

Banners in heraldic art

Magnus Bäckmark

Abstract

The banner is very useful to heraldic art. It is a carrier of charges and colours, just like its counterpart the shield. But where the shield can be seen as crude, heavy, flat and robust – its purpose being taking hits – the banner is brilliant, swift, full of life and motion. Its purpose is spiritual. It is lifted above anyone's head, above dust and confusion, for inspiration and guiding. Something of this character, I will with this article try to show by examples that the heraldic artist, if lucky, can translate in his or her work.

First, we could though take a quick glance at the historical development of banners. The term banner approves, as we shall see, to a specific kind of flag, but in a wide sense of the word a banner is any ensign made of a piece of cloth, carried on a staff and with symbolic value to its owner(s). The profound nature of this innovation, which seem to be of oriental origin, makes it the mother of all kinds of flags. The etymological root of the word banner is the French word *bannière*, derived from latin *bandaria*, *bandum*, which has German extraction, related to gothic *bandwa*, *bandwô*, 'sign'.

The birth of heraldry in the 12th century Western world was preceded by centuries of use of early forms of banners, called *gonfanons*. From Byzantium to Normandy, everywhere in the Christian world, these ensigns usually were small rectangular lance-flags with tails (Fig. 1).

In quite the same moment the idea arose that a chosen design could be repeated not only on a shield, but also on other garments, and even after death possibly be an immaterial legacy to the owner's issue, heraldry was created. Naturally, also the *gonfanon* was an object to charge with the chosen design (Fig. 2a).

Parallel in use with the old type of long tailed *gonfanons*, a new shape was invented to better fit the heraldic charges. This new shape defines what from that point onwards is called a banner, in the more precise use of the word, namely a rectangular oblong (later square) shape; with greater width than length (Figs. 3–5, 8). This modification was to expect from the shape of the 12th century shield, which measured around twice as much vertically as it did horizontally.

Already with the equestrian seals from the 12th century, where *gonfanons* and banners carry heraldic charges, as well as the shield, we are already talking about banners used in heraldic art, the subject of this article. We can't be sure each and every seal image is reliable, in the sense that it can be taken as a proof of how *gonfanons* or banners



Jan Oskar Engene (ed.): *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Vexillology, Stockholm, 27th July to 1st August 2003*, Bergen: Nordic Flag Society, 2004. ISBN 82-996983-1-6

© 2004 Nordic Flag Society and the author



Figure 1 The pope Alexander II sent William the Conqueror of Normandy a sacred banner as support for his "crusade" to England in 1066. On the Bayeux tapestry, made in the 1070s, slightly different cross banners are seen in different scenes with William (like on this picture) or his men, but there is no much doubt the banner had this typical gonfanon type of design.

Drawing by the author after pictures of the tapestry.

really looked like in the time and place where the owner used the seal. Just as likely, important men could have their seals engraved copying style of foreign seals only changing the heraldic charges, in the same way the first coins made in the outskirts of Europe were copied after coins from more civilized parts, and expensive seals were often made abroad. Anyhow, equestrian seals from the early middle ages are quite similar in style.

In seals, banners were here and there used as carriers of heraldic charges to women (Fig. 7). In Sweden, and I believe the rest of Europe too, this implied very high rank – principal rank, or similar – like the male equestrian seal did. The equestrian and banner seals were abandoned gradually after the 14th century, when those seal styles started to appear more and more antique and obsolete. I'm quite safe to say not a single seal after the middle ages has been engraved showing a banner as a carrier of the charge of the shield, in Sweden. Also in other kinds of heraldic art, like glass paintings, wood carvings, stone sculptures etc, the heraldic banners regrettably are non-existent. Only actual banners, for funeral purposes, ceremonial or military use, were made (Fig. 13) – they were not used as alternative of the shield in heraldic art. This is because of a somewhat provincial and later quite stereotyped use of heraldry. In heraldically more daring countries, like Germany and Great Britain, this is not quite as much the case (Figs. 10, 11, 15, 16).



Figure 2a-b The seal of Birger Jarl, founder of the city of Stockholm and the governor of Sweden during the youth of his son Valdemar Birgersson, elected king of Sweden. The imprint is made 1254 and shows on the adverse (a) how the armorial charge often was placed on the gonfalon as was it supposed to be seen with the lance levelled. The reverse of the seal (b) reveals more detail of the coat of arms than the engraver has been able to give to the same motif on the shield and gonfalon on the adverse. From Hildebrand. Colours are here added.

