

JOURNAL SCAN

The New Zealand Armorer No. 129 Summer 2013-2014 (came in January), apart from Roger Barnes' *Sirens*, has a delightful creature that may be a Basilisk on the shield and the crest of one von Breitbach on an armorial monument from the 16th century, in Germany, and in an article on the Arms of Gregory John Morgan, four examples by different artists, including the bookplate we saw in No 151 and this coloured version by our member Yvonne Holton (*right*).



FLAGMASTER 149 December 2013 (but came in February 2014) has a splendid Unicorn helping to support the arms of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, thirteen Double-headed Eagles on Royal Flags of the Former Yugoslavia, and a tiny Harpy, or *Frauenadler*, in the arms of the Grand Duke of Leichtenstein on his historical banner.



TAK TENT No. 62 Winter 2014 (i.e. February) surprisingly has no Unicorns, but it does have an unusual black two-headed crowned Eagle holding up a banner of the recently augmented arms of Peter Drummond-Murray of Mastrick (*right*).

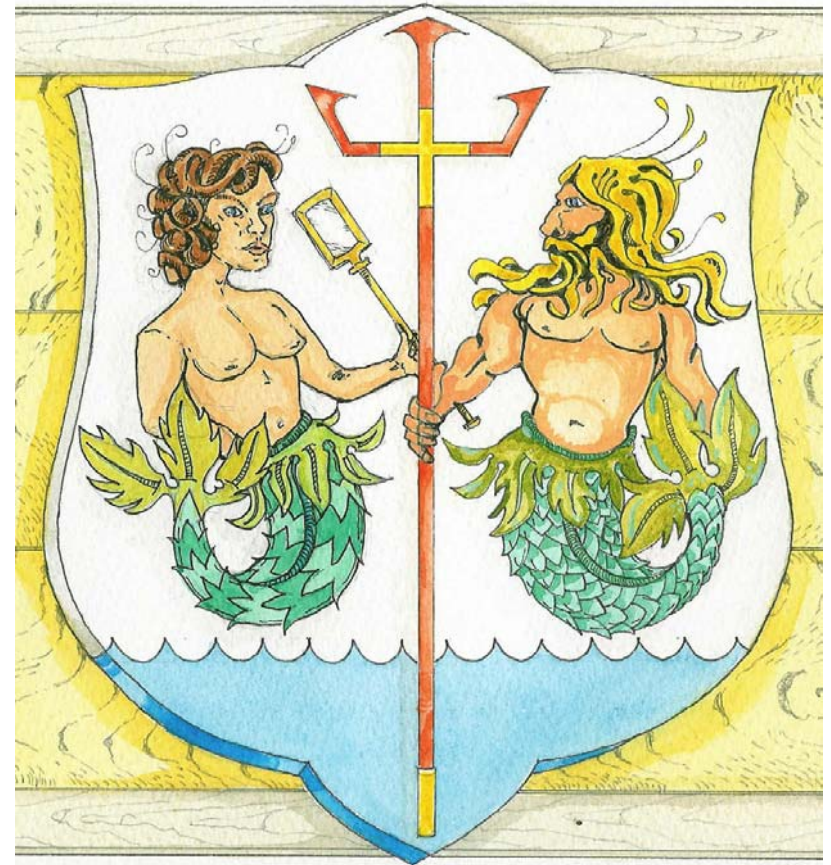
The Blazon Vol 8 No 1 Issue 15 Winter 2013 (also came in February 2014), apart from much interesting news from British Columbia, has a Phoenix in the rather small picture of the arms of The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, who was Governor General of Canada from 1999 to 2005.

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The Journal of The College of Dracology

No.156 St Ethelbert's Day 2014



Mermaid and Merman drawn by Dave Perks SHA



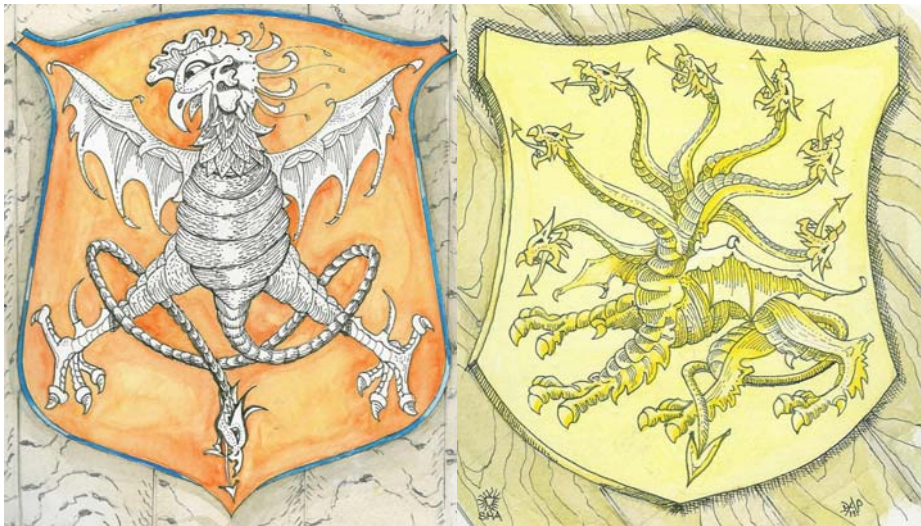
The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts



Saint Ethelbert, whose feast day falls on 24th February, was dealt with in No 82 in 2007, and there is little to add to what was written then. He was one of England's early saints.

