

HOW LA TAPISSERIE DES CERFS AILÉS

INSPIRED FRENCH PATRIOTISM

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Sometime around the late-fourteenth to early-fifteenth century, an unknown, yet skilled artist created a modestly sized tapestry depicting three noble stags with beautiful wings and two cowardly lions.¹ This tapestry, known as the *Winged Stags Tapestry* (fig. 1), was made with expensive silk and dyes after the end of the Hundred Years war, and is said to have been made to commemorate the French victories at the battles of Formigny and Castillon.² Various scholars have examined the symbolism of the *Winged Stags Tapestry*, but what they have failed to consider is what purpose the tapestry was made to serve.³ Geneviève Souchal suggests that the tapestry was made for a loyal nobleman,⁴ but based on the similarity of the iconography with Christian symbols accompanied with visual hierarchy and the inscription of the tapestry, it is my thesis that the *Winged Stags Tapestry* was made as a form of French propaganda, designed to help the general public understand and accept the French king after the long and contentious war.

Scholars know through the iconography and approximate date of creation that the *Winged Stags Tapestry* was meant to represent the victories of the King of France, Charles VII, at the end of the Hundred Years War, where he regained the provinces of Normandy (in the north of France) and Guyenne (in the south of France) from England after the battles of Formigny and Castillon.⁵ At the time, the stag was adopted as a

¹ Musées en Haute-Normandie, "The Winged Stags Tapestry," http://www.musees-haute-normandie.fr/dossier_imprim.php3?lang=en&idrub=73.

² Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c. 1300-1450*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ Geneviève Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century: An Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974); and David Jenkins, *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2003).

⁴ Souchal, *Masterpieces*, 90.

⁵ Julien Chapuis, "Gothic Art," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000– (2002) <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mgot/hdmgot.htm>. For a similar argument, see Suzanne Lewis, *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

symbol of royalty, but the winged stag was used as a direct representation of Charles VII especially when accompanied by the fleur-de-lys, as seen in front of the main stag.

Historians have concluded that the two stags crossing the fence were meant to signify the retrieval of these two provinces, while the fence was a representation of the actual kingdom of France.⁶ This conclusion is supported by the imagery in the background showing, what I would argue are depictions of the shores of France--the cliffs of Etretat, Normandy, and the Pyrenees mountain range in the southern area of Guyenne. In this iconographic reading, the two lions, almost by default, represent England.⁷ The question is therefore, who commissioned the tapestry and for what purpose?

Illustrating the confusion surrounding this basic question, historian Souchal states that royalty may have ordered the tapestry, but the shape of the shield is buckler-shaped instead of how the French King's shield usually appeared.⁸ Souchal believes that this discrepancy is due to the possibility that the tapestry was woven for a nobleman wishing to "demonstrate his loyalty to the king." While this statement could still be true, I argue that the tapestry served another purpose.

The way that most common people would interpret art during the Middle Ages would most often be with a religious pretense; Christianity was so widespread that historians would often call the Middle Ages the "Age of Faith."⁹ People expected world events – like war, weather, disease, and famine – to be explained to them by the church,

⁶ "The Winged Stags," *Musees en Haute Normandie*, <http://www.musees-haute-normandie.fr/en/a-decouvrir/featured-works/la-tapisserie-des-cerfs-ailles/>.

⁷ Jane Burns, *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Musées, "The Winged Stags."

⁸ Souchel, *Masterpieces*, 92.

⁹ Bert Bower and Jim Lobdell, "The Role of the Church in Medieval Europe," in *HISTORY ALIVE! The Medieval World*, (Palo Alto: Teachers' Curriculum Institute, 2005): 15.

and expected that “prayer and religious devotion would keep away such disasters.”¹⁰ In light of the public’s concerns with “the fate of their souls after death,” the “Church taught that salvation, or the saving of one’s soul, would come to those who followed the Church’s teachings.”¹¹ Knowing that religious thought was constantly on the minds the people of medieval France, it would only make sense to interpret the *Winged Stags Tapestry* with religious connotations in mind, particularly because the imagery can be shown to have religious meaning.

