

**Zeitschrift:** Archivum heraldicum : internationales Bulletin = bulletin international = bollettino internazionale

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Heraldische Gesellschaft

**Band:** 99 (1985)

**Heft:** 1-2

**Artikel:** The armorial bearings of Iceland

**Autor:** Thorlacius, Birgir

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-746191>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Armorial Bearings of Iceland

by BIRGIR THORLACIUS

Iceland was settled in the 9th century by Norsemen, who in the year 930 founded a sovereign state and a parliament (the Althing), the oldest national assembly in the world. They lived there as a free and independent people until the year 1262, when long-standing dissension and a struggle for power between the chieftains resulted in the loss of independence to the king of Norway, and in the latter part of the 14th century the country passed under the control of the crown of Denmark. For a long time the Icelanders made every effort to win back their freedom, and in the year 1918 Iceland became a sovereign state in union with the Danish crown, while on 17th June 1944 the republic was finally restored.

One of the elements in the struggle for independence was the desire for an Icelandic flag. This was partly satisfied in 1915, and fully in 1918. On the other hand, the coat of arms of Iceland has much longer history than the flag.

Since the dawn of history various distinguishing symbols or emblems have been used by clans, families, heads of families and whole nations. Greek and Roman coats give an account of the tokens inscribed by leaders on their shields, and shields with devices are to be seen depicted on ancient jars. However, the evolution of systematic armorial bearings belongs especially to the period of the Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries. The later rapid spread of these all over Europe shows that they fulfilled a certain need. Such devices, which were also used on seals, were convenient, both in the drawing up of contracts and in warfare, beside satisfying a human love to display.

Definitive rules developed regarding the design of coat of arms and choice of colours. Among the commonest devices on shields were a cross, an eagle and a lion, and the

principal colours and metals were seven in number: gold or yellow (or), silver or white (argent), purple (purpur), red (gules), blue (azure), black (sable) and green (vert). To these were added two furs: ermine and vair. Those dubbed knight adopted or accepted a specific coat of arms, which later became a hereditary family device.

Cities and companies often had special devices and seals. The merchants of Hamburg (company of Iceland traders) had a codfish on their seal about 1500, and the same applied to the German (Lübeck) trading company in Bergen in 1415. The Linen Merchants of Copenhagen had a cod as their trademark, and held the lease of the Icelandic trade monopoly 1742–1752.

## *Armoial Devices of Iceland before and since 1262*

In the years 1950–59 a committee appointed by the office of the Danish prime minister was commissioned to enquire into and report on the use of the Danish state coat of arms. A member of the committee, P. Warming, now heraldic adviser to the Danish government, has since published his views on the official armorial bearing of Iceland before 1262—i.e., before the country submitted to the Norwegian crown—and the bearings used by the king of Norway in his capacity as king of Iceland. The following are the main points from his report:

There is in existence a French book on heraldry believed to have been compiled about 1265–1285. It is known as the 'Wijnbergen Book of Arms' and is preserved at the Koninklijk Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Geslacht-en Wapenkunde at The Hague. The book lists 1312 armorial bearings, most of

them French and some German, and also depicts 56 royal coat of arms from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. These include the devices of the kings of France, Spain, Aragon, England, Portugal, Germany, Bohemia, Denmark, Navarra, Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Ireland. And on the reverse side of one page 35 is shown the device of the king of Iceland, that is, the device used by the king of Norway as king of Iceland after the events of 1262–1264. A reproduction of this device, greatly enlarged, is given here. The caption is high above the picture, as with the others in the book, and reads: 'le Roi Dillande', i.e. le Roi d'Islande. The edge of the shield is traced in dark colour, but the horizontal bars on it are blue and white. The alternating bars, twelve in all, fill the lower two-thirds of the shield, six of each colour. The upper third of the shield, the chief, is gold and without bars. Superimposed on the shield is a lion in red, standing on its hind legs, with the lower foot in the bottom corner of the shield, its head touching the top edge (lion rampant gules). In its forepaws the lion is holding an axe, of which the upper part (in chief) is blue, while the lower part of the haft, where it extends below the highest silver bar, seems to be gold. The lion in the coat of arms of Norway was not depicted with an axe in its claw until the days of King Eirik Magnússon, after the year 1280.

