arvil; and Beaumont, Adelaide *Academy of Saint Gabriel Report 2696* for charges found on thirteenth and fourteenth century shields.
- ¹⁹ *Pictorial Dictionary of Heraldry* (the Pic Dic”) has examples and information on most of the charges used in SCA heraldry. The site may be found at misholme.com/pictorial-dictionary-of-heraldry/.

The State of Heraldry in 1066, As Shown in the Bayeux Tapestry

- ²⁰ Bloch, R. Howard, *A Needle in the Right Hand of G-d* (New York: Random House, 2006), p.7.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ²² Count Eustace of Boulogne, a non-Norman political opponent of Duke William, but who fought at Hastings as his ally and who is shown prominently on the Tapestry, and the monks of St. Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury have also been proposed as the patron(s) who had the Tapestry created. Bridgeford, Andrew in *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Walker and Company, 2005), pp. 304-309.
- ²³ Gibbs-Smith, Charles H., *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidan Press Limited, 1973), p.6.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.
- ²⁵ Bloch, *Needle*, p. 83.
- ²⁶ Foxe-Davis, Arthur Charles, *The Art of Heraldry: An Encyclopedia of Armory* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 7.
- ²⁷ Scott-Giles, C. Wilfred, *The Romance of Heraldry* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1965), p. 37.

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- ²⁸ Dennys, Rodney, *The Heraldic Imagination* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., Publisher, 1975), p. 26.
- ²⁹ Scott-Giles, *Romance*, p. 36.
- ³⁰ Foxe-Davis, *Art*, p. 7. The argument holds true regardless of who the creator of the Tapestry truly was: William's wife, his half-brother, a political frenemy, or monks seeking his favor.
- ³¹ Scott-Giles, *Romance*, p. 36. According to Andrew Bridgeford in *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 299), Wace was commissioned to write *Roman de Rou*, a history of the Norman Conquest, by King Henry II. He completed it sometime around the year 1170.
- ³² The definition is from www.dictionary.com, as of 10/19/17.
- ³³ Scott-Giles, *Romance*, p. 37.
- ³⁴ Bloch, *Needle*, p. 112.
- ³⁵ Pine, L.G., *Teach Yourself Heraldry and Genealogy*, (London: The English Universities Press, 1957), re-published by Dover Publications in New York, 1968, pp. 16-17. The drawing shown above is from page 17 of Pine, and is based on an enamel effigy of Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou commissioned by his widow and placed on his tomb. The enamel was formerly at Le Mans Cathedral and is now in the Museum of Archeology and History in Le Mans.
- ³⁶ Ailes, Adrian, *The Origins of The Royal Arms of England*. (Reading: Graduate Center for Medieval Studies, University of Reading, 1982). pp. 52–53.
- ³⁷ Marks, Richard and Payn, Anne, *British Heraldry: From its Origins to c. 1800* (London: British Museum Publications, 1978) pp. 11, 12.