

A SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF THE PRUSSIAN HELMET EAGLES

Everyone probably knows the one-headed eagle as the proud emblem on the helmets of Prussian soldiers before 1914. As generally known, there were 5 basic types on the Pickelhaube; the Line eagle, the Guard eagle, the Grenadier eagle, the Dragoon eagle and on the metal helmet of the „Leib“ Cuirassier regiment No. 1, the Frederician helmet eagle. In this article, I'd like to explore the origins and the meaning of all these helmet eagles, as each of them refers with its attributes to important periods or events in Prussian history.



Figure 1 - Line eagle of a Pickelhaube from M1887



Figure 2 - Helmet eagle of an officer Pickelhaube of the Leib-Cuirassier regiment No. 1



Figure 3 - Dragoon eagle of a Pickelhaube M1891 (Courtesy of Tony Schnurr)



Figure 4 - Guard eagle of a Pickelhaube M1860 (Courtesy of Tony Schnurr)



Figure 5 - Grenadier eagle of a Pickelhaube M1860 (Courtesy of Tony Schnurr)

The Line eagle, the Guard eagle and the Dragoon eagle all carry the insignia of the Kingdom of Prussia and thus stand for Prussian monarchy (1701 - 1918). All three eagles carry the so-called Imperial sceptre in their claws, which has a small eagle on the top. The Line eagle also carries the Imperial orb in its right claw, while the Guard eagle and the Dragoon eagle carry the sceptre in their left claw and a sword in their right, which represents the Prussian "Reichsschwert" (Imperial sword). In some old sources of the 19th century it is claimed that the Guard eagle stands for the for the Electoral-Brandenburg period, as it carries a sword and sceptre, but as the sceptre shows the Imperial I doubt this. Especially because the Grenadier eagle also holds a sword and sceptre, and the latter really shows the Electorate of Brandenburg attributes (see page 3). The fact that the sword of Line and Guard eagles looks identical is also a clear indication for me that it should be the same sword.



Figure 6 - Prussian crown insignia with Imperial scepter and Imperial orb (Source: Wikipedia.org, Author: Overberg - Museum Oranienburg, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure 7 - Prussian „Reichsschwert“ from 1540/41 (Source: TU Architekturmuseum Inv. Nr. F 8094, colored afterwards)

The eagle sceptre, Imperial sword and orb (Figures 6 and 7) are all insignia of the Prussian King and were used in the Prussian coronation ceremony. Although the Imperial sword dates back to pre-royal times, the name "Reichsschwert" refers only to the Prussian "KönigREICH". This ceremonial sword was made in Königsberg in 1540/41 for the Elector Albrecht of Prussia (1490 - 1568) and decorated with Christian motifs by the goldsmith Jobst Freudner from Ulm. When the Duchy of Prussia fell to Brandenburg in 1618, after the death of Duke Albrecht Friedrich the sword became the property of Elector Johann Sigismund. It was not given the name "Imperial sword" until the coronation of Friedrich I in 1701.

Another symbol of the Kingdom of Prussia is the Royal cipher "FR" on the chest of the Line eagle. This was introduced by the first King of Prussia in 1701 and stands for "FRIDERICUS REX" (King Frederick). There was also a second variant of the Line eagle, also with a Royal cipher on the chest, namely "FWR" (Fig. 8). This so-called "old Grenadier eagle" was generally used until 1889 by the Grenadier regiments and until the end of the Prussian monarchy also by some other regiments that existed before 1813 and that wore an eagle on their helmets. The Royal cipher "FWR" stood for "FRIDERICUS WILHELMUS REX" (King Friedrich-Wilhelm) and was a reminder of Friedrich-Wilhelm I (1688 - 1740), who became known as the Soldier King. On the Guard eagle in this representative position is the Guard star with the motto of the High Order of the Black Eagle "SUUM CUIQUE", which was also not introduced until 1701 (Fig. 9).