According to the French book, the coat of arms in question appears to have been used by the king of Norway as the king of Iceland after the year 1280. It is possible that the same, or similar, arms were used by the 'king of Iceland' from the beginning, in 1264. There are no records of the cod as the emblem of Iceland until so much later that its use need not conflict with this, or any other device that may have been used as an Icelandic emblem.

This coat of arms of the 'king of Iceland' mentioned above seems to have been devised by using as a basis the Norwegian bearings of a golden lion on a red field (gules a lion rampant d'or), but with the metal and colour reversed (or a lion rampant gules). However, this difference is not allowed to suffice, for the lower two-thirds of the shield become 'barry, argent and azure with twelve bars, the lowest being blue and the highest silver, next to the chief. With this juxtaposition of silver and gold for some reason or other one of the basic laws of heraldry is broken; namely, that two

metals shall not be next to one another; nor, for that matter, two colours; but there should always be 'a colour on a metal and a metal on a colour'. Had this coat of arms been devised according to the laws of heraldry alone, then there would have been a bar azure next to the chief or, then a bar argent, etc., instead of the silver lying next to the gold against the rule. From this it can be deduced that account had to be taken of a previously existing coat of arms.

In circumstances such as when an addition is made existing armorial bearings, heraldry permitted deviations from the general rule. For similar reasons, in the Danish coat of arms the devices of the Färöer and Greenland are juxtaposed, although both have a field of colour, and moreover the same colour.

The coat of arms already in existence, and to which reference is made when adding to it part of the state emblem of Norway, must have been the arms of Iceland before 1262. According to this, the state armorial bearings of Iceland prior to this date would have been a shield with 12 silver and blue horizontal bars (barry argent and azure), the uppermost bar being silver and the lowest blue. From a heraldic point of view, in its simplicity this is a beautiful device.

If this deduction is correct, the oldest state armorial bearings of Iceland are of a similar age to those of Norway, which, without axe, are known from the days of King Hákon IV Hákonarson. The Danish state arms date from 1190, the Swedish (with the three crowns) from 1364, and the Finnish from the last quarter of the 15th century.

The number of bars in the Icelandic arms need have no special symbolism, but one is led to remember the fact that Iceland was originally divided into twelve district assemblies, or Things; though admittedly this had been changed before the custom of using armorial bearings came to Scandinavia in the period 1150–1200.

That the lion in the Norwegian state arms should carry an axe in this book of heraldry, being added to them precisely at the time when the book was being compiled, indicates that the compiler was well informed about Norse heraldry.

The above account of the coat of arms of Iceland before and after 1262 is a summary of the views of P. Warming.

### The Codfish Device

It is not known when the cod, sometimes flattened sometimes not, became the Icelandic emblem. A picture of a flattened codfish is found in the margin of an Icelandic vellum manuscript from about 1360 (Stockholm-Book, No. 5, fol.), but the picture can hardly be that old as that method of flattening fish did not exist until the 16th century (Fig. 1).

In the year 1550 King Christian III of Denmark sent a seal to Iceland with Laurentius Mule, the governor, together with a letter dated 28th January of that year, in which the king thanked the Icelanders for their loyal obedience in the matter of religious reform. The letter provides that six to eight men of good reputation responsible for the keeping of the seal, so that it shall not be misused in any way.

Whether the king had the seal made on his own account, or at the desire of the Icelanders, is unknown, but it was to be an insurance to the king and others the documents bearing the impression of the seal were from the proper authorities.

This seal seems to have been lost, and its design is unknown, though it probably contained the codfish device.

At the Althing in 1592 the Lawman Jón Jónsson was deputed to present to the State



Fig. 1 Codfish as shown in the Stockholm Book.

