

Camels in Heraldry: Symbols in War and Peace

by David B. Appleton

The camel, the so-called “ship of the desert,” is a rare but not unknown charge in heraldry. What is this strangely-shaped animal, sometimes called “a horse designed by a committee”? And why is it found at all in coats of arms across Europe, far from its native lands?

Background

There are two kinds of camels in the world: the one-humped Arabian or dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*), found primarily in Arabia, North Africa, and India; and the two-humped Bactrian (*Camelus bactrianus*), found mostly in the highlands of central Asia. The Bactrian is shorter, heavier, a little slower, and has a longer coat of fur than its one-humped cousin. Both types are primarily used as beasts of burden, although they also provide wool, milk, hides, and meat.

The dromedary was domesticated more than 5,000 years ago in the Middle East, and is mentioned in the Bible some 45 times. The Bactrian camel was domesticated only about 2,500 years ago in Central Asia.

Because of its importance to the people of the middle east, the camel has become inextricably linked with the Arabs and the Arabic language. This link can be demonstrated by the observation that, “in Arabic, every word means one thing, its opposite, something obscene, and something about a camel¹.”

Camels did appear in Europe on occasion in the Middle Ages. In 1162, King Henry II of England received gifts loaded on camels and horses from the Moorish King of Valencia and Murcia². And in the early 13th Century, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II had camels in his royal menagerie³.

The Camel in Heraldry

But what of the use of camels in heraldry? Why do we find camels in coats of arms and crests at all? What meaning can they have?

According to the 15th Century heraldic manual and bestiary, *The Deidis of Armorie*: “The camel ... betokens that he that first bore him in arms was a great lord, wise, unyielding, and mighty,

1. Justice, p. 40

2. Hyland, p. 104

3. Coss, p. 76

and suitable for battle, humbling himself and ready to take the charge of his subjects, and right patient in his deeds⁴.”

A number of heraldic authors give differing interpretations for what a camel symbolizes in armory. One says patience, discretion, and prudence⁵; another, expeditiousness⁶; a third, sloth⁷; yet others, endurance⁸; perseverance⁹; and even indefatigable perseverance¹⁰. But what does the camel really symbolize in arms? The fact different heraldic authors give meanings for camels which are direct opposites (*e.g.*, expeditiousness and sloth) lends support to the idea that the so-called “symbolism” of most heraldic charges and tinctures has no basis in fact.

And then there’s the question of what kind of camel is used in heraldry, Bactrian or dromedary? The late J.P. Brooke-Little, in his book *An Heraldic Alphabet*¹¹, states: “The one-humped variety is usually depicted but the Bactrian or common camel with two humps has also been used.... No distinction is made in blazoning the two varieties, although obviously it should be.”

Or perhaps it’s just that heralds have the same difficulty as American humorist Ogden Nash, who wrote:

The camel has a single hump;
The dromedary, two;
Or else the other way around.
I’m never sure. Are you?

Why Are Camels Used in Heraldry?

But to return to the question of why camels are found in heraldry at all ...

Canting Arms

Many, perhaps most, are clearly – but not surprisingly – found in canting (punning) arms, where the name of the beast sounds like the surname of the bearer. This use occurs in many arms in many languages all across Europe. As only a few examples of this, we find camels in the arms of:

4. “The camell ... betaknys þat he þat first bur him in arnes wes a gret lord, wis, stark, and mychty, and conueniant in battell, humiliand him and redy to tak þe charge of his Subgettis; and rychte pacient in his dedis.” (*Deidis of Armorie*, Vol. 1, p. 25)

5. di Valfrei, p. 46

6. Kent, vol. 1, p. 352

7. Ferne, pp. 236-237, citing Jacobus Capellanus

8. Metzsig, p. 40

9. Geoghegan

10. Nesbit, Vol. I, p. 332

11. p. 58

Camelli (Italy) [Figure 1]

Camilleri (Malta): *Azure atop a terrace Vert a camel statant Proper by its head a decrescent in chief three mullets of six points Argent.*

Cammell (England): *Quarterly: 1 and 4, Azure a camel statant Argent; 2 and 3, Lozengy Argent and Azure.*

Chameau (France): *Per fess Sable and Argent a camel statant Gules.*

Chaumel (France): *Argent a dromedary passant Proper on a chief Azure three mullets Or.*

And in the arms of Gobbi (Italy): *Azure atop a terrace Vert a camel passant Argent.*

This last is a more obscure cant, but one which makes more sense when you realize that in Italian *gobba* means “hump.”

Kemele (Flanders): *Vert three camel’s heads couped Or.*

As a crest for Camelo (Portugal): *A demi-camel rampant Proper through its nose a ring Sable.*

As a crest for Campbell of Succoth (Scotland): *A camel’s head Proper.* [Figure 2]

Military

But what about some of the other arms in which camels appear? Perhaps a man who went on the Crusades? A camel seems less likely a charge for commemorating that than does one or another of the many heraldic crosses. Indeed, I have not yet found any coats of arms dating back to the Crusades era which display a camel.

