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A Grammar of Signs: Bartolo da Sassoferrato's "Tract on Insignia and Coats of Arms." By *Oswaldo Cavallar, Susanne Degenring, and Julius Kirshner.* Studies in Comparative Legal History. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Robbins Collection Publications, 1995. Pp. 200. \$25.00.

The tract *De insigniis et armis* by the famous law professor Bartolo da Sassoferrato was published posthumously in 1358, and it has been preserved in nearly one hundred manuscripts. The book under review presents an investigation of this text, along with a modern edition and an English translation. The work, by an energetic team of authors, is clearly argued and well grounded.

Bartolo's originality lay in the fact that he was the first to discuss coats of arms and insignias systematically, and the first to propose a grammar of signs. The work's tripartite structure, based on the method of bestowal (by virtue of office or rank, through bestowal by rulers or princes, or by private adoption), became the basis for all subsequent treatments. It is interesting that Bartolo did not discuss the social rank of the bearers, nor did he discuss the exclusive claim of the nobility to coats of arms. The authors interpret this as a subversive conception, in itself a sign of an open society (p. 86), one that garnered for Bartolo the enmity of the Italian aristocracy. In later centuries, both admiration and criticism marked the overwhelming reception of the tract. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it became a fundamental text, the basis for the creation of a juridical doctrine of signs and insignias.

The authors give central place in their inquiry to the legal phenomena of the employment and creation of coats of arms and insignias by the jurists of the later Middle Ages. At the same time, they use the tract as a source of information about Bartolo's life.

This is the first time that the text has been examined in its full length, and a number of new results emerge regarding its content and context. Several erroneous scholarly opinions need to be corrected. Contrary to the popular, traditional picture, it is unlikely that Bartolo received a coat of arms from the emperor Charles IV, and he could not have learned Hebrew. At least, this is the conclusion of the fascinating, detective-like chain of argumentation. Both of these stories have had an enduring tradition, and scholarship has, if anything, embroidered on them. Their ultimate source is in the tract itself,

in brief notes. But the absence of any contemporary verification and the obviously later (sixteenth century) origin of the actual depictions of the coats of arms make suspect the credibility of the originals. According to the most recent conclusions, which the authors present, Bartolo can no longer be regarded as the author of the entire tract, which was published by his son-in-law some months after Bartolo's death. The authors regard Bartolo as the one primarily responsible for the overall design of the work and as the principal author of the first part, dealing with the juridical theory of signs and insignia. The second part, however, which contains the depictions of the coats of arms and examines their development from various shapes and objects, was presumably composed by Bartolo's son-in-law Nicola Alessandri, who may also have made minor changes to the first part. This, at any rate, is the conclusion of a preliminary analysis; it will need further support by way of a detailed examination of the entire manuscript tradition and a precise linguistic study. In this connection it is noteworthy that Lorenzo Vallas's vigorous attack on Bartolo and the tradition in many of his works (above all in his letter to Pier Candido Decembrio) is directed primarily against the second part of the tract. The erudite humanist apparently did not notice the stylistic and thematic differences of this part. It was largely as a result of Vallas's great influence that subsequent scholarship continued to accept, even into the current decade, the erroneous views that Bartolo had composed the entire tract, that he had received a coat of arms from the emperor, and that (in a kind of anticipation of the demands of the early humanists) he had learned Hebrew.

One of the merits of this convincing study is to have clarified these connections for the first time, both for specialists as well as for the wider public. Five appendices round out the work: a new, carefully prepared edition of the tract, based on twenty-three manuscripts, and reprints of four earlier editions. The English translation is welcome indeed. It will make it possible to study this fundamental tract on signs and insignias in the classroom with students. Additional valuable appendices document the later historical reception of the tract. There is a reproduction of Antonio da Bruno's commentary on 10.5.31.14, an excerpt from the *Tractatus de duobus fratribus* (pt. 2, question 11) by Pietro degli Ubaldi, and an English translation of Lorenzo Vallas's letter to Pier Candido Decembrio.

These new results complement in excellent fashion the current discussions regarding the significance of signs in the Middle Ages. Further new discoveries can be expected from a future continuation of this research, both for understanding the function of signs and insignias in late medieval and early modern Italy and with regard to the use and misuse of the tract and its theses by later jurists, students of heraldry, and constitutional historians. We owe the three authors a debt of gratitude for their conscientious work, for their lucid presentation, and for their willingness to take up a theme whose importance transcends the usual disciplinary boundaries. This is a well-written study of great value for everyone interested in signs and their meanings. It deserves to find a broad readership.

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