Even in those countries, the heraldic use of banners were quite limited. In return, banners – as well as flags – were often incorporated as elements in new arms. The banners could have a charge of its own (Fig. 19), or it could repeat shield charges (Fig. 14). Especially German and Scandinavian heraldry loves repeating the shield charge on miniature banners on the helmet (Figs. 6, 12).

The revival of the artistic use of the banner came with the renaissance of heraldry during the late 19th century. With inspiration from medieval art, the banner has since then been used in bookplates (Figs. 17–21, 23–28, 33) and heraldic illustrations (Figs. 22, 29–32, 34–35).

In conclusion, I would like to mention a little what inspires me with the banners. I have been involved with heraldry since 1998, but not counting a few earlier tries I have only this last year started to appreciate the banner more and more. To me, it is an interesting change to have a "background" to the heraldic charge that is not stiff, but could be waving in wind. You can as an artist also imply an impression of speed in the picture, depending on how lively the banner is flying. Experimenting with the folds of the cloth is also interesting. A challenge is to dare the banner be somewhat folded (like in Fig. 29) but still of course leaving enough of the charge visible to make it possible for the viewer to identify the arms.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Lars C. Stolt, who kindly helped me with the bookplates depicted in this article, from his private bookplate collection.



Figure 3 An early example of the banner with its early, oblong shape is seen in the reverse seal of Philipp, duke of Flanders and Vormandois, 1162. Drawing by the author after seal, depicted in Galbreath. Colours reconstructed.



Figure 4 Lazarus Marcellinus Gerardini, leader of the government of Genoa, ca. 1248. Drawing from Ströhl after a contemporary manuscript.



Figure 5 Wahsmut von Künzingen.
Drawing from Ströhl after the
picture in Weingartner Liederhandschrift
from the first quarter of the 14th century.



Figure 6 The arms of Adolf V, count of
Holstein, from his seal 1273 shows the
shield design repeated on three small
banners on the helmet. Drawing by the
author after seal, depicted in Siebmacher.
Colours reconstructed.



Figure 7 This seal was used in 1318 by the Duchess Ingeborg, widow of the Swedish
Duke Erik Magnusson and daughter of king Håkon VI of Norway. On her right, her
own family arms are displayed, on her left her late husband's. Instead of shields,
banners are used. From Hildebrand.



Figure 8 The banner of the count of Tyrol. Drawing in Ströhl after the Gelre armorial from around 1370.



Figure 9 In a Swedish television documentary broadcasted in 2002, the banners of king Erik of Pomerania, who reigned 1396–1439, were suggested to have looked like this. Both are coloured versions of his different seals. If he used a heraldic banner, it would probably not have shown a shield, but be charged with the arms covering the whole, and the cross on the right banner would probably, but not necessarily, have reached out to the edges. From 1389 "the banner of the three kingdoms" – the union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden – is mentioned, when queen Margaret fought king Albrecht of Pomerania at Åsled, but it is not known how it looked like. The colours of the arms with the three crowns were anyhow Gules (not Azure) and Or. This was the arms of the Union, not the Swedish arms with Azure field.

Photo: the author.

Banners in heraldic art



Figure 10 In this representation of the arms of the patrician society Zur Katze in Constance 1547, a lady supporter holds a banner showing the arms of the city of Constance. From Ströhl.



Figure 11 The arms of Gebhard II Truchsess von Waldburg, Electoral prince and Archbishop of Cologne, from Jost Amman's Wappen und Stammbuch, printed 1589. The banner and the heart shield show his family arms (Waldburg), the other quarters are the arms of the see of Cologne and the territories Westphalia, Engern and Arnsberg. The arms are here supported by a lady in contemporary fashionable clothing. From Ströhl.



Figure 12 Superexlibris from 1626 for Anna Banér, wife of count Gabriel Bengtsson Oxenstierna. The Banér family arms, known from the last quarter of the 14th century, is a heraldic stylisation of a banner – hence the name. This figure shows that a banner in Sweden in the 14th century probably well could be triangular of shape. Another twist of the idea of banner is taken in the crest, where the figure is repeated several times on banners. From Carlander.



