

MYTH AND PROPAGANDA IN THE BOOK OF ST. ALBANS

by

David B. Appleton

Introduction

Definition of “Myth”

Myth: “A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena. Properly distinguished from *allegory* and from *legend* (which implies a nucleus of fact) but often used vaguely to include any narrative having fictitious elements.”¹ “A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.” “A popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal.” “A fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology.”²

Define of “Propaganda”

Propaganda: “Any association, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine or practice.”³ “The systematic propagation of a doctrine or cause or of information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such a doctrine or cause.”⁴

What is the Book of St. Albans?

The Book of St. Albans, or to give it its full title, *The Bokys of Haukyng and Huntyng; and also of coot-armuris*, published in 1486, is a book of three treatises written to guide “gentill men and honest persones” in the arts necessary to an English gentleman; hawking, hunting, and, important to our purposes here, heraldry. (A second edition published ten years later in 1496 added another treatise on fishing with an angle, or hook.)

Much has been written about the authorship of this book, which is probably not all from one hand. The part on hunting, which is in verse, ends with the words “*Explicit* Dam Julyans Barnes in her boke of huntyng,” and this is generally considered to refer to a Juliana Berners, daughter of Sir James Berners and sister of Richard, Lord Berners, and one of the earliest women writers in English, traditionally prioress of the nunnery of Sopwell near St. Albans.⁵ More recent scholarship has identified the probable writer as Julians [sic] Barnes, the wife of the holder of a manor near St. Albans.⁶

Why is it important?

The Book of St. Albans is a seminal work in several respects. It was the first book published in Hertfordshire, England,⁷ just ten years after the introduction of the printing press to England by Caxton. It is the earliest example of color printing in England.⁸ It is the earliest treatise on heraldry

written in English. Though it was clearly derived from (or from the same source as) Nicholas Upton's *De re Militari*, written in Latin about 1441 (*The Boke of St. Albans* uses most of the same illustrations of crosses, lines of division, charges, etc., and in the same order as Upton's work⁹, in many cases not even differing by tincture), it also had an undeniable influence upon other and later works in the field. It may have influenced *The Deidis of armorie: a heraldic treatise and bestiary*, written in Scotland after 1494 by R. Andersoun, Andersoun's essay on heraldry being "very similar" to that found in *St. Albans*.¹⁰ Sir John Ferne's *The Blazon of Gentrie*, published a century later in 1586, borrows heavily from the *Boke of St. Albans*, even to the point of using some terms which are found nowhere else. For all of these reasons, then, the *Book of St. Albans* holds a special place in the history of heraldry in Great Britain and the English-speaking world.

Myth About the Book of St. Albans

There are myths not just in but about the Book of St. Albans. In his *Heraldry and Heraldry in the Middle Ages*, no less an authority than Anthony Wagner, at that time Richmond Herald of the College of Arms in London, in speaking of the blazoning system substituting the names of gemstones for the usual names of the tinctures, says: "This fantastic system, which was invented by Sicily herald before 1458 and is described in the *Boke of St. Albans* and elsewhere."¹¹ In fact, however, while the Book of St. Albans does associate the heraldic tinctures with gemstones (and orders of angels, and various virtues), it does not describe a system of using these gemstones as substitutes for the usual names of the tinctures, nor does it advocate such use, itself using the usual English names for the tinctures in all cases (substituting only silver for argent and gold for or).

Myth In the Book of St. Albans

Heraldic author Gerard Brault has noted that "The writers of medieval heraldic treatises ... did not always reflect actual practice, but fantasized about it or rationalized matters, often to an astonishing degree."¹² They often did not reflect actual history, either. Our author tells us: "Insomuch that all gentleness comes from God in Heaven, at heaven I will begin, where were five orders of angels and now stand but four, in coat-armors of knowledge encrowned full high with precious stones."

Why is this a myth? Remember our first definition of the term: "A ... fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena." (OED)

"Japheth made first the target [shield] and therein he made a ball in token of all the world. And afterwards, two thousand eighteen years before the incarnation of Christ, coat-armor was made and figured at the siege of Troy, where in *Gesta Trojanorum* it tells what the first beginning of the law of arms was, the which was figured begun before any law in the world except the law of nature and before the Ten Commandments of God."

Wow! That's quite a claim to make. Older than the commandments given to Moses on Sinai. But, no. While identifying designs were painted on shields in ancient times, coat-armor,

heraldry as we understand it, and by extension, the law of arms, did not appear before the 12th Century A.D..

Our author then continues with a wonderfully complex but integrated system of relationships of the tinctures used in heraldry with precious and semi-precious stones, virtues, and orders of angels: “And this law of arms was grounded upon the nine orders of Angels in heaven encrowned with nine diverse precious stones of colors and of diverse virtues. Also of them are figured the nine colors in arms the same in number.” (See Table 1 below.)