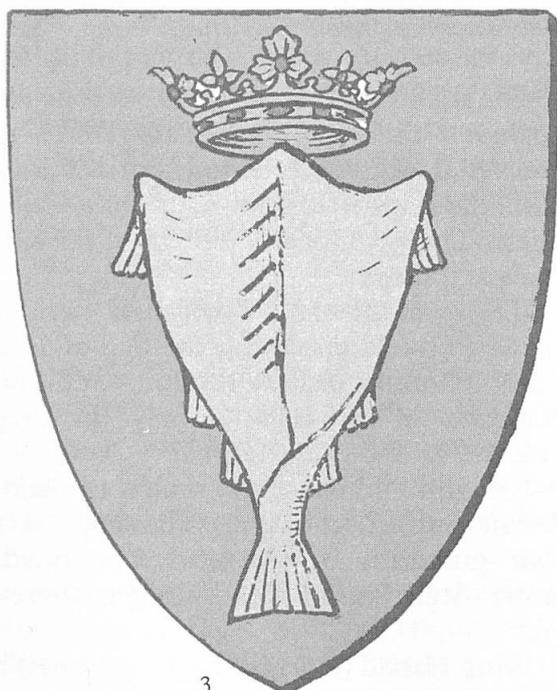


Fig. 2. Seal of 1593 (Photo: Gisli Gestsson).

Council, that exercised royal powers during the minority of Christian IV, various matters, including the granting of a seal to the country. The seal was to be kept by the governor and used on missives to the king. The State Council granted the request, and there is a letter to the governor on the subject, dated 9th May 1593, where it is declared that the Council has acceded to the request of the Icelanders and had a seal made for them, which it has handed over to the governor of Iceland, Heinrich Chrag, and moreover commissioned him to keep it and see that it be not misused.

On the seal, which is of silver, there is a headless codfish ensigned by an open crown and with the date 1593 at the side, while round it in an arc is the inscription: SIGILLVM INSVLAE ISLANDIAE. This seal is kept in the national museum at Reykjavik, exhibit No. 4390, having been presented by the authorities in the year 1897 (Fig. 2).

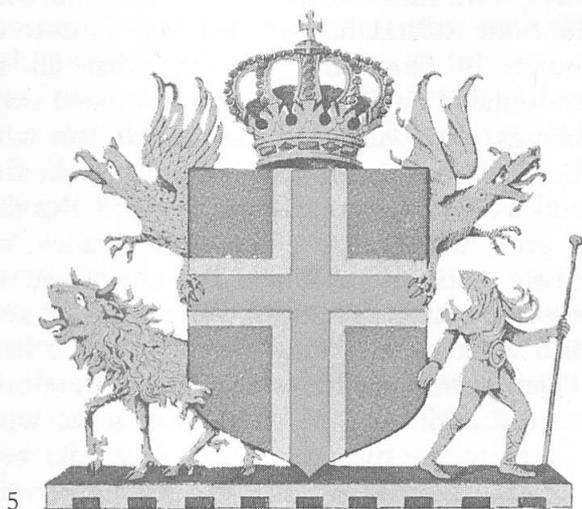
Here we have a definite authority for the crowned codfish as the emblem of Iceland, though it occurs before the seal of 1593, for example, on Danish gold coins struck in the years 1591. The cod was included in the royal seal of Denmark in the reign of Christian IV and continued in use to the reign of Frederick VI, with some modifications in 1819. Since the years 1820, when the Norwegian lion had to be dropped from the combined state coat of arms, the devices of Iceland, Greenland and Färöer were put in its place, and the Icelandic cod appeared in the lower right-hand division: a flattened silver codfish ensigned of a golden crown on a red field (gules, a codfish argent, ensigned of a crown or in chief) (Fig. 3).



3



4



5



6

Fig. 3. The Cod Devise. Gules, a codfish Argent, ensigned by a crown Or in chief.

Fig. 4. The Falcon Emblem 1909–1919. Azure, an Icelandic falcon close Argent.

Fig. 5. The Land-guardian's Emblem. Azure, a cross throughout Gules fimbriated Argent, the shield ensigned the crown of Iceland proper. On a compartment are set for supporters: Dexter: first a bull Or armed and unguled Gules, and above him a vulture Or; Sinister: A rock-giant Or with a staff in his exterior and Gules, and above him a dragon Or.

Fig. 6. Armorial Bearings of the Republic. Azure, a cross throughout Gules fimbriated Argent. On a compartment of basalt rock are set for supporters: Dexter: first a bull Sable armed and unguled Or, and above him a vulture, wings erect, Argent armed and beaked Or; Sinister: A rock-giant proper, garbed Argent, belted Sable with a staff in his exterior hand Sable, and above him a dragon his wings also erect Sable, crested and beaked Or.

The heraldic Icelandic cod was removed from the Danish state coat of arms, its place being taken by a falcon as the device of Iceland, and this continued in use until the year 1948.