The imagery of winged stags does not belong only to the kings of France; the symbol of the stag appears in both Christian art and literature. As seen in the Hergiswald Emblem created in 1654, (fig. 2) “a winged stag [is] poised to jump over a steep mountain or rock, with the motto ‘Alta alatis patent’ (‘The heavens are open to the winged ones’).”¹² This phrase was inspired by the constellation of Pegasus, the classical winged horse, but has since come to represent “the virtuous and devout Christian, endowed with the wings of faith and assisted on his way to heaven by the Virgin Mary, thus serving as an exhortation to a pious life and a reminder of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, patron saint of Hergiswald.”¹³ Raising the importance of the winged stags in the tapestry, this more-religious interpretation suggests that Charles VII was not only royal, but that he was destined for heaven. This religious connection would have been important

¹⁰ Bower and Lobdell, “The Role,” 16.

¹¹ Bower and Lobdell, “The Role,” 15.

¹² Alison Saunders and Peter Davidson, *Visual Words and Verbal Pictures: Essays in Honour of Michael Bath*. (Scotland: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 2005): 15. Although the Hergiswald Church was painted much later than the creation of the Tapestry, the information about it is still relevant since I have found that it reflects imagery and ideas from before the creation of the tapestry.

¹³ Saunders and Davidson, *Visual Words*, 15.

to the people of France due to their own hopes to rise to the heavens when their time came.

To further emphasize the connection between France and Heaven, it can be seen in the *Winged Stags Tapestry* that there are many plants including irises, roses, and lilies.

¹⁴ In the Christian world, the official, traditional monogram of Mary is decorated with lilies and ivy--the lily being a symbol of virginity and purity. ¹⁵ (fig. 3) Other Symbols of Mary include the “Mystic Rose,” which “symbolizes Mary's mystical participation in the Holy Trinity as Heaven's Rose or Mystical Rose,” and the iris or “sword lily” (along with the Fleur-de-lys), which represents “Our Lady’s Seven Sorrows.”¹⁶ Scholars have similarly observed that the appearance of multiple flowers were used to represent the Kingdom of Heaven, particularly as seen on the right side of the Wilton Diptych, created in 1395. ¹⁷(fig. 4)

There is one religious symbol, however, that would require little explanation to the people of France. This was the depiction of St. Michael Defeating the Dragon, which is depicted in the tapestry on the red banner held by the main stag. As described by the Museum of High Normandy:

¹⁴ “The Winged Stags,” *Musees en Haute Normandie*, <http://www.musees-haute-normandie.fr/en/a-decouvrir/featured-works/la-tapisserie-des-cerfs-ailes/>.

¹⁵ Pauly Fongemie, “The Symbols of Mary,” *Catholic Tradition*, <http://www.catholictradition.org/Mary/marys-symbols.htm>.

¹⁶ Pauly Fongemie, “The Symbols of Mary,” catholictraditions.org, accessed February 2014, <http://www.catholictradition.org/Mary/marys-symbols2.htm>. According to Fongemie’s research, Mary has more symbols including the pear, the almond, the periwinkle, and the pansy.

¹⁷ J.J.G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and their Methods of Work*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1992. In the video, “Wilton Diptych,” KhanAcademy.org, speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker, Dr. Beth Harris also point to the Stag is also a major symbol that appears in the Wilton Diptych; it can be seen that one of the figures on the left inner panel has a stag necklace as his symbol, and that the angels on the right inner panel are wearing stag broaches. Scholars, such as Michael Camile, *Glorious Visions*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1996): 167, suggest that this diptych is meant to show that King Richard II (shown with the stag necklace on the left) is “getting his right to rule from the Virgin Mary and from Christ; the divine right to rule England.”

The large winged stag holds the royal standard of Charles VII between its front legs. The floating end of the elongated, red and gold-fringed banner splits into two strips. Saint Michael is portrayed fighting the dragon against a red background sprinkled with small golden suns and one larger sun. The archangel has outspread wings and wears typical 15th-century armour. He holds a small blue shield (targe) with a white cross, brandishes a sword, and towers above the fierce, open-mouthed dragon, which is doomed to lose the fight.¹⁸

Given the commonality of this imagery at this time, much like the use of a national flag, it is my speculation that the people of France would have recognized not only the flag from it being shown in military parades and hung on special occasions, (fig. 5) but they would have had in mind the stories of St. Michael told by the church. The archangel Michael had come to be the French patron of warriors due to his victories over the devil and the dragon as it was written in the Bible:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (Revelation 12:7—9)

He was seen as the “defender of God’s people against satanic destruction.”¹⁹ By including the image of St. Michael on the *Winged Stags Tapestry*, the viewer would most certainly have made the connection to King Charles VII defeating his own ‘dragon,’ that

¹⁸ “The Winged Stags,” *Musees en Haute Normandie*, <http://www.musees-haute-normandie.fr/en/a-decouvrir/featured-works/la-tapisserie-des-cerfs-ailes/>.

