

1. Medieval heraldry in the province of Groningen

A colloquium on regional heraldry, held in Groningen, is bound to focus for a moment on the history in that very province. There is no doubt that regional heraldry is of the utmost importance to the history of heraldry in general. On the one hand, the study of regional heraldry can show the degree to which the heraldic theory is used in practice, on the other hand, the regional developments together make global developments and those of course have their influence on the general theory. Groningen, of course, belongs in international and national heraldic perspective to the periphery. As such, we don't have to expect influence by Groningen heraldry on the history and theory of heraldry in general. However, the medieval heraldry as used in these parts is interesting, not only in an antiquarian and descriptive way, as I hope to show.

Relevant to the history of heraldry in the province of Groningen is, that it consists of the city of that name and the surrounding countryside, the Ommelanden. The Ommelanden is in fact a later, 15th century collective noun to indicate a number of various independent regions, that formed a kind of political union in that century. The Ommelanden, together with the current province of Friesland to the west and the German Ost-Friesland to the east, constitute the medieval Frisia, in the Middle Ages unique for the absence of feudal authority between the twelfth and fifteenth century. This situation was known as the Frisian freedom. I'll pay some attention to the neighbouring province of Drenthe as well, because

the city of Groningen was considered to be part of the county of Drenthe, nominally until the 15th century.

The unique, virtually allodial history of Groningen and the surrounding Frisian countries, offer a very interesting field of investigation, for it shows how heraldry develops without a monarch and without heralds, in a way all by itself, without, in the words of Pastoureau, the 'withering influence of heralds, nor suffering from the restrictive legislation of the sovereigns'.

First I will offer a very short overview of the sources and the practice of medieval heraldry in the province of Groningen; after that I will focus on a few aspects, which can be considered more or less typical for the Groningen heraldry. A problem with the study of the origins and development of heraldry in the North of the Netherlands is the lack of sources. We mostly have to rely on seals and, to a lesser extent, from the late 15th century onwards, on tombstones. This means we hardly have any information on the use of tinctures. There are however a few paintings on vaults and ceilings of the many medieval Groningen churches. For example a 13th century painting, depicting among others a banner and a shield with charges of the Passion of Christ: five estoiles, referring to the five wounds of Christ on the Cross, a hammer and pincers. Some 15th and 16th century paintings give information on arms of Groningen families, but there aren't enough to show a detailed heraldic development¹.

What is clear from these and later sources is, that the colour green is very rarely used. Only the medieval noble families Van Groningen, Clant and Rengers bear arms with this colour. Furthermore, colour is placed onto colour and metal onto metal without problem. That heraldic law was not consequently observed until later times.

The first dated use of heraldry in the provinces Groningen and Drenthe we find on late 13th century seals, from 1263 onwards. The first Groningen seal, of that year, shows the arms of the prefect of Groningen, a fess, which is still to be found in the Groningen city arms. In total only eight 13th century personal seals from inhabitants of the city of Groningen and the province of Drenthe are extant, all of them bearing shields. The shields bear a fess, roses, a chief, roundels and eagles, clearly they show proper and mature heraldry. Furthermore the arms used are the same as those of the descendants of the sealers, if known. This leads to the conclusion that the hereditary use of heraldic symbols has reached these parts as early as the 13th century. Even in the Frisian Ommelanden we find in this century one seal (a counter-seal to be exact) with a heraldic emblem: a fleur-de-lys, used by a nobleman, whose name Dodo is only known from the legend of the seal.

When we study the 14th century Groningen seals we reach the same conclusion, but on firmer grounds. Heraldic iconography was clearly well known and properly used in this province. A table might serve to give insight in the amount of heraldic material, which still isn't abundant. In this table I distinguish between the number of seals announced in the charters and those actually still extant (these being the numbers between brack-

	1301-1350			
	<i>laimen</i>	<i>priests</i>	<i>monasteries</i>	<i>government</i>
Groningen ¹	8 ² (3 ³)	10 (3)	4	22 (3)
Vredewold	-	-	-	(1)
Langewold	-	-	-	(1)
Humsterland	1	?	-	(1)
Hunsingo				2 (3)
Middag				
Marne				
Halfambt				
Oosterambt				
Innersdijk				
Ubbega				
Fivelingo	(2)	(1)	5 (3)	7 (3)
Oldambt	-	-	2	2
Reiderland	-	-	-	-
Westerwolde	-	-	1	-
<i>Total</i>	9 (8)	10 (6)	15 (4)	34 (12)

Table.

14th-century Groningen seals. Numbers indicate number of sealers mentioned in charters. Numbers between brackets indicate number of seals still extant.

