

Understanding Heraldry



is a system of identification of individuals and families based on hereditary (or "charges") centered on the shield. The origins of this system are as remote as the origins of writing. The practice of adopting arms, meaning a shield with charges on its bearer, started in the late 1100s in Western Europe and spread rapidly. At the time, only royalty and the high nobility adopted and displayed coats of arms; but the practice was quickly imitated by the lesser nobles, knights, prelates and even women (because arms were for warriors, by definition men). Eventually it spread to various entities like churches, abbeys, towns and schools.

It is usually argued that the reason for the spread of heraldry among the nobility, meaning the military and landowning classes, of Europe was to facilitate identification of leaders on the battlefield. (A minority view holds that coats of arms on tunics and shields would quickly become unrecognizable in the thick of battle: garments and shields would fast become damaged or dirtied in the fray.)

Perhaps armory (a more correct term than heraldry, which strictly means that which pertains to heralds, although it is seldom employed and even then mainly by academics) received its greatest impetus from the tournament, a popular activity for knights in the 1300s through the 1500s. A tournament was a kind of martial competition event, lasting several days, between teams of knights who aspired to win fame and prizes through their prowess. At these events, whose popularity coincided at first with the cultural and literary phenomenon of courtly romances (e.g., *Le Morte d'Arthur*) featuring chivalry, pious knights and virtuous maidens, it was both useful and necessary to be readily identifiable. Thus the competitors would display arms on their shields, coat-armor (the surcoat worn over the suit of armor), and horse covering. They might also wear a "crest", a representational figure of some kind, on their helmets.

Heralds - individuals who identified knightly combatants - were essential at tournaments. They kept the scores, announced the winners, and - above all - could attest to the nobility of the competitors and their eligibility to participate. Heralds at first were personal employees of monarchs and noblemen (there were later itinerant "freelance" heralds with no employer), and served them in various capacities. One typical activity was to act as emissaries (or ambassadors) between sovereigns or field commanders. These heralds were named after their masters (for example, "York Herald") whose arms they bore on their tunics ("tabards") so everyone could see and know whose agents they were.

It is clear that heraldry - meaning the adoption and use of coats of arms by individuals and families - existed before heralds and, later still, official bodies charged with regulating armory (such as the College of Arms in England) came into being. Some assert that there is evidence of the existence of heraldry in the Bayeux Tapestry, the famous visual narrative of the Norman conquest of England in 1066, but this remains unproven: some of the warriors depicted do appear to be bearing personal emblems but it is not established that they were hereditary, which is a requirement of heraldry.

Broadly speaking, there are today two types of arms: assumed and granted. Anyone may design and use a coat of arms (and many have). However, granted arms, meaning arms that have been formally conveyed to an individual by a sovereign, a state, or a body with authority to do so, are accorded a superior status. These arms are evidenced by formal documents (grants), recorded in official repositories and have legal status where arms are recognized under the law.

Another fundamental distinction, more relevant in Continental Europe than in the United Kingdom, is that between "noble" and "non-noble" (or "burgher") arms. Although noble families invariably have a coat of arms, it does not follow that a coat of arms is a certain sign of nobility. In the old European kingdoms, nobility often brought privileges (such as exemption from tax) and therefore sovereigns tended to grant it sparingly. That said, it could be acquired through the purchase of a government or judicial office; military or other service to the state; or purchase of a manor or noble estate. But many non-noble families throughout Continental Europe also had a coat of arms. Indeed, in France, when arms were taxed by Louis XIV, the Crown forcibly "granted" coats of arms to entire populations of villages to increase

revenues.

Finally, a coat of arms is granted to one individual and inherited by his descendants who alone may bear or use his arms. This contrasts with a prevalent, but entirely incorrect, notion today that sharing the same name as a grantee is sufficient basis to use his arms. It is simply wrong to assume that, if your surname happens to be "Alford" and there exists an Alford family coat of arms, you are entitled to bear the Alford arms. If you are not legitimately descended from or related to the first Alford to be granted those arms, they are not your "family arms."

Heraldry operates on the basis of a collection of fairly simple rules and the language called "blazon" which can be learned without great difficulty. The aim of the rules is to ensure a consistency and quality of design, and that of the language is to express any design in as few words as possible but in a manner that any heralds or interested party can understand. The rules are more or less the same everywhere but that does not mean that all coats of arms in Europe have the same style and appearance. Italian arms are distinct in appearance from German ones, for example; and crests are far more popular in Britain than on the Continent. It can also happen that rules are completely ignored. As a result, a system that is simple in theory can be complex in practice.

In theory, two persons or families cannot have the same coats of arms. But in fact this can happen because heraldry developed in different countries over nine centuries. A coat of arms might well be unique in France, but the same arms - particularly those with very simple designs - might also have been granted to an unrelated individual in England.

