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Samurai Heraldry

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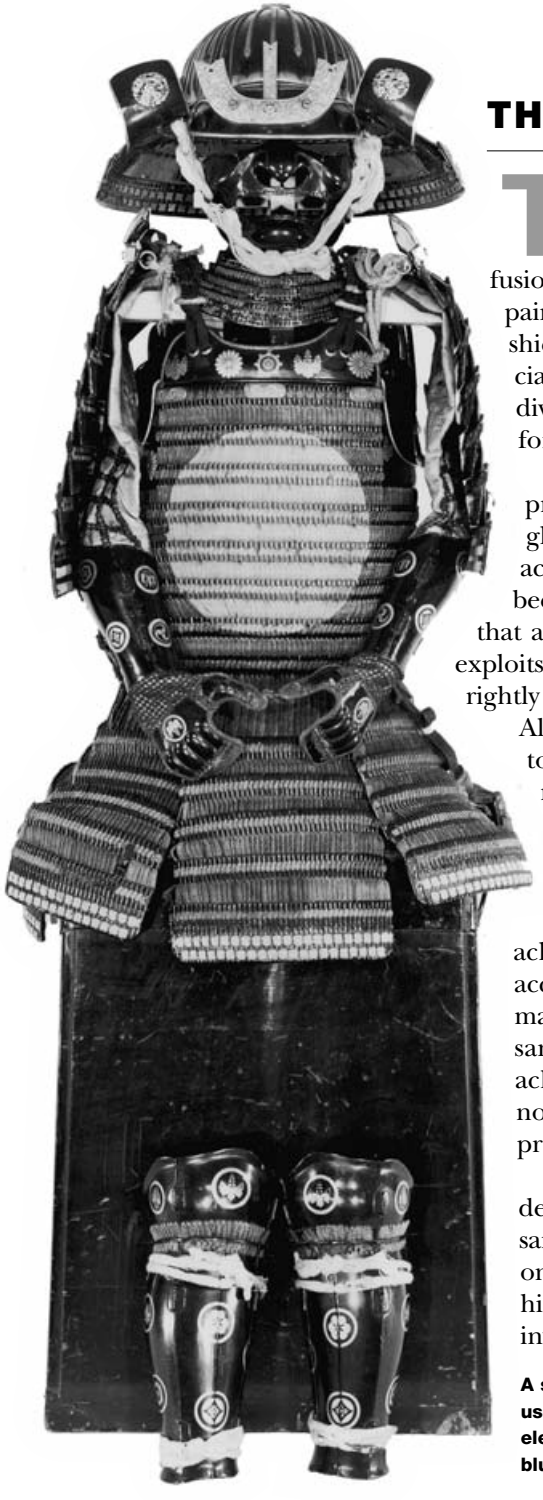


THE FUNCTIONS OF HERALDRY

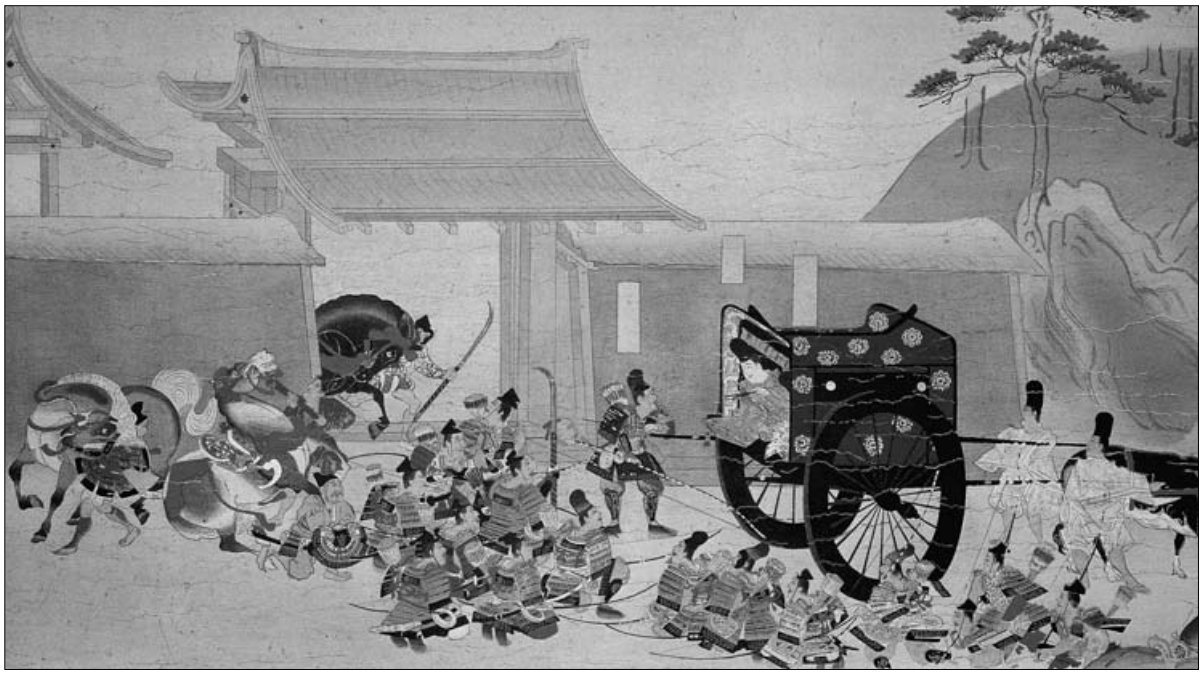
THROUGH THE ART AND SCIENCE of heraldry the armies of different ages and different regions around the world have been able to distinguish friend from foe in the confusion of battle. The practices employed have ranged from the painting of simple patterns or devices on ancient warrior shields, through the embroidery of complex designs on associated sequences of regimental flags, and back to simplified divisional symbols painted on the hulls of modern tanks. Some form of heraldry is found in nearly every military society.

