

**Kevin Harrington:
Who let the Bears on?
An Essay in Urso-Vexillology**
(Submitted paper)

Abstract: *Bears in heraldry and vexillology are not at all uncommon, only surpassed in their appearance on heraldic shields and crests and on flags and ensigns by the lion and the eagle. Bears are widely distributed in from North America to Eurasia but they are not found in Australia or sub-Saharan Africa, and there is only one species, the Andean bear, in South America.*

The bear is known under various names *ursus* in Latin (whence ours, orso, urs, urso), *arktos* in Greek, *medved*, *niedźwiedź* among Slavic speakers, *Bär*, bear, beer, *bjørn*, *ber* in Teutonic forms, *lácis* and *lokys* in Latvian and Lithuanian, *hsiung* in Chinese, *yo-nva* in Cherokee; *dob*, *dobab* in Hebrew; Celtic forms *art*, *arth*, *arzh*.

In mythology, religion and legend the bear looms large.

It is mentioned several times in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible; bears mauled the children who mocked Elisha.

The Tungus testify in his name: "May the bear gobble me up if I am guilty."

The Greeks saw the bear as the companion of Artemis (Diana), the moon goddess. Hera changed Callisto into a bear.

The Yakut say: "The bear remembers everything and forgets nothing."

The Altai consider the bear is their ancestor.

The Pueblo associated the bear with the underworld.

The Algonquin Indians call the bear 'Grandfather'.

The Chinese see the bear as a male symbol, heralding the birth of boys, an expression of yang.

The Ainu believed in monster bears *ararush* - which existed because humans did not treat the bears with proper rituals or offerings.

Among the Celts the bear competed with the boar; the bear was the warrior's symbol.

Neither Christianity nor Islam saw good in the bear – he was a glutton, a creature of the night, a disgusting figure. In the Bible he prowled and growled.

In heraldry the bear often appears as a charge for canting or allusive reasons, a pun on the armiger's name. Brooke-Little mentions Fitz Urse, Beresford, Barnard, and Barham (Boutell's heraldry, 1978, p. 71). In Boltons American armory finds a bear in the arms of Barrett, Bernon, and Bernard. A Cornish armory shows Bears. The association of a rampant bear and ragged staff with Earl of Warwick derives from an ancestor baron Urso d'Abitot who came with William the Conqueror. (However FSW suggests that Arthgal, from the British arth also meaning bear, was the ancestor of this Earl, mentioned in Dame Heraldry, p. 207). A celebrated Italian princely family, the Orsini, bore a bear in their armorial crest; two popes were Orsini. Pope Lucius II is a scion of the family Caccianemici dal Orso - the name literally translates as 'hunt down the enemies of the Bear' and his coat shows a bear (orso). Canting arms also apply to corporations such as municipalities and their arms; examples are Bärenstein, Berne, Berlin, Berwick, Bjørneborg (Pori), Bernau, Bernsdorf - which through legend or imagination (similarity of sound) were early endowed with the device of a bear (Bernese coins of 1200 show a bear). Sometimes this may not relate to the presence of bears or incidents of a bear encounter - was Berlin not founded by Albert the Bear and named after him?

The city of Yaroslavl, Russia, which has a bear as a charge in its arms and on its flag. The bear incorporates a legend - when Yaroslav the Wise, Prince of Kiev, wished to wrest an eastern territory at the junction of the Volga and Kotorosi rivers from a tribal people, the Merya, he first destroyed their god, a sacred bear.

The bear, the hallowed master of the northern forest occupied the place of the lion. The latter acquired dominant symbolic role only much later, after the thirteenth century according to Michel Pastoureau (Figures de l'héraldique, 1996, p. 84).

What are the characteristics of a bear that foster its use as an emblem, an heraldic charge or a device on a flag?

The bear is large in size and weight, he or she is heavily muscled, armed with paws that crush, break and enter, claws that rip, scoop, and disembowel, and fangs that tear. The thick fur discourages the bullet, the arrow, the spear and the knife.