¹⁹ Whitney Hopley, "How Does Archangel Michael Fight Satan During the End Times?," *About.com: Angels & Miracles*, <http://angels.about.com/od/AngelsReligiousTexts/f/How-Does-Archangel-Michael-Fight-Satan-During-The-End-Times.html>.

is England, but more specifically seen him, like Michael, being the defender of God's people.

Concerning the lions, it is best to focus on the stronger visual attributes rather than the religious undertones that could suggest a correlation with certain saints. The lions are most often connected with imagery of England due to the kingdom's use of "le lion passant" as a repeated symbol on many English flags.²⁰ (figs. 6, 7, 8). The problem with associating the lions on the tapestry with typical "lion passant," however, is that they are not generally shown as active or fierce. (fig. 9) The true heraldic lion is, however, "always to be represented in profile, or, as the ancient heralds say, showing but one eye and one ear. His attitude, also, should always be rampant or ravaging."²¹ In the tapestry, the lions are represented as "passant" in order to show England as having cowardice and less strength than France, when compared to the larger, more elegant stags.

If a citizen were able to read or be read to, any confusion or misinterpretation of the *Winged Stags Tapestry* would be solved. Accompanying the imagery, there is an inscription that reads almost like a pledge of allegiance to France; there are three banners that fly around the stags that read:²²

²⁰ Sean Ingle, "Why do England have three lions on their shirts?," *theguardian.com*, <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2002/jul/18/theknowledge.sport>. English flags often included the image of a lion: the flag for the Duchy of Lancaster showed three lions, the Crown of Castile flag had two lions, and the Royal Arms of England depicts two set of three lions.

²¹ Hugh Clark, *Introduction to Heraldry: With Nearly One Thousand Illustrations*, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 156.

²² Souchal, *Masterpieces*, 88-89.

“C’est estandart/est. une enseigne
 Qui. Aloial francoise enseigne
 De jamais ne la bandonner.
 S’il ne vault son/Bonheur [honneur?]
 donner.”

“This standard is a sign that tells each
 loyal Frenchman never to abandon it, if
 he does not wish to give up his honor.”

“Si. Nobles n a/dessoubz les ciulx
 Je ne. pourroye/porter. Miulx”

“So the Noble there are not beneath the
 skies... I could not carry better.”

“Armes. Porte. Tres glorieuses. [...]
 Et. Sur. Toutes victorieuses.”

“I carry very glorious arms, victorious
 over all other.”

These words tell the reading audience that the people of France should be loyal to the kingdom because then they will be a part of a noble and victorious country.²³ Wherever the tapestry was set on display, there would have likely been an orator giving his interpretation or reading, which would have provided more information to the illiterate or uneducated.²⁴

Encapsulating the meaning of the *Winged Stags Tapestry*, based on all of the symbolism given, it is my interpretation that the tapestry represents France as a kind of Holy Land; the stags, representing piety, are stepping into the kingdom of France under the guidance of the Virgin Mary, whose flowers cover the geography of the tapestry, and are also shown on a shield showing that she is protecting France, appointing the land as holy. Her flowers are also covering the ground to signify that France is related to the gardens of heaven. All of this imagery points to the devotion of the King of France Charles VII to God. To further emphasize the importance of France, the hierarchy of the

²³ Souchal, *Masterpieces*, 89.

²⁴ Souchal, *Masterpieces*, 89.

figures show that the “French” stags are more powerful than the diminutive “English” lions.

Dictating the translation of the intended message, the iconographic symbolism and the written inscription found in the *Winged Stags Tapestry* aid in its use as a form of propaganda. While it does not look like the stereotypical propaganda of today, the tapestry does contain many of the elements of propaganda art from the medieval ages. Encyclopædia Britannica defines propaganda as the “dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion.”²⁵ The basic elements of propaganda include repetition, simplicity, imagery, and sentiment.²⁶ Based on evidence discussed earlier, it is clear that the *Winged Stags Tapestry* contains all of these elements:

- Repetition- the tapestry displays multiple French symbols including the winged stags, the standard of Charles VII, and multiple instances of the fleur-de-lys.
- Simplicity- the religious iconography is common and well known to the people of France.
- Imagery- the actual execution of the tapestry is aesthetically pleasing, and would cause an individual to want to view it for longer, which would also allow for more interpretation.
- Sentiment- all of the elements of the tapestry, if properly understood, could create a feeling of pride or envy.