Figure 13 In St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland, hang the banners of the most recently created knights of the Order of St. Patrick, the last of whom died in 1974. From the left the owners are Connaught, Connaught, Farnham, Roden, Headfort, Dartrey, Granard, Cork, Lurgan, Dunraven, Waterford, Mayo and Gosford. Photo: the author.



Figure 14 Bookplate for a member of the Lomagne-Tarride family in Béarnaise, France, 18th century. The supporting fauns hold banners that repeat the first and second quarters from the heart shield. From Rolland, 2.



Figure 15 Bookplate made in 1743 for a member of the Duberon family, Lorraine, France, has the arms surrounded by moors, one of whom holding a banner with the arms on it. From Rolland, 1.

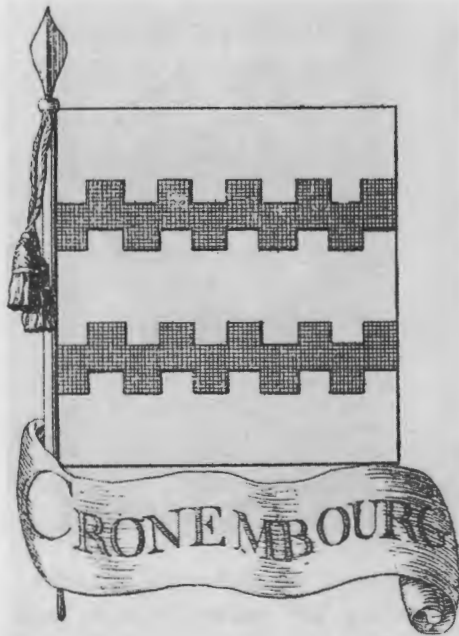


Figure 16 A couple of 18th century bookplates from Burgundy, France, apparently originating from the same artist, use the banner, which is very rare in this period. This one is for a member of the Cronembourg family. From Rolland, 1.



Figure 18 Bookplate for Fritz Behr, by Hans Stubenrauch, 1902. The first shield is evidently Behr's family arms (bear being canting for Behr). The second shield is probably his wife's family arms.

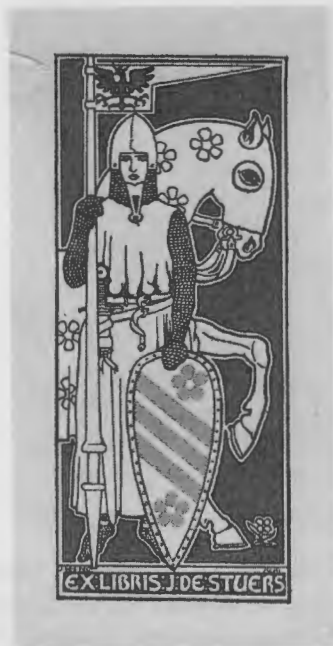


Figure 17 Bookplate for J. de Stuers, ipse 1901.



Figure 19 Bookplate for John George the third Earl of Durham, 1905.



Figure 20 Bookplate for F. Delion, drawn by Ph. Frisch, 20th century.



Figure 21 Bookplate for Fredrick Caisberg, 20th century. Note the latin motto "Bevare of the capricorn", which is connected to the capricorn's arms in the arms. The maltese cross seem not to be part of the arms. Assumably, the owner is a knight of the Johannite Order.



Figure 22 The English arms (England ancient and France ancient) on banners appear on the poster for a heraldic exhibition in Birmingham 1936. From Bergman.



Figure 23 Bookplate for George Drewny Squibb, Norfolk Herald Extraordinary. Drawing by Hugh Stanford, London, 1947. The banner in the crest is in this case a part of the family arms, related to the motto.

Banners in heraldic art



Figure 24 Bookplate for the opera singer, professor Uno Ebrelius (1918–88), Malmö, Sweden, by Jan Raneke 1959, showing Ebrelius' family arms displayed on a banner.



Figure 25 Bookplate for Lars C. Stolt, Stockholm, Sweden, made for his books on militaria. Drawing by Sven Sköld 1968.



Figure 26 Bookplate for Oberstudienrat Richard Goldmann, Dortmund. Drawing by Lothar Högel, 1973. The supporter is Dortmund's patron St. Reinhold with a banner with the city arms. The city was a free Imperial City and was thus entitled to use the Imperial Eagle in its arms.