Like men bears can rear or stand on two feet, increasing their height. The bear can run fast, swim and climb with dexterity.

They are usually black or dark brown blending in with the forest cover; the polar bear is black-skinned but white in fur as he hunts, swims, and rides on or amidst ice. A she-bear is fearless and ruthless in defense of her young.

Although content with berries and honey, bears are actually carnivorous - salmon, seals, mice, livestock, garbage.

All these characteristics make a fearful animal. The bear commands respect. He is a symbol of strength, independence, sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and power.

What examples can be found on flags of these dreaded animals?

The flag of Buskerud, in Norway, west of Oslo, is excellent. The bear stands fiercely displaying his strength and his blood-red claws, three on each paw. His mouth is open, tongue out like a lash and sharp teeth asparkle. Only the blue colouring removes him slightly from reality. But the coat of arms for Berlin (Land) shows a fierce and rampant bear in its natural coloration, so it was also on the 1937 flag of Berlin. Even not rampant but moving fast on all fours the bear presents a grim appearance as he does on the flag of Finnish Vantaa. With his virile member awakened and red, the bear on the Bernese flag is surely an alpha male. The emblem on the flag of Yaroslavl is doubly effective - a bear with a weapon, doubly armed! See also the Polish Artillery guidon. The Bear's image may simply represent a forest or wooded environment, the geographic location, especially the northern parts of the world, e.g. the Arctic regions, or even the natural history or ecology of a place. In these instances the bear appears as simply passing through on all fours, lying, sitting, standing under or leaning towards a tree. The Polar bear is a national or territorial emblem in Greenland, Perm (Russia), Canada's North-West Territories and Nunavut. The Grizzly (*Ursus horribilis*) is on California's flag and on the seal of Missouri. The European brown bear The Black bear forms the crest on Ontario's coat of arms,

The parts of the bear suggest the whole and can inspire fear and respect. Hence the bear claw, the forearm, the head, the upper quarters, the hindquarters, the very print of the bear's paw in the snow or earth

may serve as emblems on arms and flags. The bear's hide stretched to cure and keep its shape is a feature of a Canadian First Nation. The fur may be coloured dark brown, light brown, tawny, beige, white, grey and black. There is a socio-sexual group known as Bears today – they are gay men who have a great deal of body hair, and are of large bulk, even fat. The group developed designs for their movement's flag – one consists of seven stripes of the fur colours mentioned with the black footprint of a bear in the upper hoist area.

The albino or beige occasionally seen in bear coloration projects a ghostly image and because of its rarity such a bear is recorded in place names such as White Bear Lake, Minnesota (the yacht club burgee shows a white bear).

We have mentioned that the bear will eat many types of food; these too appear on flags and in coats of arms. Witness the Winnie-the-Pooh flag, the Salmon prayer flag, and images of rabbits, squirrels, and the bearberry!

I suppose the bear's strength, standing height and imposing features make it an appropriate animal for the role of a supporter of the shield of arms in heraldry. However, unlike the lion, it is rarely or never used outside of its natural habitat, past or present (except for canting). However this claim is less relevant when we see the bear's fellow supporter is a sea-horse or beaver, drawn at the same height.

An interesting point to examine is the human's viewpoint of this forest beast. We have mentioned the fur or bearskin often used for garments especially at the tribal level. (However there is still abundant use of bearskin today especially in ceremony and military uniforms, e.g. the 18-inch headgear of the British Foot Guards - taking 100 pelts a year of Canadian black bear. Other users include Danish, Canadian and Belgian armed forces.) A bearskin rug can sell for more than 2,000 US dollars, a grizzly \$6,000, a polar-bear \$14,000. The Chinese pharmacopeia includes bear bile and dried flesh of the bear's paw, parts often in illegal trade. As for the meat there are recipes on the Internet for bear stew and tart apple bear roast. In the Middle Ages and later, as quite evident in English heraldry, is the tamed bear, accoutered with a muzzle, a chain, and collar, or the head 'couped'. The bear was often captured and tamed (to a degree) in many parts of the world including Russia

