

## Origins Part 3: Cult of St Giles



St Giles' motif

This section examines the history of the cult of St Giles and the associated motifs of a deer or stag transfixed by an arrow as a source of the *Old Davidson* design of the Davidson arms.

St Giles was a holy man of Greek origin who settled in the south of France and was said to be associated with the early Frankish Kings, in particular Charles Martel c.688-741.

He is reputed to have been accompanied by a deer, sometimes said to be a hind, which in one story he nursed back to health after it had been shot with an arrow by hunters. In another, he lived on the milk of the hind which again was shot by strangers, the arrow piercing its body.



Stone carving above the West Door St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, depicting the arrow through the hand of St Giles

In yet another version, he intercepted the hunter's arrow which pierced his arm or, as is depicted in the carving above the west door of St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, through his hand.

However, like so many Christian tales, the stories of St Giles would appear to be variants of even earlier pagan tales. There is the story of Aeneas and his followers, fleeing from Troy and the Trojan Wars, in Italy, where Aeneas was said to have shot with an arrow the sacred deer of that area. Their descendants, it is claimed, were the Roman patrician family of Julius [Jules- Giles perhaps coincidental?]

Notwithstanding the confused origins of St Giles, he became, by the time of the Crusades, a cult figure, with a centre near Arles on the Rhone, the embarking port for many Western Europeans bound for the Holy Land. His name was also associated with the Northern Crusade of the Teutonic Knights, who depended on Western European Knights to support their expansion eastwards towards Russia.

The Cult of St Giles was well established in the Low Countries. Could this be another source of the St Giles' motif used by the Davidsons?

It is of interest that certain Belgian, German and Austrian or Hungarian families have the arrow and deer motif in their arms. The former Borough of Holborn, now part of Camden in central London, had arms granted early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, using the similar stag and arrow motif as in the early Davidson arms. The arrow was shown through the body of the stag rather than the neck.

The Holborn Borough arms derived from the amalgamation of four old parishes, one of which was St Giles-in-the-Fields, from which this motif was included.

We know of only two churches which were dedicated to St Giles in Scotland. These are the High Kirk in Edinburgh and the Collegiate church of the northern cathedral town of Elgin, the latter being a centre where north-east Davidsons and those of Badenoch, an early Davidson clan territory, would probably have had connections.



Arms of the former Borough  
of Holborn, London

It was held in medieval times that the hind epitomised the concept of Christ.

Edinburgh has a story of David I of Scotland who, while hunting near Holyrood, was attacked by a stag, but the king was unscathed when he saw or realised that the stag had a silver chain with a cross hanging between its horns. Variations of this version of the St Giles theme are found elsewhere in Europe.

The motif included in the *Old Davidson* design is too similar to the *St Giles'* motif to be other than so derived, and could explain its adoption by certain Davidsons as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century.