As well as merely identifying allies and opponents, the practice of heraldry has also performed the function of glorifying a particular individual by ensuring that his personal achievements were easily recognised. The extension of this has been the introduction of a hereditary element into heraldry, so that a warrior's descendants would always be associated with the exploits of a particular brave ancestor. In this sense, heraldry has rightly been called 'the shorthand of history'.

All these aspects of heraldry applied as readily to Japanese as to European military history. For many centuries Japan was a military society, and five hundred years of civil wars made the ability to distinguish at a glance allied armies from rival contingents a paramount necessity. The importance placed upon personal identification and display was also very great in a warrior society that prized individual achievement above all else – even, it would appear from some accounts, above the need to actually win battles. Even in the massive and well-organised encounters of the 16th century a samurai's personal prowess was still highly valued, and achievements such as being the first into battle or taking a noble opponent's head were as eagerly pursued as in a previous age.

In both these honourable examples the use of heraldic devices was a vital aid towards establishing the truth of a samurai's claim. During a siege the presence of a warrior's flags on an enemy castle wall proved who had been the first to fight his way in. During the head presentation ceremony that invariably followed a battle, two separate forms of heraldic

A suit of armour owned by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, which makes considerable use of *mon* for decorative purposes. There is also a quasi-heraldic element in the shape of a sun disc – *hi no maru* – picked out in red on blue from the silk lacing of the breastplate.



The earliest use of devices identifiable as *mon* are to be found in connection with the Japanese imperial family. In this illustration from the *Heiji Monogatari Emaki* the emblem of 'nine stars' appears on the side of an imperial ox-cart used during the Heiji Rebellion of 1160. Note that this is the only 'heraldry' visible. The samurai wear no personal heraldic identification, and would fight under a distinctive banner instead.

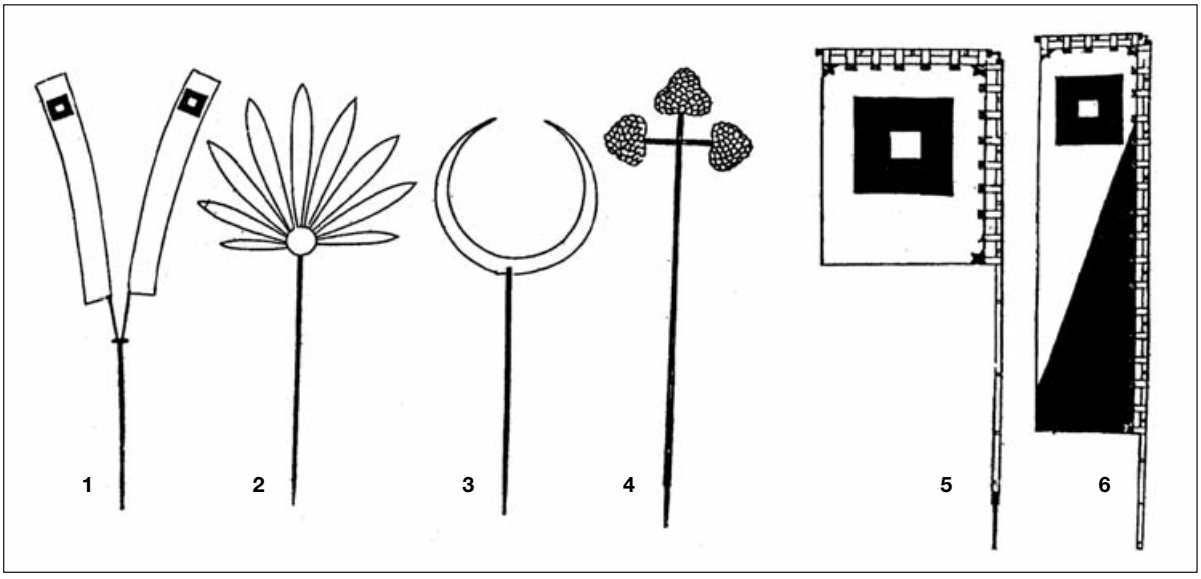
identification aided the recognition of personal exploits. One was the identification of the victim, whose severed head was presented to the victorious samurai's lord as an invoice for reward. The other was confirmation by eyewitnesses that the particular samurai had actually killed the man whose head he was presenting. In both cases the heraldic flag or other device associated with either party was vital evidence.