On the other hand, some more recent coats of arms and crests incorporate a camel to recall service in the Middle East and Africa. For instance, we have the examples of:

- Baron Gilbert-Julien Vinot (*Or on a fess gules between a dromedary statant and a pyramid sable the Legion of Honor proper*), who took part in Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt as well as the later campaigns in Europe. As a Brigadier General, he was wounded in Vitoria, and as Maréchal de Camp, he was wounded in the Battle of Ligny on June 16, 1815, just two days before the Battle of Waterloo¹². The camel, as well as the pyramid, in his arms references his military service in Egypt.



Figure 1: Photo by the author



Figure 2: Photo by the author

12. Wikipedia, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_Julian_Vinot (accessed May 22, 2018)

- Guillaume Dode de la Brunerie (*Écartelé: au 1, d'or, à un dromadaire passant de sable; aux 2 et 3, d'azur, à un compas ouvert d'or; au 4, d'argent, à trois croissants d'azur*) [Figure 3], was a Marshal of France. In Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, he was employed in fortifying Gizeh, Cairo, and Alexandria. Promoted to major in 1801, he stayed in Egypt until the French forces there capitulated, returning to France in November of that same year¹³. Here, too, the camel in his arms memorializes his military service in Egypt.



Figure 3: de la Brunerie
Wikipedia Image by Jimmy44

- Dominique Jean Larrey (*Écartelé: au 1, d'or, à un palmier de sinople, posé à dextre, soutenu d'une terrasse du même, et acc. d'un dromadaire passant d'azur; aux 2 et 3, d'azur, à trois chevrons d'or; au 4, coupé: a. d'argent à la barre ondée de gueules, ch. d'une raie nageante du champ; b. d'or à une pyramide de sable.*) was a surgeon in Napoleon's *Grande Armée* and an important innovator in battlefield medicine and triage. He went to Egypt in 1798, and built military hospitals in Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and Palestine. After seeing the speed with which the carriages of the French flying artillery maneuvered across the battlefields, Larrey adapted them as *ambulance volantes* ("flying ambulances") for rapid transport of the wounded, and manned them with trained crews of drivers, corpsmen and litterbearers. It has been said that even in the harsh desert terrain, his flying ambulances would collect the wounded in less than 15 minutes¹⁴. Once again, the camel, standing by a palm tree, and the pyramid in his arms refer to his service in Egypt and the Levant.

- Horatio Herbert Kitchener served in Egypt in the 1880s where he took part in the reconstruction of the Egyptian Army, which was then led by British military officers. At the beginning of 1890 he was appointed Inspector General of the Egyptian police before moving to the position of Adjutant-General of the Egyptian Army in 1890 and *Sirdar* (Commander-in-Chief) of the Egyptian Army in 1892.

In 1896, the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, ordered Kitchener to invade northern Sudan, ostensibly for the purpose of distracting the Ansar ("Dervishes") of the Mahdiah state from attacking the Italians in Eritrea, as well as in retaliation for the death of Major-General Charles George Gordon at Khartoum in 1885. Kitchener won victories at the Battles of Ferkeh and Hafir in 1896, after which he was promoted to major-general. He achieved further successes at the Battle of Atbara and the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, following which he was created Baron Kitchener of Khartoum and of Aspall¹⁵, with an augmentation of arms and supporters "as a lasting memorial of the conspicuous talent and ability displayed by him on divers[e] important occasions during [the] recent expedition to Omdurman, which terminated in the capture of Khartoum¹⁶."

13. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillaume_Dode_de_la_Brunerie (accessed May 22, 2018)

14. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominique_Jean_Larrey (accessed May 22, 2018)

15. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Herbert_Kitchener,_1st_Earl_Kitchener (accessed May 22, 2018)

16. 7 April 1900 grant of augmentation and supporters by Sir A. W. Woods, Garter, in virtue of a Royal Warrant dated 26 May 1899, quoted by Hubert de Vries on *As Sudan*, <http://www.hubert-herald.nl/Sudan.htm> (accessed June 8, 2018)

The camel supporters in his achievement of arms, and the later single camel supporter following his becoming Earl Kitchener of Khartoum and of Aspell, are a clear reference his long military career in Egypt and Africa¹⁷.

45 Squadron, Royal Air Force

The winged camel badge of the 45 Squadron of the Royal Air Force [Figure 4] commemorates two different but related things: (1) the aircraft used by the Squadron in France and Italy for much of World War I, the Sopwith Camel (called so because of the hump-shaped cowling, a protective covering, over its machine guns just in front of the pilot), and (2) the Squadron's post-WWI association with the Middle East. Beginning in April 1921, the squadron was based in Helwan, Egypt, following which it served for nearly fifty years in the Middle East and Far East¹⁸. Now based in England, the squadron still marks its aircraft with its winged camel badge.



Figure 4: 45 Squadron
Public domain from Wikipedia

GHQ MELF

The General Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces, originally named the Middle East Command, was a British Army Command established in Egypt prior to the Second World War. Its primary role was to command British land forces and co-ordinate with the relevant naval and air commands to defend British interests in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean¹⁹.

