



OF HELMS AND CRESTS
A WAY FORWARD

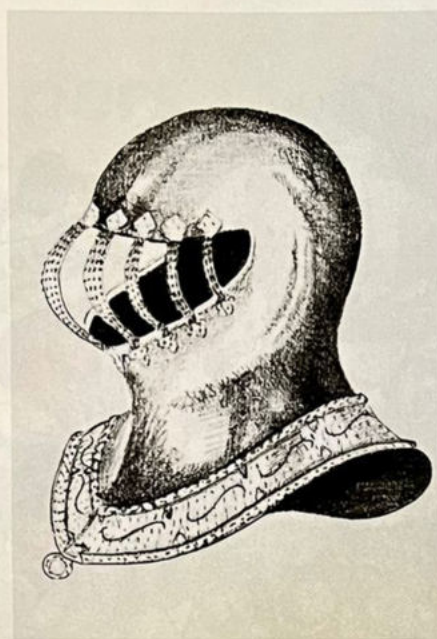
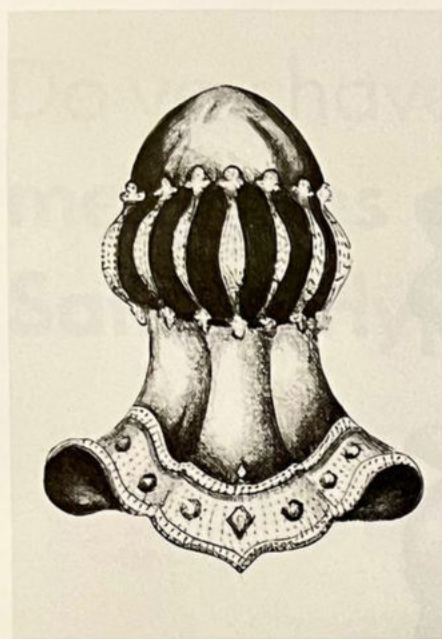
Have you ever watched one of those films where the story unfolds several centuries ago and battles are fought on foot and on horseback? Where the sound of galloping hooves gradually rises to a crescendo, and you suddenly see rows of hundreds of warriors, shields and swords in hand, just before that deafening clash and clang of steel against steel? In the midst of that inferno of bloodshed, you must surely have noticed fluttering banners and emblazoned flags, from which a long heraldry tradition evolved to this day, albeit we no longer fight our battles with daggers and lances, writes the team at Heritage Malta.

Imagery courtesy Heritage Malta.

Heraldry originated in the form we know it today in the second quarter of the 12th century, when it was essential to identify people on the battlefield. From a distance it would be impossible to tell friend from foe apart if it were not for the colourful indicators of coats of arms on flags and emblems. You may have heard of 'heralds', and you're wondering if they are somehow connected to all of this. The answer is yes!

Protected from any personal danger and distinguished by a loose overgarment known as a tabard, a herald would deliver messages and challenges on behalf of his sovereign or lord. He would have a thorough knowledge of all the coats of arms of 'his' realm as well as a working knowledge of those of other realms. In times of war, a herald would stand by the side of the king or general and give him a running commentary on the battle – who had been killed, who had been captured and, especially, if anybody had changed sides, which was not uncommon.

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With the decline in the use of armour, while the original purpose of heraldry was lost, it had become deeply rooted in society. Coats of Arms were granted not only to aristocrats but also to people of substance who had the need for some means of identification in times of high illiteracy.

Today heraldry is mostly a status symbol. Many people just make up their own Arms, but for the Arms to be legal they have to be granted by a proper authority, operating under a specific charter granted by the state. This is where Heritage Malta and the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms come in.

Despite the abundance of armorial bearings all over the Maltese islands, there had never been a central authority regulating the granting of Coats of Arms until a few years ago, when the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta was established. The Office, which operates under the aegis of Heritage Malta, is based at the historic Fort St Elmo in Valletta. The appointment of Dr Charles A. Gauci as Chief Herald of Arms of Malta was officially announced in the Malta Government Gazette on 25th June 2019.

Heritage Malta, together with the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, has launched a new publication encapsulating all there is to know about Maltese heraldry. Delving deep into the roots of local heraldry, *The Way Forward*, written by the Chief Herald, debunks several long-standing misconceptions concerning Malta's past nobility and traces major historical and legal shifts that have seen the Maltese Islands transition from fief to colony to independent monarchy and finally to sovereign republic.

The publication also contains two appendices that provide invaluable references for researchers on Maltese heraldry. This final section outlines the legal basis for the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta. ■

THE WAY FORWARD (hardback; 172 pages; 12 plates; 53 other illustrations) is a must-have for anyone interested in Maltese history, the former nobility and heraldry in general. The book may be purchased online here: heritagemalta.mt/store/office-of-the-chief-herald-of-arms-of-malta-the-way-forward/