Viewing the *Winged Stags Tapestry* would surely make any frenchman feel patriotism for his country in ways we recognize as positive propaganda. Just as the stags

²⁵ Bruce Smith, "Propaganda," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/478875/propaganda>.

²⁶ Foothill Technology High School, "Basic Elements of Propaganda," http://www.foothilltech.org/rgeib/english/media_literacy/basic_elements_of_propaganda.htm.

of Normandy and Guyenne step into the fenced, protective wall of France, so will the people of Normandy and Guyenne accept their king as victorious over all.

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"Wilton Diptych" (Video), KhanAcadamy.org, Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker, Dr. Beth Harris, (6 min 27 sec). <http://khan.addu.edu.ph/humanities/art-history/art-history-1400-1500-renaissance-in-italy-and-the-north/england/v/wilton-diptych/>. (Accessed February 19, 2014).



Figure 1: Tapisserie des Cerfs Ailés (The Winged Stags Tapestry)

Circa Mid 14th Century France

3.47m X 3.8m

Musée départemental des Antiquités de Rouen.

http://www.musees-haute-normandie.fr/objet.php3?lang=en&idrub=73&id_article=1620#top



*Figure 2: “Alta Alatis Patent” Hergiswald Emblem
Circa 1654 Switzerland
Wallfahrtskirche Hergiswald*

<http://www.denkenundschreiben.ch/nicolemueller.swf>

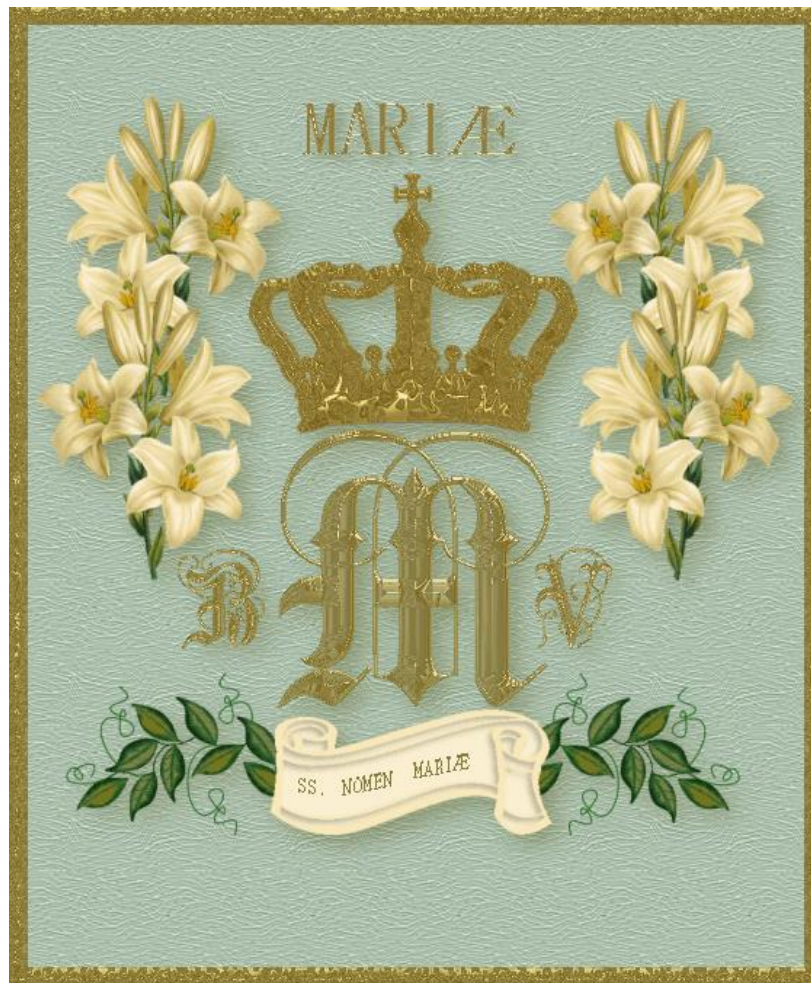


Figure 3: Monogram of Mary

<http://www.catholictradition.org/Mary/marys-symbols.htm>



Figure 4: The Wilton Diptych
Circa 1395-9 England or France
Each panel is 53 x 37 cm
The National Gallery