In the latter part of the 19th century, there was agitation to abolish the use of the cod as the national emblem and adopt the silver falcon on a blue shield.

### *The Falcon Emblem*

By a royal decree of 3rd October 1903 it was proclaimed that the coat of arms of Iceland should be 'a white Icelandic falcon on a blue field' (azure, an Icelandic falcon argent) (Fig. 4). It was considered more dignified to use this fierce, tough, lordly bird as a national emblem than the cod. It has been said that, side by side, the poets and falcons of Iceland maintained the country's fame in other lands for three or four centuries. But the day dawned when foreign princes could no longer understand or appreciate Icelandic poets, though they still continued to honour and admire the falcon for many centuries, and Icelandic falcons were regarded as royal treasures.

Falconry is an ancient sport, believed to have originated among the herdsmen of Central Asia and to have been practised first in Turkestan. About 2000 B.C. falcons were considered noble gifts in China. The sport spread later to Europe and was a pastime of princes there, as in the east, for many centuries. In Scandinavia falconry has a tradition dating from heathen times. It is little wonder if the remote land of Iceland, from which came the best hunting falcons to be found, sent as gifts between kings and emperors, enjoyed a certain reflected glory from the fact. In its homeland the falcon received the distinction of being engraved in the seals of several Icelandic chieftains.

After the change in the coat of arms of Iceland in 1919, a decree was issued regarding a special royal flag. This was to be sky-blue, bearing an Icelandic falcon seated and crowned with the Icelandic crown, the falcon facing towards the flagstaff. This flag was later used by the king on his visit to Iceland in 1921, and in the same summer the 'Icelandic Order of the Falcon' was instituted. The falcon is the emblem of the Order, as its name indicates.

### *The 'Land-Guardian' Emblems*

The falcon coat of arms was not long in use, however, for on 12th February 1919 there was yet another change, and bearings adopted with the flag of Iceland incorporated in the shield. The royal decree issued on the subject reads as follows:

'The coat of arms of Iceland shall be a crowned shield displaying the flag of Iceland. The supporters shall be the four well-known guardians of the land; namely the dragon, vulture, ox and giant.' (Fig. 5).

Rikarthur Jónsson, the sculptor, made the design for the coat of arms. The supporters are four guardians of the land mentioned by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla* where it is said:

'King Harald (Gormsson of the Danes) bade a man skilled in magic go in changed shape to Iceland and see what he might tell him. This man went in the shape of a whale. And when he came to land, he travelled westwards to the north of the land. He saw that all the mountains and hills were crowded with beings, some large and some small. But when he came to Vopnafjörður, he entered the firth and would have gone up on the land. But then a great dragon came down the valley, and many serpents, toads and lizards with it, and spewed poison upon him. But he turned away and went westwards along the coast, as far as Eyjafjörður. He entered that firth. There came to meet him a bird so great that its wings spread to the mountains on either side, and a crowd of other birds, both great and small. Away he went thence and westwards, and then south to Breidifjörður, and there turned into the firth. Then there came out to meet him a great bull, that waded forth into the sea and began to bellow fearfully, and with it went a crowd of land-beings. Thence he went southwards about Reykjanes, and would have gone ashore at Vikarsskeidi. Here a rockgiant came to meet him. It had an iron staff in its hand and its head reached higher than the mountains. With it were many other giants. Thence he went east all along the land—'there was then naught but sand and wilderness and mighty breakers off the shore, and so mighty an ocean between coasts', he says, 'that longships cannot go there.'

It is the idea of these faithful guardians of the land that lies behind the design for the coat

of arms of 1918. The possibility of having a guardian in each of the four quarterings of the shield was considered, though it was decided not to have them in the shield proper, but as supporters. The coat of arms, which is what is incorporated in the shield only, may be used either with or without supporters.

### *The Armorial Bearings of the Republic*

With the restoration of the Republic in 1944, the prime minister at the time, Dr. Björn Thórdarson, commissioned three permanent secretaries (A.Kl. Jónsson, V. Einarsson and B. Thorlacius), together with Dr. Matthias Thórdarson, Curator of the National Museum, who had been adviser on the design of the arms of 1918, to make enquiries and recommendations regarding changes in the state coat of arms. A change was necessary at all events, since the crown above the shield was bound to go, with the abrogation of the monarchy. We who were entrusted with this task, discussed possible changes in the coat of arms itself, and especially whether the falcon on a blue background should be revived. But the final decision was to recommend no changes in either arms or supporters. In this we were unanimous, and at the meeting to discuss the matter, the prime minister accepted our view. A new design of arms was now made, with the crown omitted and the shape of the shield altered. The supporters were depicted in a different way, as was also the base supporting the shield. The artist Tryggvi Magnusson made the design.