Figure 8 - Old Grenadier eagle of a Pickelhaube M1860



Figure 9 - Medal of the High Order of the Black Eagle (Source: "Des Herr von Sesser Schriften", Volume 2 (1732), from page 560 - books.google.de)

On January 18, 1701, the former Elector Frederick III of Brandenburg (1657 - 1713) placed the crown on his head in Königsberg and crowned himself King of the newly founded Kingdom of Prussia. He was known as Frederick I of Prussia from then on. The fact that he chose the previously rather inconspicuous Duchy of Prussia for his new Kingdom may seem an unusual choice at first glance, as the Electorate of Brandenburg had actually held a much more important reputation until then. In the Holy Roman Empire, the position of Emperor was not inherited, but was chosen for lifetime by the Electors, who were also known as "Reichsfürsten" (Imperial rulers). The Golden Bull of 1356 regulated the order of the Electors with their prestigious Arch-offices: Mainz provided the Arch-chancellor for Germany, Trier the Arch-chancellor for Burgundy, Cologne the Arch-chancellor for Italy, Bohemia the Arch-bearer, the Count Palatine of the Rhine the Arch-truchsess, Saxony the Arch-marshal and Brandenburg the Arch-chamberlain (Fig. 10).

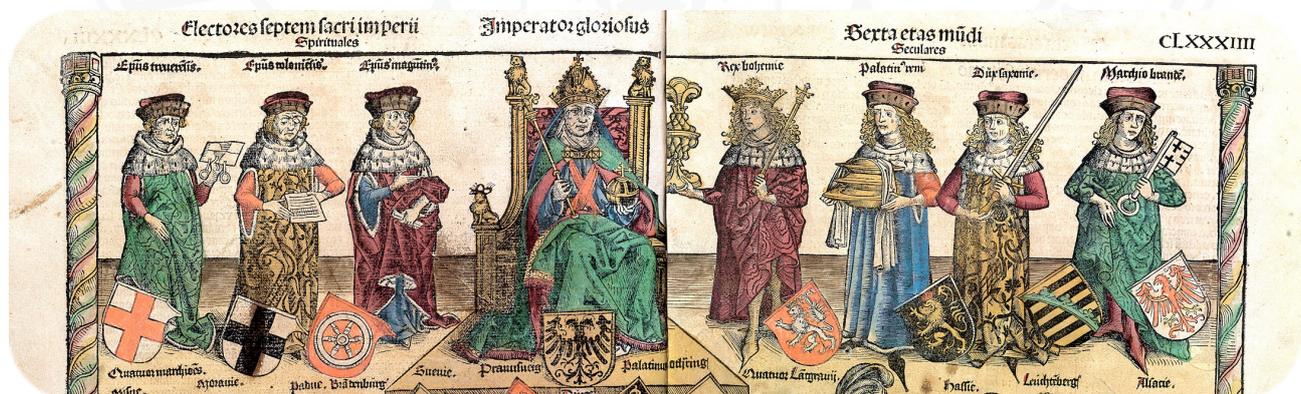


Figure 10 - "Schedelsche Weltchronik Struktur des Reiches" (Source: Wikipedia.org)

As Arch-chamberlain, the Elector of Brandenburg had to carry the Imperial sceptre of the Empire and present it to him as a staff of virtue at the coronation ceremony. The Arch-chamberlain was also responsible for the Emperor's suit at the coronation and handed him water and a cloth to dry his hands at the coronation banquet so that they were clean and undefiled when he started his reign. It was therefore an important office, which is why Brandenburg would actually have been more worthy of

ascending to the Kingdom. However, the choice fell on the Duchy of Prussia, as it was not in a feudal relationship with the Emperor and the new King could therefore enjoy a certain independence.

For this reason, H.M. King Friedrich I also introduced the Royal cipher "FR" on the chest of the heraldic eagle. Previously, it had been customary since 1525 to use the cipher "S" on the eagle's chest, for the Prussian feudal lord and Polish King Sigismund I (1467 - 1548), as he granted Prussia the Dukedom on 10 April 1525 with the enfeoffment of Krakow. But Friedrich I wanted to underline the sovereignty of the new Kingdom here too.