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/english-or-french-the-wilton-diptych>



Figure 5: The Great Standard of Charles VII

<http://jean-claude.colrat.pagesperso-orange.fr/2-armee.htm>

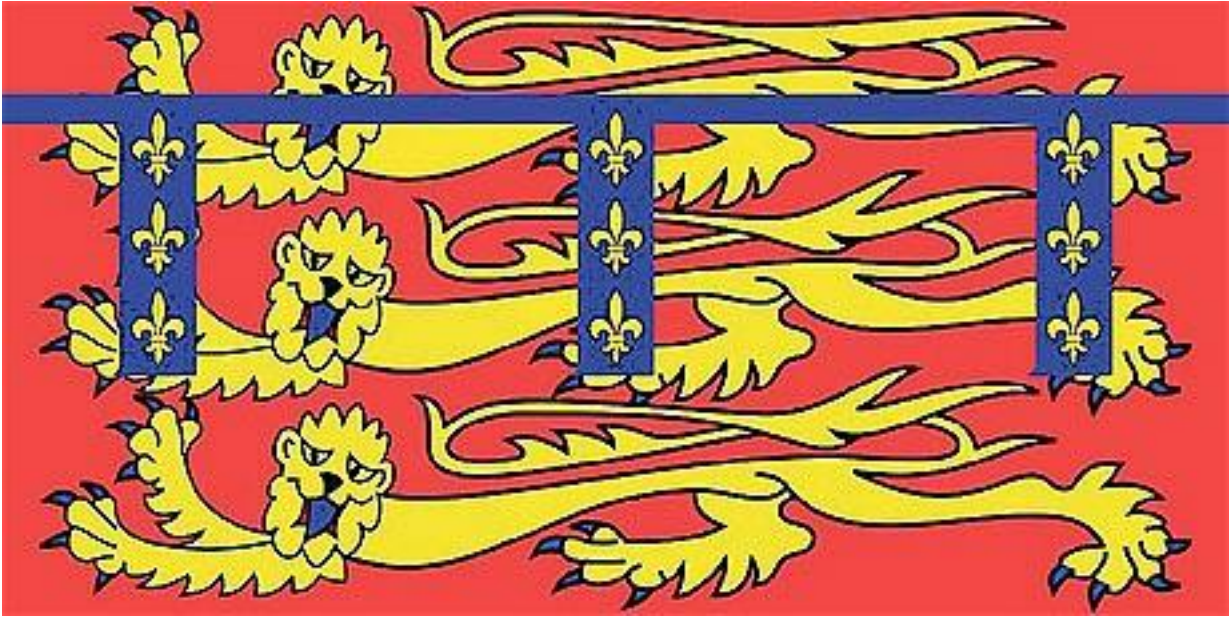


figure 6: The Standard of the Duchy of Lancaster

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/8369303/A-flag-that-wont-offend-when-the-Queen-visits-Ireland.html>