and India, and led around as a dancing bear for vulgar entertainment. Bear-baiting was a common continental sport, where betting on dogs attacking a bear, chained or in a pit, took place. The teeth and claws of the bear can be carved, polished and set to form pendants, belt buckles and other ornaments. The teeth and claws were considered the animal's obvious expression of power, e.g. among the Indians of the Northwest Coast. Man's making use of the bear or its parts in various ways does not always figure in symbols. Folk references to the bear focus on qualities such as wisdom, healing, reserved strength, warmth and family values, teaching the young (North Austin Tae Kwon Do site).

The bear in holy legends even acts as a beast of burden or as a message bearer.

The bear figures very strongly in art and literature, in proverbs and fairy tales, in myth and dance. Even playthings and little heroes of children - children who know Winnie the Pooh (Ursinho Poo), Rupert the Bear, their teddy bear, Billy 'n Bear, Buster Bear, Bear in the Big Blue House, Paddington Bear, Bearenstain Bears, Zaunkönig (Willow-Wren) and the Bear, Aesop's two fellows and a bear, Petit Ours brun, Boo-Boo Yogi Bear, Gummibärchen, and Smoky the Bear. These are more likely to be seen on flags, mascots and logos than in any heraldic rendition (but there is a cuddly armorial bear for Bernel). Even yacht owners have their 'toys' represented on burgees.

Incidentally the term 'bears and bulls' in stock market terminology is evident on two flags I have found, each probably representing the banker or investor on his or her yachting vacation.

We see that heraldry has a lesser part to play in North American bear images and those in the corporate world of sports and institutions. The military and scouting organizations likewise often eschew heraldic depiction opting for the natural and less serious (or seriously violent) approach. Time doesn't allow us to enter further into these fields, apart from seven illustration that follow.

It is in the sports arena and on the sports fields that we find the greatest expression of the bear's courage, speed, agility, ferocity, defensiveness, invulnerability, irascibility, etc. Long noted in North America, both the USA and Canada, and now creeping into the European Union and elsewhere, the bear growls, paces, rushes, and scares, on flags,

pennants, banners, car accessories, scarves, and various souvenirs promoting the team it represents.

This presentation does not exhaust the topic; there are numerous bear images on flags, logos, and coats of arms still in my collection. For example, I have ignored business use of the ursine image – quite common actually. Also I have not shown examples of the bear found on so many American First Nations, as they are readily seen on author Donald T. Healy's website and in the NAVA publication *Raven*, vol. 3/4, 1996-97. There are fewer than ten percent of the flags that use the bear as a device, and that often as one of several clan totems, e.g. turtle, wolf. The Native Peoples using the bear on their flags originate in the Great Lakes region. See the two Canadian bear illustrations below.

But not to go on forever - that would be unbearable. I'll conclude with these two short questions.

First, in what other way could the bear be symbolized, i.e. a side from showing its actual image?

Second, which countries, and why, are often represented in cartoons and satirical drawings, especially since the 1850s in an animal form?



About the author



Kevin Harrington, B.A., M.A.(T.); born in 1934; writer, teacher, librarian, poet ; studies at the University of Toronto B.A. 1957, M.A.(T.). Publisher and editor of vexillological publications; President of the Canadian Flag Association and editor of "Flagscan" since 1986; Consultant in Vexillology, Heraldry &. Onomastics; Member of NAVA; Fellow of the FIAV, 2007.

His interest in flags dates back to childhood, by age of 12 he borrowed all flag books (Campbell and Evans, Gordon, Wheeler-Holohan) from the local public library and begun a series of water-colour pictures of flags. He delighted in discovering flags - such as the black and white flag in a Time Magazine article on a trial of Breton separatists, or

finding in Toronto Library - a magazine, *The Flag Bulletin*.

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