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Summary Article: **heraldry**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Image from: [heraldry in The Macmillan Encyclopedia](#)

Insignia and symbols representing a person, family, or dynasty; the science of armorial bearings. Heraldry originated with simple symbols used on shields and banners for recognition in battle. By the 14th century, it had become a complex pictorial language with its own regulatory bodies (courts of chivalry), used by noble families, corporate bodies, cities, and realms. The world's oldest heraldic court is the English College of Arms founded in 1484.

In a coat of arms, the charges (heraldic symbols) are placed on the shield, or escutcheon. The surface of the shield is called the field, and coats of arms are distinguished not only by their charges, but also by the colouring of this field, which represents a combination of metals, tinctures (colours), or furs. There are two heraldic metals: or (gold) and argent (silver); five colours: azure (blue), gules (red), sable (black), vert (green), and purple (purple). The most common furs are ermine and vair. It is a general rule in English heraldry that metal should not rest on metal nor colour on colour. A coat of arms may be differenced (modified) to represent a family, or any individual member of that family, by the addition of any of a variety of symbols; for example, an eldest son has a label (a horizontal bar with three shorter bars descending from it) across the top of his coat of arms; a second son has a crescent on his.

The royal arms of each sovereign state indicate the public authority of its ruler. In Britain, the quartered royal standard (properly a banner; see flag) is the insignia of the ruling authority – the crown.

History Badges or signs have been used since ancient times to identify a tribe, family, or individual, but heraldry, in its restricted sense of hereditary armorial symbols, was a medieval development. It instantly and adequately filled the need, so pressing in an age when few people could read or write, for a simple system for identifying those occupying positions in public life. Its use in civil and domestic life, both for decoration and for legal purposes (for example, on seals, to authenticate deeds), had more to do with its popularity than its use in warfare. The misuse of another's arms was equivalent to forgery, so in order to be certain of acting correctly, it became the practice to consult the heralds, as specialists in the science; and eventually the principal heralds, called kings-of-arms, came to control all heraldic matters under the marshals who derived their authority from the crown. The prestige attaching to armorial bearings lies in the recognition that a grant of arms implies a grant of nobility. Although it has been doubted whether arms necessarily connote gentility in England, in Scotland commoners are expressly forbidden to bear arms at all. At the time heraldry arose, the noble and knightly classes alone required or had the opportunity of using arms. When a man acquired a feudal fief, or some other public position, he either assumed or received arms as a matter of course. Corporate bodies and cities were soon by analogy held to be persons who could receive grants of arms, and nowadays corporate heraldry is most important. Early bearings were simple in character, and were frequently chosen to suggest the name of the bearer. The bearings of Tremain (three arms joined) and Griffen (a griffin) are examples of this practice, sometimes known as **canting** heraldry.

The heraldic movement began in France and Germany in the 12th century, and soon spread to Britain and the rest of Europe. In England it developed rapidly during the 13th and 14th centuries, reaching its climax in the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. In the 19th century a revival began, and the historical,

scientific, and artistic importance of heraldry was realised. In England the College of Arms continues to exercise its function; in Scotland the equivalent body is the Court of the Lord Lyon. In 1672 all older registers were superseded by the 'Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland', in which all existing arms were ordered to be registered within a year, as well as future grants. The striking feature of Scots heraldry is that there are relatively few surnames in Scotland, and therefore comparatively few basic coats of arms. Heraldry has largely developed by differencing these basic arms for the numerous offshoots from the main lines of clans and families.

images

Richard III

Shakespeare, armorial bearing

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