The Grenadier eagle, on the other hand, really refers to the Electorate of Brandenburg period, and thus to the long tradition of the Grenadiers, because the eagle holds the Electoral sceptre with the Acanthus flower on the top and the Electoral sword (Fig. 11). It is also noticeable that he holds no "FR" on his chest, also an indication of the pre-Royal Prussian period (compare Fig. 1 and Fig. 5). The Electoral sword comes from Margrave Albrecht Achilles (1414 - 1486), the 3rd son of Frederick I of Brandenburg, who is particularly famous for knight tournament champions. It was commissioned by Pope Pius II and ceremoniously presented to the Margrave at the Congress in Mantua in 1460. For the sake of completeness, the Electoral hat should also be mentioned here, which, along with the Electoral scepter and the Electoral sword, was of course also one of the Electoral Brandenburg insignia.



Figure 11 - Electoral sword from 1459 (Source: TU Architekturmuseum Inv. Nr. F 8093, colored afterwards)

The Grenadiers existed since the Middle Ages and were considered an elite unit. The oldest regiment in Prussia was the Grenadier regiment "Kronprinz" No. 1, which was formed in 1619, i.e. still in the times of the Electorate of Brandenburg. Until an AKO of 28.08.1889, the Guard Grenadiers held the „GUARD EAGLE WITHOUT STAR" (GARDEADLER OHNE STERN) on their helmets, which generally meant the Grenadier eagle. In addition to its attributes, the M1842 Grenadier eagle should also differ from the Guard eagle in its size and should be somewhat smaller than the latter. In the magazine "Archiv für Waffen- und Uniformkunde, Issue No. 2/3 of 1918" I found an old photo showing an M1842 Guard and Grenadier eagle side by side (Fig. 12), and this comparison photo seems to confirm this thesis. However, when I digitally overlaid the two eagles on top of each other I was surprised at how clear the difference in size actually was. Measurements of other M1842 eagles also confirm the different sizes: The M1842 Guard eagle was approx. 14.0 cm high and the M1842 Grenadier eagle measured only approx. 13.0 cm. With the introduction of the M1860, however, the difference in size no longer existed, at least the measurements of my M1860 helmet eagles no longer show any differences in size.



Figure 12 - Edited photo detail from "Die preussischen Infanteriehelme" from the magazine "Archiv für Waffen- und Uniformkunde" issue no. 2 of 3 from 1918. On the left is an M1842 Guard eagle, on the right an M1842 Grenadier eagle, whose silhouette was then placed above the Guard eagle on the left.

As a sign of office and dignity, the Electoral sceptre with the Brandenburg crest always had a prominent place in the Hohenzollern family history until the Royal accession and was only replaced by the black Royal eagle of Prussia in 1701. On July 8, 1411, King Sigismund of Luxembourg (1368 - 1437) proclaimed Frederick VI, Burgrave of Nuremberg (1371 - 1440), administrator of the Margraviate of Brandenburg. On April 30, 1415, he was appointed Elector of Brandenburg and from then on called himself Friedrich I of Brandenburg. Since this event, the title "ARCHICAMERARIUS" (Arch-chamberlain) may be seen on the seals of the Hohenzollerns. In the seals of his son Frederick II "the Iron" of Brandenburg (1413 - 1472), the Electoral sceptre can be seen for the first time in 1466 as a sign of the Arch-chamberlain's dignity.

Interesting background information:

According to the rules of heraldry, the sword is always held on the right side of the heraldic animals, which is why the sceptre was held on the left. This can be seen on the Prussian Guard, Grenadier and Dragoon eagle. Interestingly, however, both are reversed in the Brandenburg crests; the sword in the left claw and the sceptre in the right (see Figures 14 - 16). This can be traced back to an incorrect order issued by the Minister of the Royal Household between 1804 and 1824.