Apart from this use of heraldry for the benefit of an individual in a samurai army, flags and colours were also a vital element in battlefield organisation. By the use of different coloured heraldic flags the separate units of an army could be identified and controlled. In addition, the prominent heraldic standards used by generals – called *uma jirushi* or 'horse insignia' – provided a rallying point on the battlefield[1].

1 In the body text Japanese terms are only italicised at their first use; in the captions, only nouns referring to types of heraldic display and charge are italicised throughout.

GLOSSARY

Hata bugyo Officer responsible for organisation, ordering and verifying of an army's flags.
Hata jirushi Tall, narrow flag flown vertically from crossbar strung by cords to top of vertical shaft.
Hata sashi Flag-carrier, standard-bearer.
Hi no maru Sun disc emblem, displayed as heraldic charge.
Horo Cloak-like, bag-shaped cloth worn over light framework behind rider's back, to identify a leader's messengers, aides or bodyguards.
Ibaku (also *maku*) Curtains used to screen off a leader's headquarters position in the field.
Kami God/goddess of the Shinto religious pantheon.
Kasa jirushi Very small identification flag of army or unit, attached to helmet.
Maku See *ibaku*.
Mon Emblem identifying individual or family, displayed in his/their heraldry.
Nobori Tall, narrow flag with two edges attached to both a vertical shaft and a short upper crossbar forming an inverted L-shape.
Sashimono Emblem, of varying size and form but often a tall, narrow flag, attached to rear of cuirass to identify army or unit.
Sode jirushi Very small identification flag of army or unit, attached to shoulder plates of armour.
Tsukai ban Leader's unit of messengers/aides.
Uma jirushi Leader's large standard for battlefield identification/location; either a conventional or *nobori*-shaped flag, or a three-dimensional emblem. *O uma jirushi* = 'great', *ko uma jirushi* = 'lesser' standard.



Four centuries later Japanese heraldry had developed into a complex practice, if never a 'code' in the European sense. This is the full heraldic display of Arima Toyouji (1570–1642), a *daimyo* or baron who fought at Osaka (1614–15) and Shimabara (1638) – the final battles of the 'samurai age' proper before Japan settled into the centuries-long peace of the Edo Period under the Tokugawa shoguns. All the flags are in black and white, and all the three-dimensional devices are gold lacquered. (1) Double back-flag worn by Arima's *ashigaru* or common footsoldiers; (2) three-dimensional sunburst back-device worn by his messengers; (3) three-dimensional crescent *sashimono* back-device worn by his *samurai* warriors; (4) Arima's 'lesser standard', an elaborate three-dimensional gold trefoil; (5) his 'great standard' bearing his *mon* or family emblem, which is repeated on (6), the *nobori* flags carried by his attendants and troops.

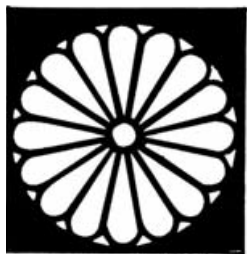
THE USE OF THE *MON*

The best known features of Japanese heraldry are the devices called *mon*, which are usually simple yet elegant motifs based on plants, heavenly bodies, geometric shapes or, more rarely, animals. By their very simplicity mon are much more easily recognisable than European coats-of-arms, even if the European system of quartering and labels provides a more precise identification of an individual. Unlike a European blazon, however, the particular colour of a mon was never specified. They are usually depicted as black upon white or another light colour, or in white upon black or another dark coloured field. Particular colours were introduced in the design of the flags upon which the mon were most often displayed on the battlefield.

The direct parallel to mon in European heraldry is the badge, which was sewn on to a soldier's jacket and used for the same purpose of quick recognition; but as mon also served as the equivalent of the coat-of-arms, the layman's understanding of them as 'Japanese family crests' is not too wide of the mark. Mon often appear as the actual crest above the peak of a Japanese samurai's helmet, and are also seen on scabbard designs, on flags at shrines, or as a purely decorative element on clothing.

It should be noted that, unlike the quartering on a European knight's surcoat, mon did not always appear on the sleeveless *jinbaori*, which was the Japanese equivalent of the surcoat. This garment, which was used only by high-ranking samurai, and rarely while actually fighting, tended to be lavishly embroidered with designs that had no particular heraldic significance.