“—The first stone is called topaz, signifying gold in arms. This stone, topaz, is a subtle¹³ stone and gold it is called in arms. The virtue thereof is that the gentleman the which this stone in his coat-armor bears shall be a fair messenger in his king's battle. The which stone is reserved in the Angel's crown that was a true messenger and a sure in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Second lapis—The second stone is called smaragdus,¹⁴ a gravely¹⁵ stone signifying green in arms. The second stone is called emerald, a gravely stone and vert it is called in arms. The virtue thereof is that the gentleman the which in his coat-armor it bears, keen and hardy in his king's battle shall be. The which stone is reserved in the Archangel's crown that was keen and hardy in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Tercius lapis [third stone]—and this stone is called bruske¹⁶ color in arms. The third stone is called an amethyst, a dusky stone, bruske it is called in arms. The virtue thereof is that he the which bears in his coat-armor that stone fortunate of victory in his king's battle shall be. The which stone is reserved to the Virtue's crown that was fortunate and victorious in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Quartus lapis [fourth stone]—and this stone is called plumby¹⁷ color in arms. The fourth stone is called a margarite,¹⁸ cloudy stone, plumby it is called in arms. The virtue thereof is what gentleman that in his coat-armor that stone bears great governance of chivalry in his king's battle shall have. The which stone is reserved in the potentate's¹⁹ crown that was chivalrous of governance in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Quintus lapis [fifth stone]—a loys²⁰ is called cynnaber or sanguine in arms. The fifth stone is called a loys, a sanguine stone or sinamer²¹ it is called in arms. The virtue whereof is the gentleman that in his coat-armor this stone bears, mightiful of power in his king's battle shall be. The which stone was reserved in Denomination's crown that was mightiful of power in his king's battle of heaven when he fought with Lucifer.”

“Sextus lapis [sixth stone]—and this stone is called gules in arms. The sixth stone is called a ruby or redly stone, gules it is called in arms. The virtue whereof is the gentleman that in his coat-armor that stone bears hot and full of courage in his king's battle shall be. The which stone is reserved in the Principality's crown that was hot burning as fire in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Septimus lapis [seventh stone]—a blue stone, azure it is called in arms. The seventh stone is called a sapphire, a blue stone, azure it is called in arms. The virtue thereof is the gentleman that in his coat-armor bears that stone, wise and virtuous in his working in his king's battle shall be. The which is reserved to Throne's crown that was wise and virtuous in his king's battle of heaven when they fought with Lucifer.”

“Octavus lapis [eighth stone]—this stone is black and is called sable. The eighth stone is a diamond, sable it is called in arms. The virtue whereof is what gentleman that in his coat-armor that stone bears, durable and unfaint in his king's battle shall be. The which stone is reserved in the Cherubim's crown that was durable and unfaint in his king's battle of heaven when he fought with Lucifer.”

“Nine. Lapis [stone], a shining stone and is called silver in arms. The virtue whereof is what gentleman that in his coat armour this stone bears, full doughty, glorious and shining in his king's battle he shall be. The which stone was reserved in the Seraphim's crown, that was full doughty, glorious and shining in his king's battle when they fought with Lucifer.”

Our author then goes on to further categorize these nine stones/tinctures/virtues.

“There are nine diverse colors for the field of coat-armors, five worthy and four royal. The five worthy are these: gold, vert, bruske, plumby and sinamer. And the four royal are these: gules, azure, sable and silver. But now after blazers of arms there are but six colors, of the which two are metal and four colors: gold and silver for metal; vert, gules, azure and sable for colors, and these are used and no more.” (See Table 2 below.)

“Of nine precious stones, five are noble and four of dignity. The five noble stones are these: topaz, emerald, amethyst, pearl, and loys. The four dignity are these: ruby, sapphire, diamond, and carbuncle.”²²

...

“Nine virtues of precious stones there are, five general and four special. The five general are these: a true messenger; keen and hardy; fortunate of victory; chivalrous of governance; and mightful of power. The four special are these: hot of courage; wise, ready, and virtuous in working; durable and unfaint; full doughty and glorious shining.”



Figure 1

Myth and Propaganda in the Book of St. Albans

Forging a transition from myth to propaganda, our author speaks of the use of crosses in arms: “And because the cross is the most worthy sign among all signs in arms; at the cross I will begin, in the which this noble and mighty prince, King Arthur, had great trust, so that he left his arms that he bore of three dragons and over that another shield of three crowns (Figure 1), and took to his arms a cross of silver in a field of vert and on the right side an image of our blessed Lady with her Son in her arms. And with that sign of the cross he did many marvels after, as it is written in the books of

chronicles of his deeds.” All of which chronicles were, of course, written some centuries after the life and death of any possible historical figure who might have served as the inspiration for the King Arthur of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, and Sir Thomas Malory, placing such writings well into the realm of myth. And, of course, the subject of these chronicles lived centuries before the advent of heraldry as we understand it.