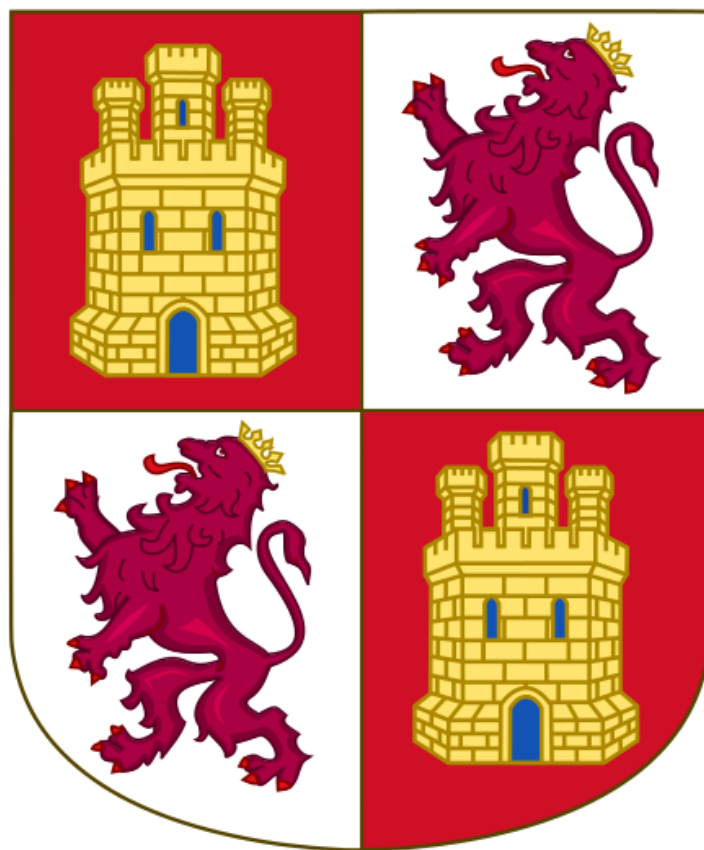


Figure 7: Arms of Castile and León

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arms_of_Castile_and_Leon.svg

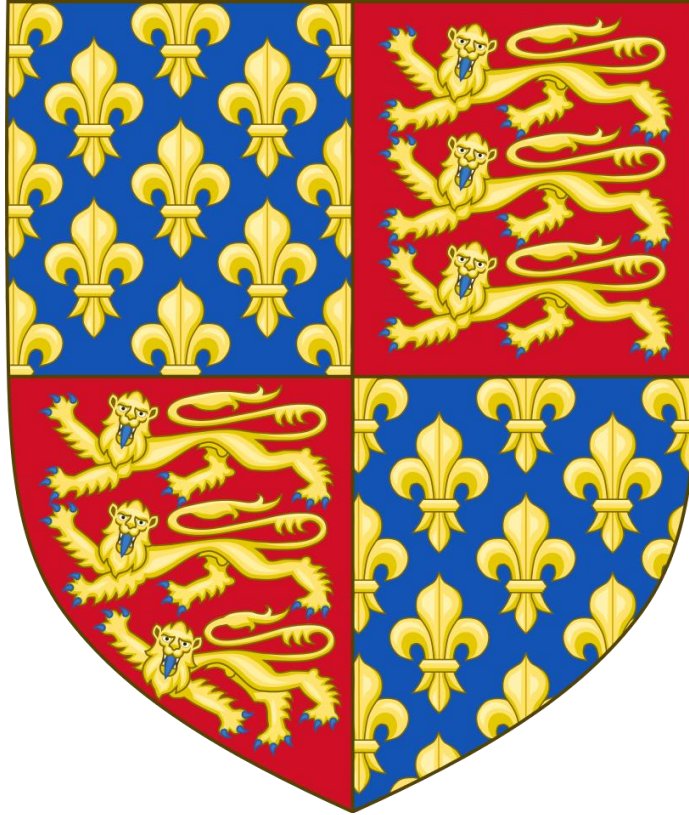


Figure 8: Royal Arms of England

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Arms_of_England_\(1340-1367\).svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Arms_of_England_(1340-1367).svg)

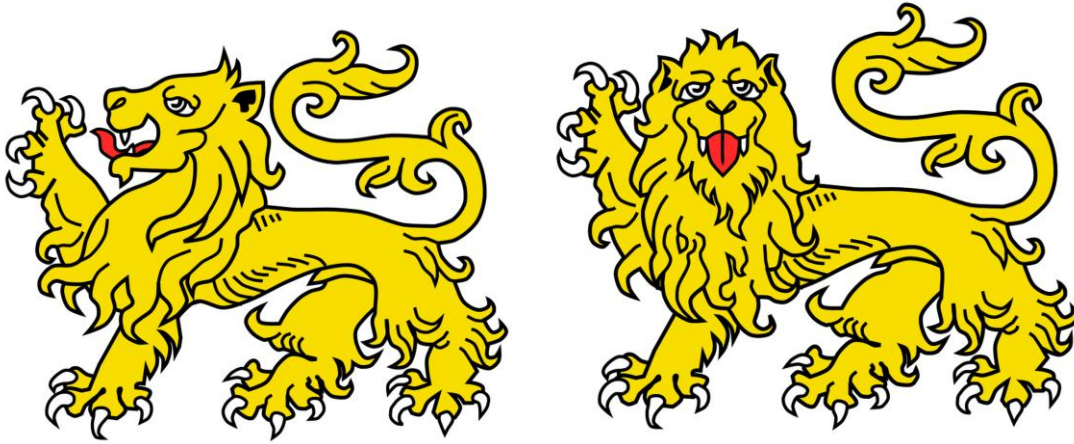


Figure 9: Heraldic Lions “Lion Passant” and “Lion Passant Guardant”

<http://www.internationalheraldry.com/>