Unfortunately I couldn't find much information about the Dragoon eagle, but it is a mixture of a Guard eagle and a Line eagle. They were given this special helmet eagle as a reminder that the Dragoon's were originally a mounted Infantry unit and fought both on horseback and on foot. As, like the Grenadier eagle, it doesn't hold the Royal cipher "FR" on its chest, the idea may arise that it should show a pre-Royal representation. However, as the sceptre clearly shows the Imperial sceptre with the eagle on the top, I guess it is a representation of the Kingdom of Prussia. If the attributes were also to refer to the Margraviate of Brandenburg, then the decoration of the 1st Brandenburg Dragoon regiment No. 2 from 1913, which H.M. Kaiser Wilhelm II awarded him on the occasion of his 25th anniversary on the throne, would make no sense. Since June 16, 1913, the regiment was allowed to wear a blue shield with the Electoral sceptre on the helmet adorned with the crimson Electoral hat with white ermine trim (Fig. 13). The Electoral sceptre was a Marshal's baton with a Acanthus flask. The Emperor thus emphasized the long tradition of the regiment, which dated back to the Electorate of Brandenburg. Elector Friedrich III of Brandenburg, later King Friedrich I of Prussia, had formed it on 24.4.1689 from a Dragoon company given to him by Margrave Georg-Friedrich of Ansbach (1539 - 1603) with a strength of 8 companies.



Figure 13 - Dragoon eagle of an officer's Pickelhaube of the reserve of the DR No. 2

The last helmet eagle was that of the „Leib“ Cuirassier regiment "Großer Kurfürst" (Silesian) No. 1 (Fig. 2), which shows a Frederician helmet eagle as it was known since Frederick II "the Great" of Prussia (1712 - 1786). The regiment was originally a Dragoon regiment, or rather a "Leib" Dragoon regiment, but in 1718 Frederick William I raised the 4 oldest Dragoon regiments to Cuirassier regiments. It was his son Frederick the Great, however, who introduced the Frederician eagle with sword and thunderbolts in its claws and the motto "PRO GLORIA ET PATRIA" at the beginning of his reign in 1740, as it can also be seen on the "Leib" standard of the Silesian "Leib" Cuirassier regiment "Großer Kurfürst" No. 1, and as it has also been awarded as the emblem on the regiment's helmet since 01.07.1902 as proof of Royal grace. Frederick the Great always took a prominent role among the Prussian Kings. The „Leib“ Cuirassier regiment "Großer Kurfürst" Nr. 1 was able to shine under him, especially at the Battle of Freiberg (29.10.1762), for which the regiment alone received 7 orders "POUR LE MÉRITE", an order which Frederick II himself endowed for deserving officers in 1740. The Battle of Freiberg was the last great victory for both the regiment and Prussia before the Seven Years' War came to an end.

Attentive viewers will certainly have noticed the different crossguards on the swords of the Guard and Dragoon eagle, even though they are both supposed to show the "Reichsschwert" (Imperial sword). This can be explained by the general rules of heraldry, according to which the heraldic eagles were designed. According to these rules various designs of swords are permitted, as long as they aren't described in detail in the blazon. Thus, all the different designs of the helmet eagles can best be explained by the designers' artistic freedom. A comparison of various contemporary Brandenburg heraldic eagles also shows that there was this artistic freedom in the design. All 3 crests show different crossguards although they should actually all look the same since they show all the Electoral sceptre and the Electoral sword (cf. Figs. 14 - 16).



Figure 14 - Crest of Brandenburg (Source: Landtag.brandenburg.de - Crest of the Hohenzollerns - Image: 264751)



Figure 15 - Heraldic eagle of the Electorate of Brandenburg with acanthus flower sceptre and Electoral sword in its claws (Source: digitalisate-he.arcinsys.de - digitized copies of HStAD inventory R 4 No. 19891)



Figure 16 - Crest of Brandenburg around 1898 (Source: Meisterdrucke.com - art prints - German-School - 465289)

The same also applies to the representation of the crossguards of the Imperial and Electoral swords on the helmet eagles. These swords look far too similar for a realistic design based on the original. The difference wouldn't be noticeable at first glance because of the same shaped crossguards.