- 1 Including Gorecht.
- 2 Incl. four seals of members of the family of prefects.
- 3 All three seals of members of the family of prefects.
- 4 Incl. three seals of members of the family of prefects.
- 5 Incl. two seals of members of the family of prefects.

ets). Chronologically the table is divided in the first half of the century, the third quarter and the fourth quarter, geographically in the city of Groningen and from

	1351-1375				1376-1400			
	<i>laïmen</i>	<i>priests</i>	<i>monasteries</i>	<i>government</i>	<i>laïmen</i>	<i>priests</i>	<i>monasteries</i>	<i>government</i>
1)	6 ¹ (3)	6 (3)	-	21 (5)	6 ² (1)	8 (1)	-	42 (16)
	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(1)
	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	-
	-	-	-	-	3	(2)	(1)	-
			2			1 (1)		
	(2)	(1)	2 (1)	3	6 (13)	3 (1)	3 ¹ (1)	
	-	-	-	-	1 (1)	-	-	-
	-	-	-	(1)	-	-	-	-
	-	(1)	1 (1)	2 (1)				
	9 (5)	11 (9)	4 (4)	28 (7)	27 (21)	43 (33)	7 (3)	49 (23)

east to west the regions of the Ommelanden and, finally, the status of the sealer: laymen, priests, monasteries (including abbots) and government. Heraldic symbols are only to be found in the first two of these four categories.

The most important conclusion of this table is that the number of seals that can give heraldic information is relatively small, but is quickly growing in the second half of the 14th century. However, if we analyse the seals that show a shield, the charges used are almost exclusively heraldic: lions, eagles, fleurs-de-lys, roses etc. The arms are very simple; divisions are in the minority and there are in one shield never more than two different charges. Simplicity characterizes the heraldry in the Northern parts of the Netherlands and Germany. Among the Groningen, and more general the Frisian,

nobility especially the lions, eagles and fleurs-de-lys were the three most popular charges and continued to be so for centuries. The 14th century arms used by the nobility were mostly hereditary, like the arms of the Houwerda family. The seal of Menno Houwerda of Termunten shows a typical and very nicely cut example of arms of a Groningen nobleman: a lion rampant.

Some other examples are a seal of Godevard van Groninghe, a member of the family of prefects, showing the fess that is still to be found in the city arms. The seals of the noble family from Drenthe Van Echten/Van Ansen show the three eagles, which were used by this family until their extinction in the 19th century; that of Roelof van Echten with an initial R and the cleric Alef van Ansen with an initial A as brisures.

The seals of

Fig. 1.1. Menso Houwerda (1398)



Fig. 1.3. Van Echten/Van Ansen (1363)

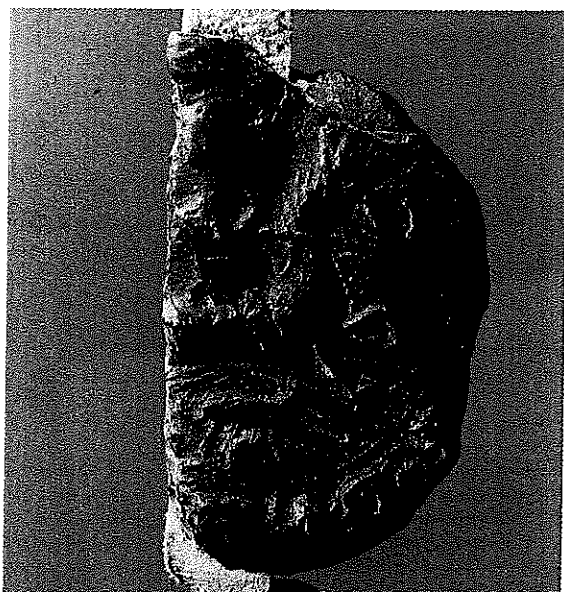


Fig. 1.2. Godevard van Groninghe (1347)



Fig. 1.4. Roelof van Echten (1347)

The 14th century Groningen seals don't exclusively show heraldic charges. Other, non-heraldic images can be found, even used by the most distinguished nobles of this region. The seal of Onno Onsta, for instance, shows St. Christopher and is almond-shaped,

which form in later times is only used by clerics and monasteries. This type of image is of course very common and has more to do with christian iconography than with heraldry. More interesting is a type of protoheraldic seal which is relatively widely used in the Ommelanden: a

The seals of*Fig. 1.5. Alef van Ansen (1357)**Fig. 1.7. Aytardus van Harssens (1371)**Fig. 1.6. Achtzijlvesten (1380)*

man of groups of persons, sometimes on horseback, accompanied by fleurs-de-lys, estoiles or other heraldic symbols. In some cases these images can be identified as christian iconography, for instance St. George or St. Hippolytus. In a number of cases these saints transfer to

*Fig. 1.8. Reyner van Harsens (1396)*

real heraldry in the 15th century²; especially St. George was very popular with Frisian noble families. But many representations are quite unclear, like the following two examples: the seal of the Acht Zijlvesten, a jurisdiction of water-board, showing a man on horseback, holding a

banner and accompanied by a fleur-de-lys, and the seal of the nobleman Aytardus van Harsens, again a man on horseback accompanied by one or more dogs. This representation is also to be found on the seal of Reyner van Harsens and is therefore probably hereditary.