Figure 27 Bookplate for Lars C. Stolt, copper engraving by the Austrian artist Herbert Toni Schimek 1982.



Figure 28 Bookplate for Dante Fangaresi. Etching and mezzotint by the Lithuanian artist Marius Liugaila 1998.



Figure 29 My interpretation of the arms of Suomen Heraldinen Seura (the Finnish Heraldry Association), made 2002. The lion on the shield, which pay reference to the lion in the Finnish state arms, is here used also as supporter.



Figure 30 Drawing, made by the author, of the arms of Tudor-Radu Tiron, employée at the Presidential Office of Romania and heraldic artist, 2002. The charge is a stylized crossbow. Because of that, I found it fun to equip the chosen supporter, the lion, with a real one.

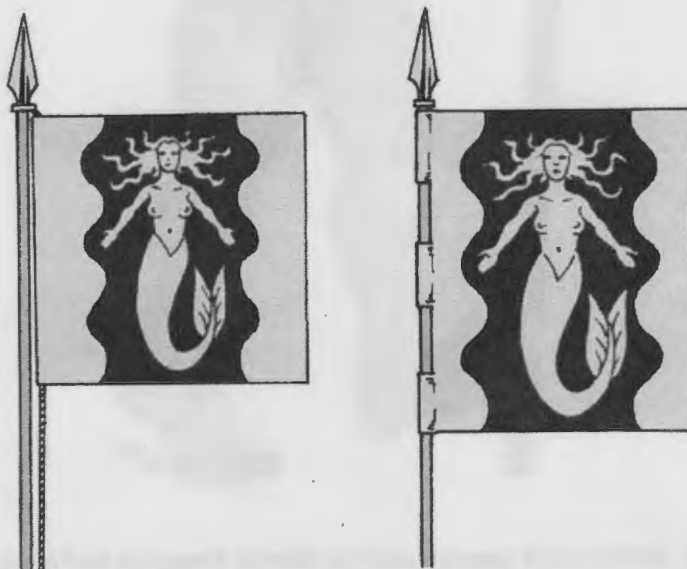


Figure 31 Drawing of the Zuschke family arms, drawn by Ronny Andersen, Esbjerg, Denmark, 2002, showing the difference between an armorial flag, attached to a halyard, and a banner with a sleeve or with wrapping attached to a staff.



Figure 32 Banner with impaled arms of Martin Sunnqvist and his wife Malin Sjöstrand, Lund, Sweden. The savage is chosen as supporter, while a savage appear in the canting arms of the Åkerman family, which is another branch of the same agnatic family as Sunnqvist belongs to. Drawing by the author 2003.

