

an introduction to

HERALDRY

structure of visual and verbal systems in shield design

What is heraldry?

A shield was part of a mediaeval warriors equipment, and suitable for decoration. Visual distinctions were made on shields to distinguish knights from each-other in battle, important once the warrior has donned full armor.

Eventually these visual symbols were used in civil life and were passed on through generations.

Later it became important to distinguish oneself by displaying familial coat-of-arms, indicating heritage and honors.

Why heraldic language?

Heraldic language, called *blazon*, is used to describe in detail every aspect of a shields design. Each color, shape, and pattern has a specific name.

By creating a standardized form of verbalizing these designs, heralds and historians could understand the look of a shield or coat-of-arms simply by hearing the description.

Why the shield?

The shield is one part of a full heraldic *achievement*, an array of heraldic symbols chosen by a family or given in honor. This would include symbolic helmets, banners, and mottos among others.

The shield is the foundation of this 'achievement' and truly the only part that can stand on its own. These diagrams explain the graphic system employed to create the combinations that have been chosen to become familial symbols.

Representing Color

gules

red

azure

blue

vert

green

purpure

purple

sable

black

or

gold

argent

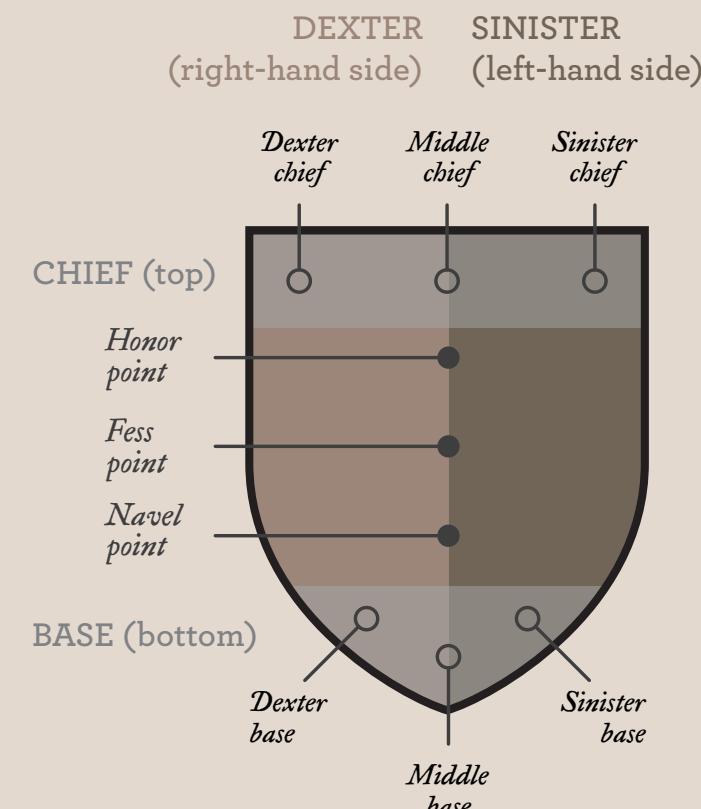
silver

There are typically five standard colors and two 'metals' used in heraldry. Occasionally other colors are used, but were never standardized.

Most shields used both metals and colors. This is the standard approach to achieve higher contrast. Using color on color is considered bad heraldry.

Developed in 1638 ad. the system shown here describes how each color can be shown using only black ink, since it was difficult to have colored inks available at all times.

Parts of a Shield



Dexter and Sinister:

Typically, directional shapes (like a Bend, see below) start in the top right-hand side, *dexter chief*, and go down to the lower left-hand side, *sinister base*.

However, these shapes usually have a *sinister*, or left-hand variation which is identical but mirrored across the vertical axis. Virtually all asymmetrical shapes can be altered in this way.

EXAMPLE

Bend

Bend Sinister

Furs

Furs are repetitions of general shapes inspired by furs or hides of different animals including ermine and squirrel. Furs are used instead of a solid color.

Ermine

Ermines

Erminois

Peau

Vair

Counter Vair

Vair in Pale

Vair en Point

Vairy (four color)

Potent

Counter-Potent

Visual Elements

Divisions

The simplest way of creting new arms was to draw a line to divide the shield into two or more parts, painting sections with one color and one metal.

Per Pale

Tierced per Pale

Per Pale Angled

Per Fess

Tierced per Fess

Per Fess Archied

Per Fess Nowy

Per Bend

Tierced per Bend

Per Bend Bevilled

Quarterly / Per Cross

Counter Quartered

Quartered per Saltire

Per Pall

Per Chevron

Shapes and Fields

Standard shapes can be added to any shield to add distinction. The shapes were initially devised to be easy to paint and read from a distance.

Some of these shapes may also be repeated to create patterns, known as *fields*, or *also* as *charges*(see right).

Pale

Pallets

Pale Endorsed

Pale Counter-Changed

Paly

Fess

Fess Cotised

Fess Double-Cotised

Bars

Barrulets

Bars Cemelles

Barry

Bend

Bend Cotised

Bendy

Bendlets

Paly-Bendy

Barry-bendy

Cross

Chief

Base

Pale and Chief

Saltire

Pall

Shakefork

Chevron

Chevronels

Chevronels Interlaced

Chevron Cotised

Chevronny

Flanches

Bordure

Inescutcheon

Orle

Double Tressure

Gyron

Pile

Piles

Lozenge

Lozengy

Fusil

Fusily

Mascle

Rustre

Canton

Checky

Billet

Billey

Baton

Line Syles

Partition lines for the divisions or shapes can be ornamental in style. Below are depictions with corresponding blazon language.

(default)

Wavy

Dovetail

Urdy

Indented

Dancette

Embattled

Raguly

Nebuly

Potenty

Battled

Radiant

EXAMPLES

Per Pale Indented

Paly-wavy

Per Fess Radiant

Barry Dancetty

Charges

To add further character and distinction, animals, birds, mythical beasts, plants, or other objects could be used as symbols on the shield. These symbols were called *charges*.

Pose Variations

Each animal could be posed in a distinct way. There are a number of poses described in heraldic terms, but the most common for beasts are shown below. These poses can be applied to any animal, the lion being the most common.

Rampant

Rampant Guardant

Rampant Reguardant

Rampant Double-tail

Rampant Coward

Rampant Defamed

Passant

Passant Guardant

Passant Reguardant

Statant

Repetition

If there are multiple symbols, they can be arranged in the form of these typical shapes.

in Chief

in Fess

in Pale

in Bend

in Chevron

in Cross

in Orle

SHIELD EXAMPLES

Aston

Edwards

Manners