In 1947 the General Headquarters, Middle East Land Forces adopted a variation of the earlier Command's insignia (*Sable a dromedary statant or*). The golden camel in their arms, an obvious reference to the area of authority of the Middle East Command, was retained, but the background was changed from all black to the army colors of red at the top and blue below (*Per fess gules and azure a dromedary statant or*).

13th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion

The U.S. Army's 13th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion [Figure 5] is "a modular, corps-level support organization responsible for providing multifunctional logistics support to maneuver, fires, and effects organizations as well as multifunctional logistics assistance to other support organizations²⁰." That is to say, in less formal terms, the battalion is involved in gathering and distributing equipment, facilities, technical information, and trained personnel, all essential to the proper operation of a campaign.



Figure 5: 13th CSSB, US Army
Public domain from Wikimedia

17. Burke's Peerage, p. 1464

18. Jefford

19. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_East_Command (accessed May 22, 2018)

20. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_Combat_Sustainment_Support_Battalion_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_Combat_Sustainment_Support_Battalion_(United_States)) (accessed May 22, 2018)

In the early 1990s, the battalion was deployed to southwest Asia and to Somalia in support of operations there. More recently, it has been sent to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq²¹. The camel crest not only commemorates their service in southwest Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, but also – because the camel is so often used as a beast of burden to carry goods and supplies – to their mission in logistics support.

Peace and Trade

But every bit as much as it has been a symbol of wartime service in Egypt, North Africa, and the Middle East, the camel has also been used as a symbol of peace, and especially of peacetime trade with distant, foreign, and exotic lands.

A symbol of distant (foreign and exotic) lands

Anciently, camels were used by the Romans as the personification of Arabia, and the camel is found as such on Roman coins from the first and second centuries.

That same symbolism can also be found in more modern times. The English merchants Lambe and Son, dealers in tea, coffee, spices and sugar, issued a medallion in 1794 with a camel upon it as a symbol of the Orient, from whence came the tea, coffee, and spices they sold.

In heraldry, too, we find camels as symbols of distant and exotic lands. For example, there are camels in the attributed arms of such places as Samaria in the Levant and Cana in India.

In modern times, this same symbolism, the use of camels as an indicator of geographic location, appears in the arms of such states as the Central Saharan Republic ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Central Saharan Republic#/media/File:Coat of arms of Central Saharan Republic.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Central_Saharan_Republic#/media/File:Coat_of_arms_of_Central_Saharan_Republic.png)) and the State of Eritrea (<https://heraldry-wiki.com/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Eritrea>), both in Africa.

A symbol of trade and commerce

Because it can be used as a symbol of trade and commerce, author Peter Spurrier says in *The Heraldic Art Source Book* of the camel, “This animal is met with most frequently in the arms of companies who trade in the East²².”

In one example of this, the Worshipful Company of Grocers of the City of London has as its crest *A Camel passant Or bridled Sable on his back a bale Argent charged with six cloves Sable and corded of the last*. The camel bearing a pack charged with cloves is an obvious representation of the trade in spices from the Orient.

Another example can be found in the arms of The Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors. From its beginnings as a guild of tailors in London, by the late 15th century the senior membership contained an increasing number of wealthy merchants, trading within England and

21. See, *supra*, n. 20.

22. Spurrier, p. 74

overseas²³. The golden camel supporters of its coat of arms are emblematic of that broad range of its trade.

In yet another example, there is the well-known, though ill-fated, Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies²⁴, on whose coat of arms you can find, along with a ship under sail, an elephant, and a South American llama, a camel. “The camel doubtless was intended to symbolize the riches of the Orient²⁵.”

On the Continent, we find a camel in the arms of the *Zunft zum Kämbel*, the *Kämbel* guild [Figure 6] of Zürich, Switzerland, established in 1336. The organization is one in an association of guilds there. While its arms are also clearly canting, by playing on the name *Kämbel*, they also refer to the primary activities of its members, who originally were food dealers and wine merchants in the medieval city of Zürich²⁶.



Figure 6: Zunft zum Kämbel
Wikipedia image by Roland zh

Finally, camels, usually bearing loads of trade goods, may also be found in the arms of some western Asian cities as an emblem of trade and commerce. For example, there are camels in the arms of Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semey>), et Chelyabinsk, Russia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chelyabinsk>), cities which were once part of the extended Silk Road, a wide-ranging network of trade routes between China on the one side and the Middle East and Europe on the other.

Conclusion

For two thousand years and more, the camel has been a symbol of distant and often exotic lands. This same symbolism has been adopted into heraldry, where – in addition to their use in canting arms – camels have come to not only memorialize military service in wartime in North Africa, in the Middle East, and in the deserts of southwest and central Asia, but also, and more lastingly, to serve as symbols of peaceful trade with those same distant places.

23. Merchant Taylors Company

24. Nesbit, Vol. I, p. 140

25. Galles, p. 22

26. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zunft_zum_K%C3%A4mbel (accessed May 22, 2018)

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