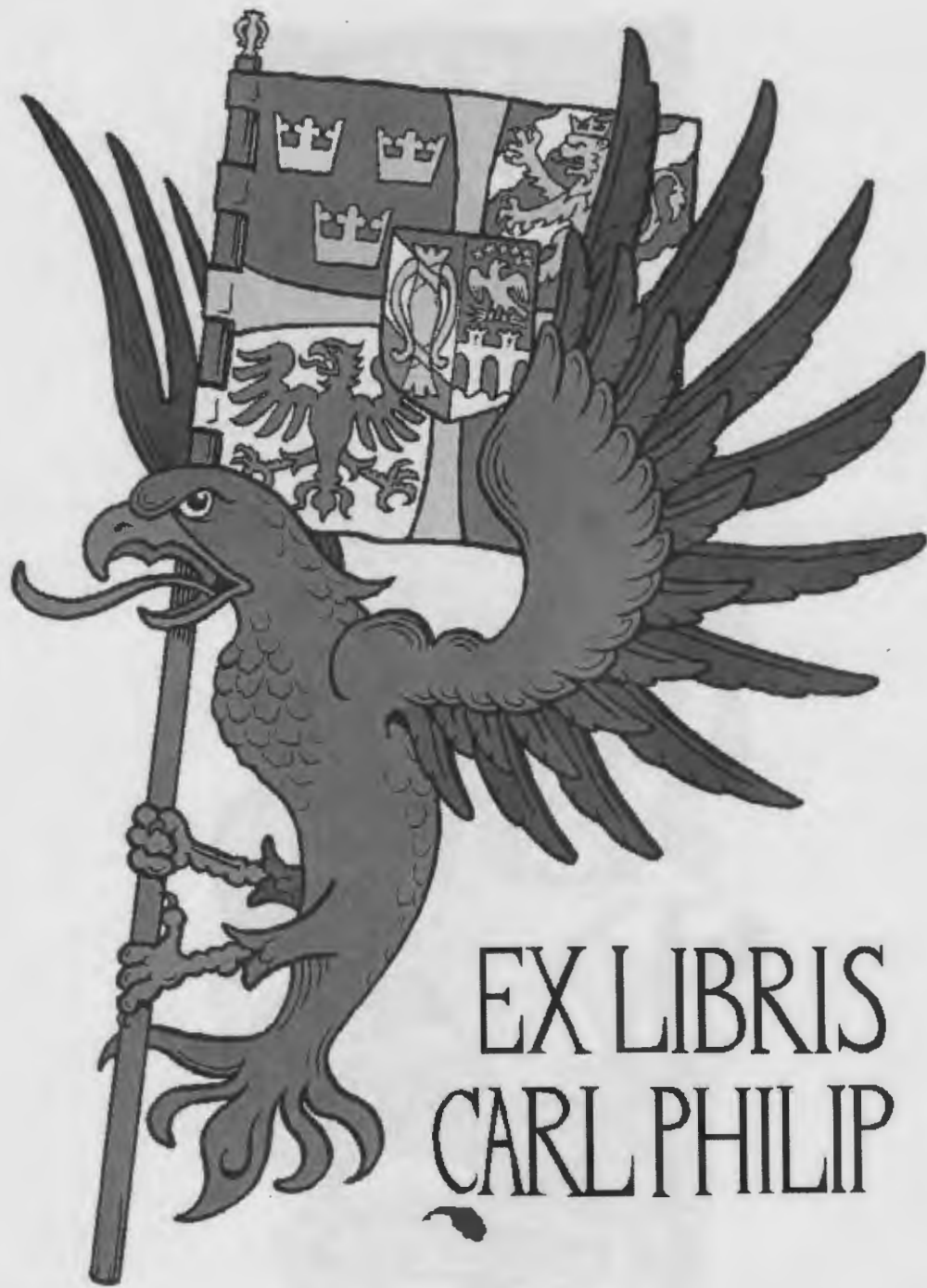


Figure 33 Bookplate of H. R. H. Prince Carl Philip of Sweden, Duke of Värmland. The arms of his dukedom appear in the third quarter of his personal arms, here expressed on a banner. The eagle holding the banner is inspired by the eagle of Värmland. The bookplate is one of two selected by the Prince after an artists' competition arranged by Svenska Exlibrisföreningen (the Swedish Bookplate Association). Drawing by the author 2003.



Figure 34 Achievement with banner, helmet and motto, for Stephen Coombs, Uppsala, Sweden. Drawing by the author 2003.