As a side note here, there is the propaganda value of incorporating the arms attributed to such a powerful mythical figure, and thus be seen – at least visually – as a successor to that figure, as here in the arms of Glastonbury Abbey: Vert, a cross bottony argent between [four] three crowns [or?] and on a canton [tincture?] the Madonna and child [tincture?]. (Figure 2)



Figure 2



Figure 3

Our author continues to discuss arms with crosses in them: “Also, I have read this sign of the cross to have been sent from God to that blessed man, Mercury, as Vincencius sayeth in *Speculo Historiali* of the marvelous death of Julian, the apostate Emperor, book xx. He says the angel brought unto the foresaid Mercury all armor necessary with a shield of azure and a cross flory with four roses of gold as here in this.” (Figure 3)

Propaganda in the Book of St. Albans

And then in what must be considered propaganda: “And I found never that ever any arms were sent from heaven, but in them was the sign of the cross. Except”, she goes on to note, in what seems to me as an outsider to be quintessentially English fashion (and I do not mean that in a negative sense in any way), “Except in the arms of the King of France, the which arms certainly were sent by an angel from heaven; that is to say: three flowers in manner of swords in a field of azure, as it shows here.”²³ (Figure 4) And the reason why no cross? “The which certain arms were given to the King of France in sign of everlasting trouble and that he and his successors always with battle and swords should be punished.”

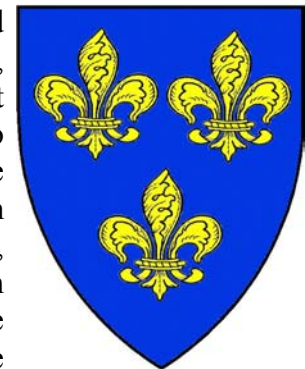


Figure 4

Finally, in a discussion in which she ranks the levels of dignity of coats of arms, arms captured in battle takes the number two place, immediately following arms which are inherited from one’s forbears (as having the greatest dignity) and immediately before arms granted by a prince or some other lord. (As a side note, but perhaps of interest to some of those among us today, our author ranks arms granted by a herald as “of no more authority than those arms the which are taken by a man’s own authority”; that is to say, assumed arms.) Once again our author shows her English bias: “The second manner, we have arms by our merits, as very plainly it appears by the addition of the arms of France to the arms of England gotten by that most noble man Prince Edward, the first gotten

son of King Edward the Third, that time King of England, after the taking of King John of France in the battle of Poitiers. The which certain addition was lawful and rightwisely done, and on the same manner of ways might a poor archer have taken a prince or some noble lord, and so the arms of that prisoner: by him so taken rightwisely, he may put to him and to his heirs.”

What would the College of Arms in London (since this is an English writer proposing it) say about incorporating the arms of a captive in battle into one’s own arms as the captor? Or adopting such arms as one’s own, if the captor is a “poor archer” and not armigerous? Is such really a legitimate usage of arms? And would such arms from the captive take precedence over the arms of the captor, in the manner of an honorable augmentation? Stephen Friar, in his *A Dictionary of Heraldry*, when discussing such “arms of assumption” (not to be confused with “assumed arms”, that is, arms borne without authority), defines them as “arms assumed by the victor in medieval combat, when a vanquished opponent relinquished his arms either by death or in return for his life”, but notes that they are “very rare.”²⁴ Parker’s *Glossary* only notes that “*Arms of Assumption* are such as might rightfully be taken, according to certain laws, from the original bearer otherwise than by grant or descent” without further discussion of the means, or the “certain laws”, by which these arms might be “rightfully ... taken”.²⁵

We are left, then, with some inconsistencies, and perhaps as many, or more, questions than when we began. But it is often like this, when myth and propaganda are interjected into a subject, and it doesn’t seem to matter if it’s done in the 21st Century or the 15th, in the first text on heraldry written in English, the Book of St. Albans.

