

ROYAL CYPHERS

Notes prepared by Alan Hillard

In modern heraldry, a royal cypher is a monogram-like device of a country's reigning sovereign, typically consisting of the initials of the monarch's name and title, sometimes interwoven and often surmounted by a crown.[1] In the case where such a cypher is used by an emperor or empress, it is called an imperial cypher. In the system used by various Commonwealth realms, the title is abbreviated as R for rex or regina (Latin for king and queen). Previously, I stood for imperator or imperatrix (Latin words for emperor and empress). The cypher is displayed on some government buildings, impressed upon royal and state documents, and is used by government departments.

The use of a royal cypher in the Commonwealth realms originates in the United Kingdom, where the public use of the royal initials dates at least from the early Tudor period, and was simply the initial of the sovereign with, after Henry VIII's reign, the addition of the letter R for Rex or Regina. The letter I for Imperatrix was added to Queen Victoria's monogram after she became Empress of India in 1877. The initials— which had no set pattern or form of lettering laid down— were usually shown in company with the royal arms or crown as on the king's manors and palaces— such as those of Henry VIII on the gatehouse of St James' Palace. The purpose seems to have been simply to identify an individual sovereign, as the royal coat of arms was often used by successive monarchs. The initials were used mostly on government papers, duty stamps and similar objects, and were sometimes surmounted by a stylised version of the Tudor Crown or, more recently, St Edward's Crown. In Scotland, the Crown appears in place of the Imperial Crown.[4]

Though royal symbols differ among the sixteen Commonwealth realms, as they are separate monarchies, the one sovereign uses the same cypher throughout all of his or her countries. Distinction continues to be made between the personal cypher and the simpler, more workaday public initials, the former being the sovereign's own monogram and the latter simply a means of identifying a reign. Nowadays, the initials are also called the royal cypher, but to aid clarification the monogram is referred to as the royal cypher interlaced and reversed.

The present Queen's cypher is EIIR, standing for Elizabeth II Regina. Cyphers for other members of the Royal Family are designed by the College of Arms or Court of the Lord Lyon and are subsequently approved by the Queen. The use in Canada of the reigning monarch's cypher, which is sometimes uniquely surrounded by a garland of maple leaves, is as a symbol not only of the sovereign him or herself, but of Canada's full sovereignty as well.[5]