Another reason may be the long history of Prussia, in which the coat of arms was designed, changed and redesigned, or the long periods of time between the various coronation ceremonies. The organizers of the first coronation ceremony, the designer of the heraldic eagle or even the first administrators of the Prussian Crown Cabinet died over the years and their successors were certainly not able to acquire all of their knowledge. Even today, with the Internet and digital search functions for so many old books and documents, we cannot trace the history of less than 100 years ago without any doubts. Now imagine the situation without the internet?! This also helps to explain the complete confusion that came up after 1889, when the Guard Grenadiers were allowed to wear the Guard star on their helmets.

Before 1889, the designs of the Guard and Grenadier eagle were constant. There was the "GUARD EAGLE WITH STAR" and the "GRENADIER EAGLE". With an AKO of August 28, 1889, the Guard Grenadiers, who had previously worn the simple Grenadier eagle on their helmets, were allowed to wear a Guard star on their helmets. With this change, the lettering of the Fatherland bandeau had to be changed too, to ensure that the word "KÖNIG" would be readable on the Grenadier eagle with an attached Guard star, just as it was on the Guard eagle. Probably because the origin and meaning of the helmet eagle was no longer familiar to everyone at that time and the "GUARD EAGLE WITHOUT STAR" was also known as the "GRENADIER EAGLE", Grenadier and Guard Grenadier helmets now came up in all possible sword/sceptre constellations (see Figs. 17 - 19, an example acc. to the helmet eagle of the Grenadier regiment on Horse No. 3). Helmets of the Guard Grenadiers can be found in the following variations after 1889:

- Grenadier eagle with the word "KÖNIG" covered by the Guard star (probably from the transitional period only),
- Guard eagle with Guard star,
- Guard eagle with Guard eagle sceptre and Guard star,
- Grenadier eagle with Guard eagle sceptre and Guard star.

It is not less confusing for the Grenadiers, who were gradually given permission to wear the "GUARD EAGLE WITHOUT STAR" on their helmets from 1889, or the Royal Infantry regiment No. 145, which was allowed to do so from 1913 too. There are helmets from these regiments with:

- Grenadier eagle,
- Grenadier eagle with guard eagle sceptre,
- Guard eagle with the word "KÖNIG" on the eagle's chest,
- Guard eagle with the word "KÖNIG" on the eagle's chest and a grenadier eagle sceptre.

In addition, there are different representations of the swords on the Dragoon eagle too, as the comparison in Fig. 20 shows.



Figure 17 - Helmet of a reserve officer in the Grenadier regiment No. 3 on horseback with Guard eagle and Grenadier eagle sceptre (Courtesy of Amy Bellars)



Figure 18 - Helmet of an officer in the Grenadier regiment No. 3 on horseback with Grenadier eagle and Guard eagle sceptre (Courtesy of Weitze.net)



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Figure 19 - Helmet of a soldier in the Grenadier regiment No. 3 on horseback with Guard eagle and the word "KÖNIG" on the eagle's chest



Figure 20 - Comparison of 2 Dragoon eagles with different crossguards (Courtesy of Tony Schnurr)

At the end, there are several reasons in the long Prussian history that could be responsible for the different crossguard designs on the helmet eagles. Different names given to the swords in the Prussian Crown Cabinet for the same swords at different periods and different information about which swords were used in the ceremonies don't make an explanation any easier. Despite all this, I personally think that the differently represented crossguards on the helmet eagles of the Guard and the Dragoon and on the Grenadier eagles after 1889 are just the personal taste of the individual heraldic artists. Furthermore I think that the Grenadier eagles with an "Imperial sceptre" were a mistake due to a lack of knowledge and a misunderstanding, as the regulations of that time always stated "GARDEADLER OHNE STERN" (Guard eagle without star).

(by Sandy-Michael Heinemann - 2024)
Historien-Kabinett.net



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