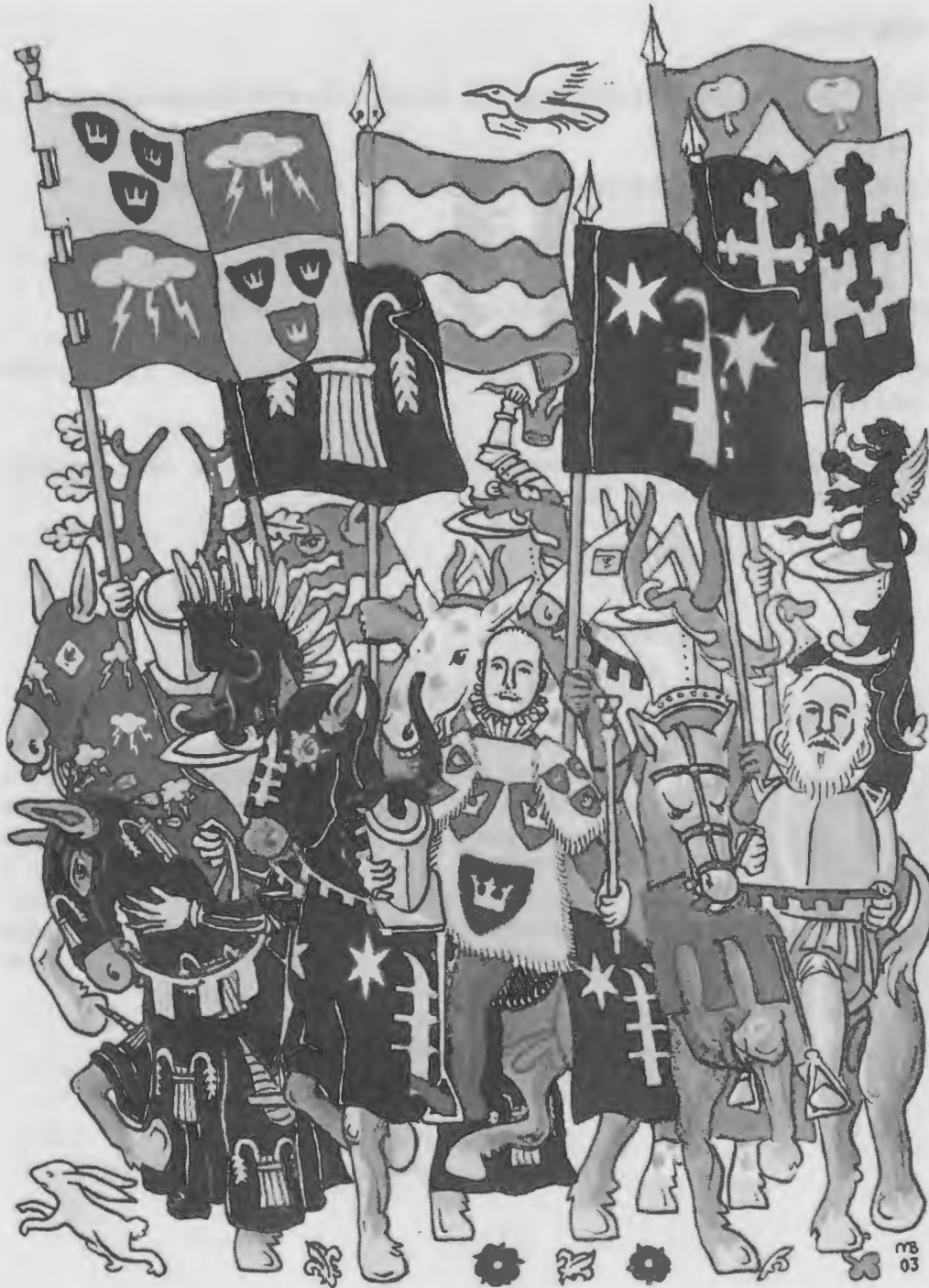


Figure 35 A heraldic display, including banners, showing the new board elected in Svenska Heraldiska Föreningen (the Swedish Heraldry Association) in 2003. From the left: Henric Åsklund, president, as such quartering the arms of SHF with his own, Jesper Wasling, Nils Stefan Bede, herald, as such wearing a tabard with the arms of SHF and a herald's staff, the author, Ingemar Apelstig, Perolow Jonsson-Falck and Marcus Karlsson. Drawing by the author 2003.

References

- Bergman, A.: "På heraldisk utställning", in: *Meddelanden från Riksheraldikerämbetet*, V, Malmö, 1936.
- Carlander, C. M.: *Svenska bibliotek och ex-libris*, II:1, Stockholm 1904.
- Galbreath, D. L.: *Handbüchlein der Heraldik*, Lausanne 1948.
- Hildebrand, B. E.: *Svenska sigiller från medeltiden*, Stockholm 1862–67.
- Rolland, V. & H.: *Armorial général de Rietstap*, supplément 1 and 2, La Haye 1904 and 1921–26.
- Siebmacher's Grosses Wappenbuch, Band 2, Die Wappen der deutschen Landesfürsten*, Neustadt and der Aisch 1981.
- Ströhl, H. G.: *Heraldischer Atlas*, Wien 1899.

About the author



Magnus Bäckmark (b. 1974) started, after studies in communication science and literature, in 1998 to make a living as heraldic artist, in combination with genealogical research. Together with Jesper Wasling he published the book *Heraldiken i Sverige* (Heraldry in Sweden) in 2001, and he is presently the editor of *Svenska Släktkalendern* (The Swedish Family Register) and *Vapenbildern*, the journal of Svenska Heraldiska Föreningen (The Swedish Heraldry Association).

Author's address: Magnus Bäckmark
Värtavägen 85C
SE - 183 60 Täby
Sweden
E-mail: <magnus.baeckmark@swipnet.se>