Today is also dedicated to Saint Matthias, one of the Apostles, who was the replacement for Judas, and therefore not present at the Last Supper.

Dave Perks has drawn a number of fabulous creatures for us, a selection being shown in No 153. His latest effort, the Mermaid and Merman shown on the cover, fits in well with the current theme, covering both Christopher Howse's *Sacred Mysteries* column from *The Daily Telegraph* of Saturday 8th February 2014 on the subject of Mermaids and Sirens, and also the essay on Sirens by **Roger Barnes** from *The New Zealand Armorer*, No.129, both quoted in full here. We are grateful to Roger and to Gregor Macaulay, Editor of the *Armorer*, for letting us have colour versions of some of the illustrations which he had printed in monochrome ("shades of grey"). Roger is a master dracologist and a great artist, as we have seen before, and his scholarly contributions are always welcome. To carry on the series, here are a couple more of Dave's drawings, the Basilisk and the Hydra (*compare with Jim Winstanley's version in No 151*). There are more to come.



The modern arms of Warsaw (*below left*) have a red field with a mermaid brandishing a sword (both *Proper*) and holding a round, golden shield. The round shield is sometimes charged with the Polish eagle *en umbra* / *adumbrated* (i.e. depicted with only an outline or shadow).



Above (*right*) is "The Maid of Warsaw," badge of the 2nd Polish Corps. In 1944, its Commander gave the soldiers of the British 7th Hussars the right to wear the badge. It is now worn as a sleeve badge (in red and white) by the successor regiment, The Queen's Royal Hussars.

The siren (as illustrated in the medieval fashion right) could be used in heraldry, although not necessarily with a musical instrument, to symbolize both the modern warning siren and the dangers associated with the work of emergency rescue services. And also, perhaps, the recklessness of some of those being rescued.





Three sirens with a comb and two fishes, but no musical instruments.
(From the Worksop Bestiary, English, 12th century.)

melodies will suddenly become the prey of their enemies or even the devil.

Many of the monsters which we find in heraldry were drawn from medieval bestiaries and Greek mythology. Other than an example given by Rodney Dennys [see *Dragonlore No 51*] of a supporter that looks like a harpy but might have been intended for a siren (depicted as a bird with a woman's head), the only siren in heraldry of which I am aware is that of the old arms of the Polish city of Warsaw. However, this creature started, it seems, as a man-headed dragon, changed during the 15th and 16th centuries into a siren (right, from a book cover dated 1659) and is now a mermaid representing Melusina from the River Vistula, which flows through the city. The sword and the round shield are all that remain from the original.



THE MERMAID ON THE CHURCH ROOF by Christopher Howse

A lovely book has just come out, about some of the most lively and beautiful medieval sculpture in Britain. It is by Alex Woodcock, a stonemason, who has also published scholarly work on the art.

His new book (Impress Books, £9.99), illustrated in colour, is called *Of Sirens and Centaurs*. The odd thing is that there are, I'd argue, no sirens in it. Let me explain.

Stunning pieces of carving at Exeter cathedral, on which the book focuses as a prime collection of sculpture in situ, depict mermaids. The one pictured here is on a roof-boss in the most sacred part of the cathedral before the high altar. Her tail used to be coloured with silver leaf.



Dr Woodcock is right to say that it is hard to substantiate a moral interpretation of mermaids as representing earthly passions catching unwary Christians (shown sometimes as fishes in their grasp). As he points out, mermaids often figure in the water that St. Christopher fords, in the paintings that often decorated the wall opposite the church door. Some mermaids look vainly into mirrors. The impression is that they were just creatures likely to be encountered in fabled seas.

By the high Middle Ages, mermaids and sirens had become hopelessly confused. The classical tale of sirens is in the *Odyssey*, where sailors risked being lured to their deaths by their song. They had "wynges and clawes" as John Trevisa, the 14th-century encyclopedist, noted.

Some woman-birds are depicted at Exeter. A carved misericord in the choir shows a woman with the body of a bird, except that the bird's legs are her arms, ending in hands. Facing her is a similar male hybrid, and they seem to hold hands affectionately.

Dr Woodcock calls them "harpy-like," as I might too. But the word *harpy* was not found in English until 1540, 300 years after the misericords were carved. There was the Latin *harpyia*, meaning the rapacious winged agent of vengeance of classical myth. But that can't fit this misericord carving – which is certainly not a siren in any sense either.

To complicate things, a quite separate meaning for *siren* was current in the Middle Ages, to translate the Latin *sirenae* in Isaiah's lament for the ruin of Babylon. The Authorised Version of 1611 has: "Owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces." The word *dragons* stands for *sirenae*, which here in the Middle Ages were taken to be a kind of flying serpent. A Wycliffite version in English has "winged adders." Whatever *sirenae* meant, it couldn't be mermaids, dancing in the Mesopotamian desert.

