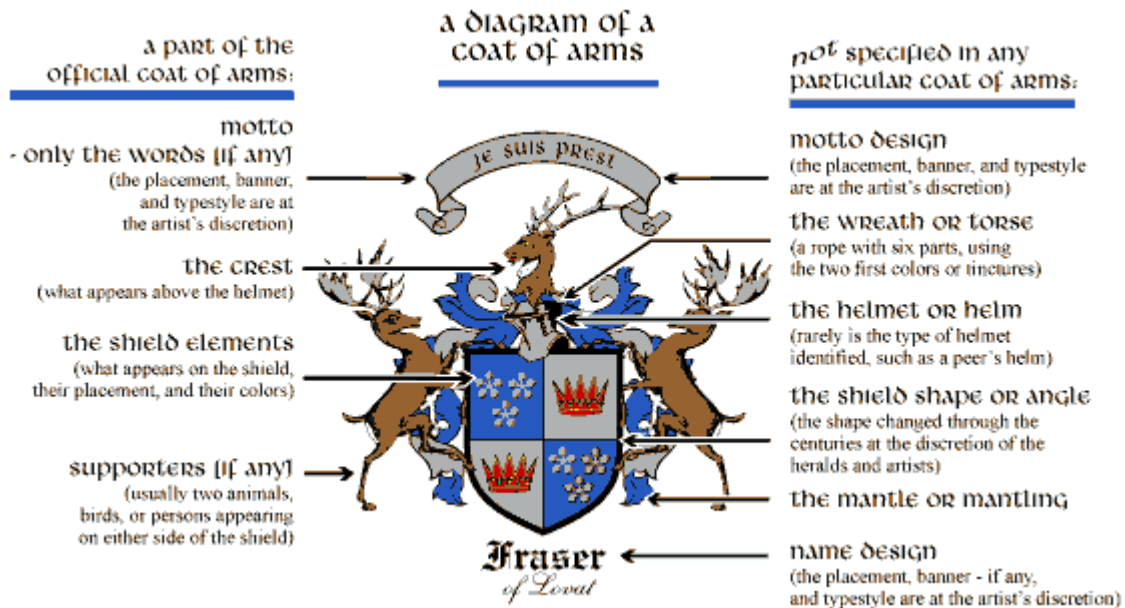




Heraldry & the Parts of a Coat of Arms



A Brief History of Heraldry

Heraldry has been defined as the art of blazoning, assigning, and marshalling a coat of arms. Its origins are uncertain, but Sir Bernard Burke, Ulster King of Arms, has drawn his own conclusion: “[T]he registry of its birth may be found among the archives of the Holy Wars, ...its cradle was rocked by the soldiers of the Cross, and... its maturity was attained in the chivalrous age of Feudalism.”

Between 1135 and 1155 A.D., seals show the general adoption of heraldic devices in Europe. Historians once theorized that a coat of arms enabled a knight to be recognized by his followers during battle. The coat of arms became hereditary just as a knight inherited the right to lead or the duty to follow another leader in battle.

Later historians dispute this theory based on the small numbers of knights who had *any* followers. "The service due from a military tenant in the feudal system was well-defined. He held his land by service of two knights, one knight, or half a knight,.... A single knight, let alone a fraction of a knight, had no band of followers, so he had no need to identify himself to them." [Source: *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* by Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson (Oxford University Press, 1988)] Woodcock and Robinson suggest that it was much more likely that the depiction of arms on a shield was a form of "individual vanity" rather than a practical military device.

One historian (Beryl Platts, author of *Origins of Heraldry*) notes that "family identification" was practiced in northern Europe even before the Norman Conquest, and she believes that all heraldry in England is the derivation

of the heraldic devices brought by the families who accompanied William the Conqueror.

The oldest documented example of a coat of arms borne on a shield is where King Henry I of England is said to have bestowed on his son-in-law, Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, in 1127 A.D.: the azure shield bore four gold lions rampant. [Source: *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* by Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson.]

Regardless of their origins, coats of arms became military status symbols, and their popularity increased along with the popularity of the tournament, which was developed in the mid-eleventh century in France (reportedly by Godfrey de Preully). The tournament became a training ground for knights, and its pageantry became more elaborate as time passed. Some knights made their living (and their reputations) roaming from tournament to tournament. William the Marshal and Roger de Gaugi were two such enterprising men, not only excelling at tournaments but extorting ransoms from the families of knights they captured.

By 1400 A.D., bearing a coat of arms had become a prerequisite to participation in a tournament, and due to the importance of social standing in such pageants, a coat of arms also became a mark of noble status. In the early days, most coats of arms were assumed by the bearers and not "granted" by any authority. King Richard I changed his coat of arms from two lions combatant (or a lion rampant) to three gold leopards (or lions passant guardant).

The earliest coats of arms were fairly simple -- bars or wavy lines, a lion rampant or an eagle displayed, or an arrangement of fleurs-de-lis. The designs became more complex as the years passed, and the practice of quartering (incorporating the arms of other families acquired through marriages) developed.

The word "Heraldry" is derived from the German "heer" -- a host, an army -- and "held" -- a champion. The term "blason," by which the science of heraldry is denoted in French, English, Italian, and German, is probably derived from the German word "blazen" -- to blow the horn. Whenever a new Knight appeared at a Tournament, the herald sounded the trumpet, and as the competitors attended with closed visors, it was his duty to explain the bearing of the shield or coat-armour belonging to each. This knowledge of the various devices and symbols was called Heraldry, and as the announcement was accompanied with the sound of a trumpet, it was termed "blazoning the arms." Source: Burke, Bernard, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales* (Heritage Books, Inc., 1996).

A Brief Explanation of the Blazon of Arms

As depicted below, a "coat of arms" consists of several parts: the shield, the mantling, the helm, the wreath, charges, and the crest (note that not all arms have crests). The official, written description of the coat of arms is called the "blazon of arms." The designs in our database are made ***precisely in accordance with the registered description*** ("the blazon of arms"). The blazon may seem like a foreign language, but it is simply a system of code words to denote colors, placement, and styling by using an economy of words.

Much of the printed design for a given coat of arms is more the artist's preference or the style of a particular herald, and not a part of any particular blazon. The mantling and the banners for names and mottoes, for example, are not an official element of the blazon of arms. The helm, likewise, is not a part of the official blazon. Some historians attach a significance to the design of the helm or helmet as representative of a certain century or social status, but there are differences of opinion on this matter.



The blazon of arms for this coat of arms would be as follows:

Arms: *"Argent, a saltire azure, cantoned with four markings of ermine sable."* (Silver or white shield with a blue saltire or 'X' and in four-equidistant places the marking of the ermine 'fur' in black.)

Crest: *"A lion's head erased azure langued gules."* (A lion's head cut off at the neck with a flourish, in blue with a red tongue.)

Elements of a Coat of Arms



Shield: The colors and charges (lions, designs, etc. that appear on the shield) are a part of the official blazon, but the shape of the shield is not. Shield shapes vary according to the geographical origin as well as the time period.



Crest: Also a part of the official blazon, the crest is whatever appears above the helm. (Note that there is not always a crest for every coat of arms.)



Helm: Not a part of the official blazon, the helmet varies with the bearer's rank, the century represented, or the herald's or artist's preference.



Wreath: Not a part of the official blazon, the wreath usually consists of the primary color and metal.



Mantle/Mantling: Not a part of the official blazon (except that sometimes the colors are specified), the design varies with the herald's or artist's preference. This is said to represent the cloth that hung from the wreath and protected the back of the head and neck, even though it may often be depicted more like the leaves of a plant