Most of the illustrations in this book involve mon, but it is important to stress at the outset that mon were only part of the story of Japanese heraldry, as the following pages will show. Mon did not always appear on battle flags, because bands of contrasting colour sometimes provided all the identification that was necessary. From the 16th century onwards the overall layout, colour and design of flags, from the large ones carried as standards to the smaller ones worn on the back of suits of armour, were



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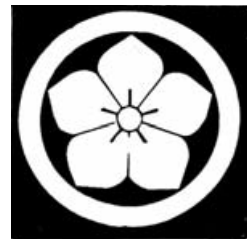

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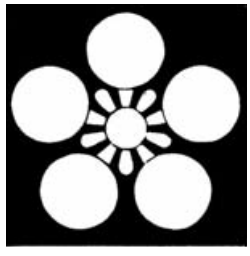

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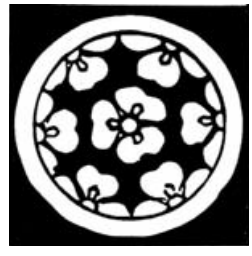

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(1) The *kiku mon*, the Japanese imperial chrysanthemum, which probably owes its origins to a stylised representation of the sun's rays.

(2) The *kiri* (paulownia) *mon* of the Ashikaga family, bestowed upon them originally by a grateful emperor, and used in various combinations with other designs as described in the text.

(3) The *kikyo* (Chinese bellflower) *mon* of Ota Dokan (1432–86), one of the first 'Sengoku daimyo' – the provincial barons who emerged as powerful regional warlords following the political and social upheavals of the Onin War (1467–77).

(4) The *ume* (plum blossom) *mon* of Tsutsui Junkei (1549–1641), who became notorious for his reluctance to join in the battle of Yamazaki in 1582 until it became clear which side would win.

(5) The *katabami* (oxalis) *mon* of Chosokabe Motochika (1539–99), who took over the entire island of Shikoku before being defeated by Hideyoshi in 1585.

(6) The *tsuru* (crane) *mon* of Mori Nagayoshi (1558–84), who was killed at the battle of Nagakute. This is identical to the device used by Nanbu Toshinao, son of Nobunao (1546–99).

prescribed as carefully as the mon, and therefore add another dimension to the study of samurai heraldry. Nevertheless, it was largely through his mon that an individual samurai and his family were known, regardless of what other symbols and designs they might have displayed in actual combat over the centuries.

Japanese Imperial heraldry

The earliest mention of flags in the context of Japan is found in an ancient Chinese chronicle, and refers to messengers being sent to Japan from China bearing yellow banners, yellow being the most highly esteemed colour. The early emperors of Japan are also recorded as giving flags of gold brocade along with presentation swords as gifts to the warriors whom they commissioned and sent out to chastise rebels against the throne.

The emperors of Japan themselves are traditionally associated with the *kiku no go mon*, the well-known design of a 16-petalled chrysanthemum. Its origin is obscure, and it has been suggested that it may be derived from an image of the sun rather than a flower, with what appear to be flower petals actually being the sun's rays. Whatever its origin, the kiku no go mon was an emblem which was reserved for imperial use alone; and in 1871, following the Meiji Restoration which led to the establishment of modern Japan, a decree was issued forbidding anyone to use any mon that could be mistaken for the imperial symbol. Regulations for the display of the imperial chrysanthemum were also set out at the same time, and specified that the 16-petalled flower was for the reigning emperor only, with the small circle in the middle indicating that it was being viewed from the front. Imperial princes had a 14-petalled flower, with the calyx in the centre indicating that it was being viewed from below. Emperor Go Daigo, whose abortive attempt to restore imperial power in the 14th century led to the Nanbokucho Wars, used a 17-petalled chrysanthemum during his years of exile.

The earliest illustrations of mon in Japanese history are associated with emperors and their courts. They may be found in scrolls depicting imperial processions, where various simple designs are seen as early as

the Nara Period (AD 710–784) on the sides of the ox-carts used for transporting imperial officials. A favourite device was the 'nine stars', which consisted of one disc surrounded by eight others, but at this period the mon had no military significance.

EARLY HERALDRY

From the 10th century AD onwards the powerful landowning families of Japan began a struggle for supremacy that was eventually to lead to the curtailment of imperial power and the relegation of the emperor to the position of a figurehead. The warriors who served these lords were called

The doves of Hachiman, the tutelary deity of the Minamoto, appear in the foreground of this section of the *Gosannen Kassen Emaki* scroll on the *maku* (field curtain) of Minamoto Yoshiie during the Later Three Years' War of the 1080s AD. The use of this design as an actual heraldic device may be a later attribution.