Dr Woodcock's exploration of the theme of sirens is so full of ideas that it sometimes made me want to argue back. He says, for example, that "popular revels

could be and certainly were by the later medieval period, visually linked with the siren.” He cites a carved bench-end at the church of the Holy Ghost, Crowcombe, which, he says, show mermen emerging from the ears of a Green Man. But they do not have the fish-scale tails of mermen; their lower parts are like leafy cornucopias.

Medieval churches, as Nicholas Orme makes clear in his book *The Church in Devon* (2013), were not in use for feasting and drinking, (against which carved sirens might somehow warn). Dr Woodcock cites a 13th-century complaint by Thomas of Chobham, but that is aimed at wanton women and foolish young men singing in the churchyard and the church all night. If anything this shows that some churches weren’t locked at night.

Nor can I agree that carved animal musicians reflect an official church distrust of music. Think of the angel musicians in Fra Angelico’s *Court of Heaven* in the National Gallery (one with the sort of tabor shown on an Exeter mermaid misericord).

But if Dr Woodcock makes me argue it is only because he gets me to look at Exeter’s tremendous sculptures and think about them.

IVORY CONCERNS

There is an insatiable demand for ivory from countries in the far east, and our Royal Princes are amongst those who are concerned that the continuing poaching may lead to the extinction of elephants, to the extent that they are wondering whether the many pieces of ivory artwork in the Royal Collections should be destroyed as a deterrent. Among the pieces threatened by this drastic action would be this carved hilt on a duelling sword (*right*) bought by King George IV for £21 (worth £1,700 in today’s money), showing Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a dragon (from *The Daily Mail*, 18 February 2014).

I remember my father had carved two small figures from ivory, one showing a young man stringing a bow and the other showing the archer on his toes having turned to loose his arrow at a passing bird. Both neatly exploited the gentle curvature of the tusks. His later sculptures were all modelled in clay and cast in bronze, so he never used ivory again. He tried using molten lead poured into a mould, but never got it to work.

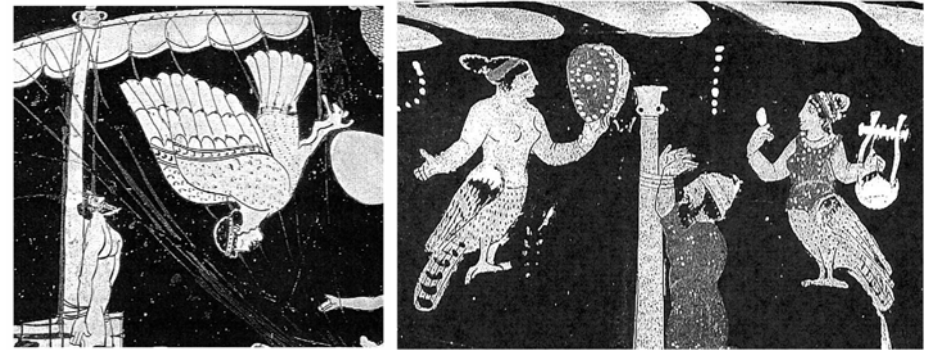


SIRENS by Roger Barnes

The sirens inhabited an isle off southern Italy, and their beautiful singing enchanted passing mariners who were drawn irresistibly towards them and lulled into sleep. At that point, the sirens would descend on the sailors, tear them apart with their talons, and devour their flesh.

When Odysseus sailed by, he had been fore-warned by Circe, so he plugged the ears of his men and had them tie him to the mast so that he alone could hear the sweet music, and his crew could not hear his entreaties to free him. And so, his ship was able to continue its voyage with no harm to its crew.

When Jason and the Argonauts passed near the island of the sirens, Orpheus sang and played on his lyre – music that was more entrancing than that of the sirens. The Argo, too, passed onward, losing but one crew-man, who jumped overboard and swam ashore. The sirens, infuriated by their failure to entice the remaining sailors, threw themselves into the sea, where they were transformed into rocks.



The word ‘siren’ comes from the Greek, meaning to bind, to entangle or to draw with a rope. The ancient Greeks depicted sirens as birds with women’s heads (*above left*, from a stamnos – pot – made near Athens, c.450 BC) and sometimes with the whole upper body of a woman and playing musical instruments. *Above right* is a detail from a bell-shaped krater (deep bowl) made in Paestum on the west coast of Italy (about half-way between Rome and the “toe” of the “boot”) in the middle of the 4th century BC. Two sirens with women’s torsos and arms hold a tambourine and a lyre. In both pictures, Odysseus has been bound firmly to the mast. Capri, not too far from Paestum, is one of the possible locations for the sirens’ isle.

Medieval bestiaries showed the siren in various ways, but often as a woman down to the waist, below that a bird’s body, wings and legs (sometimes with webbed feet), and with the tail becoming that of a fish. This medieval version, also, occasionally played an instrument such as a gittern, harp, pipe, or lyre, and sometimes held a fish.

The moral which the bestiaries drew from the old stories of imprudent men being lured to their deaths by beautiful music is that those who are enticed by earthly pleasures including such seemingly innocent things as comedies and musical