At a session of the Althingi held on 17th June 1944 at the ancient palace of assembly, the Law-Rock by the river Öxara at Thingvellir, it was proclaimed that the Republic of Iceland was restored. The assembly then elected the first president of the republic, to hold office for one year, after which he was to be elected by the whole nation. At a meeting of this State Council held at Thingveillir the same day, the newly elected president, Sveinn Björnsson, issued a presidential decree concerning the armorial bearings of Iceland in the following terms:

'The coat of arms of Iceland is a silver cross on a blue background, a bright red cross being contained within the silver one. The arms of the cross shall extend to the edge of the shield on all four sides. The breadth of the cross shall

be two-ninths of the breadth of the shield, with the red cross half the breadth of the silver, or one ninth of the breadth of the shield. The upper quarters of the shield shall be rectangular, the lower, of the same breadth, but a third longer.

The supporters are the four guardians of the land described in *Heimskringla*: To the right, a bull, to the left, a rock-giant, above the bull, right, a vulture, above the rock-giant, left, a dragon.

The shield shall rest upon a platform of basalt.' (Fig. 6)

It may be mentioned, in this connexion, that the president of Iceland possesses a special coat of arms. This bears the same device as the state shield, but has the state coat of arms, including supporters, inset in a white (silver) square where the arms of the cross meet.

### *Some literature regarding the subject:*

- ELDJÁRN, Dr. Kristján: *Hundrad, ár í thjóðminjasafni*, chapter 34. Published by Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóos, Reykjavík, 1962.
- WARMING, Paul: *Island våben. Årbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 1971, Reykjavík.
- STURLUSON, Snorri: *Heimskringla*, Chapter XXXIII, p. 270. Hid íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík MCMXXI.
- BRIEM, Dr. Helgi P.: *Sjálfsstaedi Íslands 1809*, p. 239, 445. Hid íslenska thjóðvinafélag, Reykjavík 1936.
- Íslands kortlaegning*, p. 12, 40, 42. E. Munsksgaard, Copenhagen 1944.
- ADILS, Jón Jónsson: *Skúli Magnússon, landfógeti*, p. 116. Reykjavík 1911.
- GUDMUNDSSON, Sigurdur: *Um kvenbúninga á Íslandi ad fornu og nýju*. Ný félagsrit, XVII, 28, p. 28. *Íslenskt fornbréfasafn III*, p. 152 (Diplomatarium Islandicum), Hid íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1896.
- Althingistíðindi 1881*, B, p. 1162. Althingi, Reykjavík.
- Sjónartíðindi 1944*, A, p. 54. Dómsmálaráðuneytid, Reykjavík.
- THISET, A.: *Vaabenmaerkerne for Island, Faerøerne og kolonierne*. En kritisk Undersøgelse. Aarboeg for nordisk oldkyndighed og Historie, 1914, p. 177.
- THÓRDARSON, Matthías: *Skjaldarmerki Íslands*. Nokkrar athugasemdir. Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1915, p. 18.
- ACHEN, Sven Tito: *The Coat of Arms of Iceland*. The American-Scandinavian Review 1962.
- THÓRDARSON, Dr. jur. Björn: *Íslenskir fálkar*. Safn til sögu Íslands, annar flokkur, Reykjavík 1957.
- PÁLSSON, Pálmi: *Merki Íslands*. Andvari IX, 1883, p. 141.
- JÓNASDÓTTIR, Guðný: *Skjaldarmerki Íslands*. Söguslódir, Sögufélagid, Reykjavík 1979.
- GUDMUNDSSON, Jónas: *Uppruni landvaettanna*. Dagrenning nr. 1, 1947.
- Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, X, p. 273. Bókaverslun Ísafoldar, Reykjavík, 1965.
- GUDJÓNSSON, Elsa E.: *Fáein ord um fálkamerki Sigurdar Gudmundssonar málara*. Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags, 1980, p. 36-43.