Bibliography

Appleton, David B., *The Boke of St. Albans: A Modern Translation of a Medieval Heraldic Treatise*, Appleton Studios, Duncanville, Texas, 2003

Brault, Gerard J., *Aspilogia III: The Rolls of Arms of Edward I*, The Boydell Press, London, 1997, two volumes

The Free Dictionary by Farlex, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>

Friar, Stephen, *A Dictionary of Heraldry*, Harmony Books, New York, 1987

Ivall, Dennis Endean, "A Celtic Flavour to Heraldic Art", *The Coat of Arms*, N.S. Volume X, No. 159, Autumn 1992, pp. 271-274

Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition, Oxford University Press, 24th Printing, 1985, two volumes

Parker, James, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., Rutland, Vermont, 1982

Wagner, Anthony Richard, *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, London, 1956

Table 1

	<u>Stone</u>	<u>Tincture</u>	<u>Virtue</u> ¹	<u>Order of Angels</u>
1	Topaz	Gold	A fair messenger	Angel
2	Smaragdus / Emerald	Green	Keen and hardy	Archangel
3	Amethyst	Brusk (tawny, tenné)	Fortunate of victory	Virtue
4	Margarite [pearl]	Plumby [lead-colored]	Great governance of chivalry	Potentate
5	Loys ²	Cinnamer/cinnabar / sanguine	Mightiful of power	Denomination
6	Ruby / Carbuncle	Gules	Hot and full of courage	Principality
7	Sapphire	Azure	Wise and virtuous in his working	Throne
8	Diamond	Sable	Durable and unfaint	Cherubim
9	[Unnamed]	Silver	Full doughty, glorious and shining	Seraphim

¹ Each virtue is “in his king’s battle”, *e.g.*, “A fair messenger in his king’s battle”, “Keen and hardy in his king’s battle”, etc.

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines “loys” solely as “Some kind of stone.” The only two uses of it cited in the OED both come from *The Boke of St. Albans*.

Table 2

	Color	Worthy/Royal	Stone	Noble/Dignity	Virtue	General/Special
1	Gold	Worthy	Topaz	Noble	A true messenger	General
2	Vert	Worthy	Emerald	Noble	Keen and hardy	General
3	Brusk	Worthy	Amethyst	Noble	Fortunate of victory	General
4	Plumby	Worthy	Pearl	Noble	Chivalrous of governance	General
5	Cinnamer	Worthy	Loys	Noble	Mightiful of power	General
6	Gules	Royal	Ruby	Dignity	Hot of courage	Special
7	Azure	Royal	Sapphire	Dignity	Wise, ready, and virtuous in working	Special
8	Sable	Royal	Diamond	Dignity	Durable and unfaint	Special
9	Silver	Royal	Carbuncle*	Dignity	Full doughty and glorious shining	Special

* But *carbuncle* is the same as ruby, a red stone, so this entry is somewhat confusing.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985 (“OED”)
- ² The Free Dictionary by Farlex
- ³ OED
- ⁴ The Free Dictionary by Farlex
- ⁵ The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907—21). Volume II. The End of the Middle Ages.
- ⁶ Unseen Hands: Women Printers, Binders & Book Designers, <http://libweb2.princeton.edu/rbsc2/ga/unseenhands/printers/barnes.html>
- ⁷ <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/topics/t024-spelling.htm>
- ⁸ <http://www.stephen-stratford.co.uk/stalbans.htm>; <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/gb-herts.html#stalb>
- ⁹ See, e.g., <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/mss/holkham/misc/031.htm>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.manuscripts.org.uk/queens/MS.161.htm>
- ¹¹ Anthony Richard Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., 1956, p. 106
- ¹² Gerard J. Brault, *Aspilogia III: The Rolls of Arms of Edward I*, Volume I, p. 72
- ¹³ *Subtle*: Not dense; of fine or delicate texture or composition. (The definitions of the various terms of stones and tinctures quoted in these endnotes are taken from the OED.)
- ¹⁴ *Smaragdus*: Emerald. The term is probably related to the Sanskrit *marakata*.
- ¹⁵ *Gravelly*: There are a couple of possible definitions, none of which seem entirely on point. “With dignity; in an important degree.” *Grave*: “To dig; to dig out, excavate.”
- ¹⁶ *Brusk*: An obsolete term for the color tawny, heraldic tenné, or orange.
- ¹⁷ *Plumby*: Lead-colored.
- ¹⁸ *Margarite*: A pearl.
- ¹⁹ *Potestate*: A person possessed with power over others; a potentate, ruler, lord.
- ²⁰ *Loys*: “Some kind of stone.” The two uses of it cited in the OED both come from *The Boke of St. Albans*.

- ^{21.} *Sinamer*: Obsolete variant of *sinoper*, a kind of red earth used as a pigment, cinnabar.
- ^{22.} *Carbuncle*: In the Middle Ages and later, a name for the ruby, but applied to various precious stones of a red or fiery color.
- ^{23.} An heraldic legend from the 13th Century claims that Clovis used a banner charged with toads before his conversion to Christianity. The toads were considered as pagan and devilish animals. During his baptism by St. Rémi in Reims on Christmas Day 496, an angel brought from the heaven a shield semy of fleurs-de-lis, which was immediately adopted by the new Christian king. The semy of fleurs was changed to three in 1376 by Charles V.
- ^{24.} Friar, p. 27.
- ^{25.} Parker, p. 18