Of course, we know that we should treat this kind of images of emblems more than as symbols, when dealing with heraldry, but I think it's justified to ask for the meaning of this whole category. What kind of iconography is this? Mythological, allegorical, historical or a mixture of christian and pagan representations? As far as I know, there hasn't done much research on this type of images and I didn't find any relevant literature on the subject. In the 15th century this type of representation completely disappears on seals. And there are no traces to be found in family arms.

From this century onwards the heraldic sources start to flow with abundance; again, they consist mostly of seals and tombstones, but from this period also drawings and paintings are extant. The nobility in this period makes use of proper heraldry, still characterized by simplicity. The arms show simple divisions and charges and everything in a tasteful manner.

What constitutes the coats of arms as typically 'Groningen' heraldry? This question has got of course a more general nature: how do we characterize a regional type of arms. The most difficult aspect of the study of regional heraldry is the way to perform that research systematically. One would like a kind of checklist. How do arms inherit? How is the use of tinctures? Are they socially differentiated? The variations are infinite. The easiest way is to make an inventory of specific

charges, which are unique or more widely used than elsewhere. But also the absence or rarity of elements add to the regional characteristics of heraldry. For instance, it's striking that for instance a common ordinary like a chevron is hardly to be found in the province of Groningen before 1600.

This is not the place to offer such a system to characterize regional heraldry in general. Therefore I will just give to aspects of the medieval heraldry in Groningen that can be considered discriminative with respect to the heraldry of other regions and other periods.

Apart from the internal characteristics of a coat of arms, there are more aspects that give a regional characterization concerning the practical use. How do arms inherit? Is there a system of marks of cadency or other differentiation to indicate a special status, for instance that of belonging to a younger branch of the family, or to indicate that the bearer is a cleric. The latter is the case in Groningen. The arms of the noble family Jarges show eight roses and an initial H, of which the meaning is unknown. The seal of Evert Jarges, who was a priest and vicar of the church of St. Martins in this town, shows the same charges, but is lacking one rose. As far as I know, this is a typically Groningen custom, though I found some examples in the province of Drenthe as well. After the Reformation these brisures of course disappear,

The most famous example of regional heraldry, though not exclusively Groningen, but more generally Frisian, is the so called Frisian demi-eagle: Or an eagle sable dimidiated, almost always on the dexter. As De Boo showed in a recent article on the subject³, the charge is quite new in the Ommelanden. The first representation with the Frisian demi-eagle is

to be found in 1438, whereas there are hundreds of seals prior to that year that could have shown the demi-eagle if it had been in use. No relation with the jurisdiction based on allodial properties, as supposed by earlier researchers, has ever been found. More probably is the rise of the demi-eagle a result of the renewal of the imperial privilege, ascribed to Charlemagne, by the emperor in 1417. For the first time in centuries, the emperor was psychologically very near and the relation to him seemed to guarantee the much appraised Frisian freedom. As a result of this, the demi-eagle rapidly spread as a symbol of political freedom. Especially in the 16th century where the political freedom of the Frisian states was lost, the demi-eagle evolved from a political statement to a way of showing pride of a Frisian descent.

These are just a few glimpses of the medieval heraldry in the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe. What can we learn from this? Heraldry, as originated elsewhere in Europe, reached this province as early as the 12th century, not forced upon by a monarch or high authority but adapted as a language people had been waiting for. The later history of heraldry in Groningen (and more general, in the Republic of United Provinces) continues to show that the lack of sovereigns, heralds and restrictive laws didn't cause the heraldry to drift away from international heraldic developments, but on the contrary, kept it simple but consistent.

Notes

- 1 Redmer Alma, 'Wappen, Hausmarken und Inschriften in Groningerland', Rolf-Jürgen Grote and Kees van der Ploeg, *Wandmalereien in Niedersachsen, Bremen und im Groningerland. Fenster in die Vergangenheit* (s.l. 2002) 244-250.
- 2 Cf. J.A. de Boo, 'Heraldiek in de Groningse Ommelanden. Een modieus fenomeen?', *Gens nostra* 50 (1995) 113-122.
- 3 Johannes A. de Boo, 'Das frisische Halbadlerwappen. Die Geschichte eines Wappenbildes', *L'Aigle et le Lion, Actes du IXe colloque* (Warszawa 1997) 229-238.
- 4 A more extensive article on the subject can be found in R.H. Alma, 'De vroegste ontwikkeling van de Groninger heraldiek', in: *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 54 (2000) 5-45.