ACHEN, Sven Tito: *Bergensfarene og Islands ældste vaaben*. Heraldisk Tidsskrift, 1962, p. 197.

*Althingsbaekur Íslands IV*, p. 217.

HERMANNSSON, Halldór: *Skjaldarmerki Íslands*. Eimreidin, 1916, 3. h.

HOGAN, Francis: *Kongen af Island eller Beretning om Jørgen Jürgensen fortalt af ham selv*. ("The Convict King"). Vinten, Copenhagen 1973. ISBN 87 414 3776 4.

BRIEM, Ólafur: *Heidinn sidur á Íslandi*. Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóds, Reykjavík 1945.

*Ríkishandbók Íslands 1965*, p. 274. Reykjavík, 1965.

JÓHANNESSON, Dr. Þorkell: *Saga Íslendinga*, 7. bindi, p. 312 Menntamálaráð og Þjóðvinafélag, Reykjavík, MCML.

WARMING, Paul: *Les armes de l'Islande et du Danemark dans l'armorial Wijnbergen*. Archivum Heraldicum, 82th year 1968, p. 2-3.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'Islande a été créée en 930 comme état souverain avec une assemblée nationale, l'Althing.

Dans l'Armorial Wijnbergen, on peut voir, au verso de la page 35, sous le titre «Le roi dillande» le blason le plus ancien d'Islande: *burelé de douze pièces d'argent et d'azur au chef d'or, un lion rampant de gueules brochant sur le tout et tenant une hache d'azur sur le chef d'or et d'or sur le burelé*. Le roi d'Islande de l'Armorial est le roi de Norvège régnant sur l'Islande (à partir de 1262-1264). Comme le lion tient une hache, on peut préciser que ce blason a été peint après 1280.

Le fait que la première burelle du burelé soit d'argent et placée immédiatement sous le chef d'or, fait penser qu'il s'agit d'armoiries pré-existantes à la nouvelle création combinée ou d'une ancienne bannière. L'auteur croit que le blason burelé d'argent et d'azur représente les armoiries originales d'Islande.

L'emblème de l'Islande apparaît au milieu du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle; les armes montrent une morue séchée d'argent couronnée d'or sur un champ de gueules. Le plus ancien document se trouve dans un manuscrit de 1360 environ (Livre de Stockholm, N<sup>o</sup> 5, fol.); il est peint sans la couronne. Un sceau datant de 1593 et une monnaie danoise de 1591 portent la morue couronnée. Cet emblème était une partie des sceaux royaux du Danemark ainsi que des armoiries d'Etat – avec des modifications en 1819.

Lorsqu'en 1815 la Norvège s'est séparée du Danemark, l'Islande est restée liée à ce dernier royaume. Les armes d'Islande à la morue ont été remplacées en 1903 par un nouveau blason: *d'azur au faucon d'argent*. Il se maintint dans les armoiries d'Etat jusqu'en 1919, dans la bannière royale d'Islande et dans la décoration d'Etat, l'«Ordre islandais du faucon».

En 1919 le faucon a laissé sa place à un blason tiré du drapeau islandais: *d'azur à la croix d'argent chargée d'une croix de gueules*, il est soutenu des quatre supports légendaires de la Saga et surmonté de la couronne royale islandaise.

Cette dernière disparut après la proclamation de la République d'Islande en 1944. Après de longues discussions dans la Commission héraldique, il a été décidé que le blason ne devrait plus changer, les supports ont cependant été peints d'une autre façon. Cette décision a été acceptée par le Conseil d'Etat. Le président de la République porte un blason identique: au centre des armoiries nationales, se trouve un champ carré d'argent chargé des mêmes armoiries nationales.

Günter Mattern.

Adresse de l'auteur: Birgir Thorlacius, Bolstadarhlio, 16, Reykjavik 105, Iceland.

---

*L'opinion des auteurs n'engage pas la responsabilité d'Archivum Heraldicum. Tous droits réservés.*

*Archivum Heraldicum ist für die hier vertretenen Ansichten der Autoren nicht verantwortlich. Alle Rechte vorbehalten.*

*L'opinione degli autori non impegna la responsabilità di Archivum Heraldicum. Tutti i diritti riservati.*