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JEWISH HERALDIC USAGE DURING THE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE

By Theresia von Tux

In submitting this discussion of an unusual theme in heraldry, Lady Theresia exclaims, "It's all the fault of Gershom ibn Zbara!" Lord Gershom is a familiar figure in Caid, and his judenhut is doubtless becoming well known in the East, were he now resides.

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Jewish heraldic usage is a complicated subject. The history of the Jews in the Middle Ages is a complex jumble, intrinsically tied up with regional events and cultures. What Jews did heraldically depends on where they were and how those surroundings affected them.

The period in question is bracketed by 1096 and 1555. During this time, both "true" medieval and "declining" renaissance heraldry come and go. It is also during this time that Jews suffered many rigorous persecutions by Christians. The year 1096 marks the First Crusade, which led to a Pan European pogrom that killed more Jews than the crusaders killed Moslems¹. Between the First Crusade and 1555, Jews were persecuted, expelled, over-taxed, restricted and exterminated many times in many different places. While 1555 is not the end of these practices, this date marks the official papal institution of the Ghetto, an unhappy milestone in Jewish history.

Certainly, the history of the Jews in period is often a tragic one. There are several instances, however, when Jewish life was relatively peaceful. It is during these times that Jewish heraldry appears. A pattern is present: where the Jewish population was harassed constantly and/or expelled, there are few examples of heraldry. In places where Jews maintained somewhat uninterrupted lives, heraldic usage flourished: Germany, Italy, and Spain are the best examples.

Most of the Jewish heraldic usage in Germany is decorative. German Jewish documents of the 14th and 15th century contain many examples of excellent heraldic art. It is not too surprising that this happened: Germany at that time had one of the richest heraldic traditions, and it is likely that it rubbed off on the Jewish communities there.

Heraldic decoration graces the richest of their religious manuscripts. One page of a 13th century Jewish Bible shows depictions of four of the founders of the Tribes of Israel — Dan, Judah, Ephraim, and Reuben — as knights, each holding a banner with his attributed arms.² A fifteenth century Haggadah shows the scene of Moses and the Jews escaping from Pharaoh by following the pillar of fire. Pharaoh's army carries banners and shields bearing *or, the sun in its splendor argent*³.

Uniquely Jewish charges were used by Germanic Jews on their personal seals. Three German seals dated around 1300

are a good example. One bears an escutcheon with what appears to be a head surmounted by a *judenhut*; the other two bear Stars of David⁴. There are also 14th century seals from Zurich and Uberlingen which display more *judenhute*⁵.

The *judenhut*, or "Jewish hat", deserves a special mention here. While the *judenhut* was used by Jews everywhere in Europe, the German Jews adapted it into a heraldic charge. Unlike the wheel badge, which the Christians imposed on the Jews and which the Jews clearly despised⁶, the Jews seemed proud of their distinctive hat. In appearance, the *judenhut* was a wide brimmed hat with a spike in the middle often topped off with a little ball.

The shape, so strange to modern eyes, has led to the belief that it was specially chosen to make its wearers ridiculous. At the time it was adopted by the Jews, it apparently was not considered bizarre. In fact, it differed only slightly from the flat-brimmed, pointed hat worn by horsemen and derived directly from the classical *petasus*⁷.

Jewish and Christian manuscripts of the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries from every country in Europe depict the Jews in their "Jewish hats." The frequency with which the *judenhut* appears would argue that no one thought it out of place or very demeaning. As was noted above, the Germanic Jews used it on their seals. They also used it in their other heraldic decoration, as evidenced by the manuscript with an escutcheon in the border bearing *azure, three Judenhute argent*⁸.

Jewish heraldry in Spain was very similar to that in Germany. A good example of heraldic decoration in a manuscript is the Sarajevo Haggadah. This document is thought to be a 13th century manuscript from northern Spain.⁹

Spanish seals were different from German ones. They usually depicted the badge of the King or the badge of the King differenced. In the borders of the seals were the owners' names written in hebrew. The seal of the statesman Todros ha-Levi bore the castle of Castile between four fleur-de-lis^{10, 11}.

Notes:

1. Kedourie, E., Ed.; The Jewish World, c.1979, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY; p. 170
2. Kedourie, p. 33
3. Kedourie, plate 20
4. Kanof, A.; Jewish Ceremonial Art, c.1969, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY; p. 63
5. Metzger, T. and M. Metzger; Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, c.1982, Alpine Fine Arts, Ltd., NY; p. 146
6. 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council imposes the wheel badge; Wigoder, G., Ed.; Jewish Art and Civilization, Vol. 1, c.1972; Walker & Co., NY; p. 174
7. Metzger and Metzger, p. 146
8. Metzger and Metzger, plate 90
9. Eisenberg, A.; Jewish Historical Treasures, c. 1968, Bloch Publishing, NY; p. 94. It is called the Sarajevo Haggadah because it was found in Sarajevo in the nineteenth century. One of its pages, for example, has decorative arms in the borders.
10. Wigoder, p. 135
11. Kedourie, p. 130
12. Metzger and Metzger, p. 44
13. Wigoder, p. 191
14. Metzger and Metzger, p. 48
15. Wigoder, pp. 174-175
16. Wigoder, p. 209
17. Wigoder, p. 174
18. Metzger and Metzger, Kedourie, and Wigoder were the three which I found most useful.

The reason for the royal influence on Spanish Jewish seals is simple: in Spain, prominent Jews worked for and owed their allegiance to the King. Jews in Spain were always uneasily tolerated. The seals bore witness to this fact; it's almost as if the seals were saying: "I am here only because the King puts up with me!"

Spanish Jewish heraldic decoration covered the 14th and 15th centuries. It stopped abruptly in 1492. The same year Columbus "discovered" America, all Jews were expelled from Spain.

Italian Jewish heraldry had a different pattern. In the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, Jews were so entrenched and respectable that many had their own arms. Some of these were probably assumed, as in the case of Daniel, son of Samuel the Physician, who used *per fess, argent and barry wavy or and argent, a demi-lion issuant from the line of division or, langued gules*¹². Other Jews were actually ennobled and bore arms presumably by right¹³. The fifteenth century Avicenna's Canon illustrates the arms of the Gattamelata family, *azure, a cat issuant from a hive or*, and the Pavone or Columbo family *azure, a peacock in his pride proper*^{14, 15}.

Obviously, Jews in Italy enjoyed rights and privileges unknown to Jews in other parts of Europe. It is recorded that Jews were present in the fighting during the Siege of Siena in 1552¹⁶. It is probable, given the evidence for rightfully owned Jewish arms in Italy, that the Jews involved bore their own arms in that battle.

Three years later, all of this probably changed for the Jews of Italy. In 1555, Pope Paul IV issued the bull entitled *Cum niniis absurdum*. In it, he incorporated the provisions instituting the ghetto¹⁷.

In conclusion, this has been the briefest of treatments of a subject that is complicated by the history of Jews in many places at many different times. My intent was to clarify and clear up some of the misconceptions I sometimes hear concerning the usage of heraldry by Jews in period. (I don't want to hear that "Jews never bore arms" ever again. I would also hope that anyone interested in appropriate heraldry for their Jewish persona would avail themselves of the many excellent references on Jews during the middle ages¹⁸.