

A Brief Background of Heraldry and Coats of Arms, adapted from “The Origin and History of Heraldry” by Bettye Gwaltney, NSCDXVIIC, 1991 and referenced by Marian Fiasca

Presented by Francine Zamora at State Conference NSCDXVIIC, 2012

Through the centuries, heraldry has become the exact art and science of the Herald, and it has its own language. Heraldic description, or blazonry, is still written in a combination of Norman French, Anglicized Latin and antique English. Heraldry looks and sounds as it did in the 15th Century, and to the layman can be confusing. Rather than diving into terminology and blazonry, which are fascinating topics in themselves, I am confining my remarks to the origins of Coats of Arms and a very brief history of Heraldry.

The nobility of the Middle Ages adopted personal symbols with which they could authenticate documents and writs that they issued to their largely illiterate subjects. They used personal seals that depicted the overlord, or some other symbol that identified him. These images were used on documents and personal property. How did one certain group of these symbols come to be known as Coats of Arms?

The Bayeux Tapestry which depicts the Norman invasion of England in 1066 shows the type of armor and shields the knights bore. There are symbols on the shields but not coats of arms. So it was after that, probably around the beginning of the 12th Century, that the use of personal symbols by knights and other noblemen in warfare became common.

Nobles held their lands on the condition that they provide knights to ride to battle when the king required them. This was known as a ‘knight’s fee’. When knights travelled to fight for one side or another, it became necessary that they wear a badge or a symbol of the nobleman on whose side they were fighting. The shield is an obvious place to put this insignia, and it remains the background for a coat of arms today.

A coat of arms covered the wearer, his horse if he was mounted, and was emblazoned on his shield. Identification in battle was the purpose of using a coat

of arms. Different style armor, helmets and crests were also used for identification. How did the system and the art come to be known by the general term “Heraldry”?

From very early times, heralds were employed by kings and nobles principally as messengers and ambassadors. They are believed to have come originally from the ranks of roaming troubadours and minstrels who went from court to court and various places with their songs and tales. Heraldry was constantly travelling and meeting other heralds and lords, and in this way gathered considerable knowledge of the different coats of arms used by others.

Heralds not only entertained, but also served other purposes. As they became attached to a particular noble, heralds became census takers. They provided the lord with information about how many men were available within his lands for battle preparation. The heralds functioned as staff officers in battles. By recognizing coats of arms, they could tell their lord who the opponents were, assess the number of knights on either side, and even sometimes determine who had won a battle by identifying the captives and counting the dead. As part of the chivalric code, heralds were granted immunity from being slain on the battlefield.

Tournaments developed as social events and provided knights with battle practice and showcased their prowess, wealth and status. Heraldry organized and refereed these events. As time went on, heralds became autocrats of the tournament, formalizing rituals and protocol. Heraldry announced the names of the contestants and described their coats of arms. To that end, the heralds developed blazonry, describing this insignia in precise technical language.

At first knights and gentry adopted their own designs for coats of arms, but duplication of images and disorganization eventually led to the English sorting it out. King Richard III appointed Royal Heraldry and a College of Arms was developed in 1484. The College was located in London, formally established in 1555 and consisted of 13 Royal Heraldry who were paid about \$20 from the Exchequer. The Royal Heraldry's prime responsibility now was to grant coats of arms to qualified applicants, and to keep records. In Scotland the right to grant arms was vested in the Lord Lyon, and in France arms were granted by the King.

In the 16th and 17th Centuries, Royal Heralds travelled around the realm and set up itinerant courts. These were called visitations. The Royal Heralds summoned all gentry and knights to appear before them and prove their right to arms. The Royal Heralds could grant coats of arms, confirm old ones, or even revoke them. As you can imagine, the gentry chafed under this. The Visitations of the Heralds remain an important primary source for us today, and you can see these as Harleian Manuscripts.

Today the College of Arms consists of 13 Royal Heralds who are members of Queen Elizabeth II's household. The Royal Heralds operate under the direction of the Earl Marshall, an hereditary title and position that now falls to the Duke of Norfolk. Officers of the College of Arms record pedigrees, research genealogy and design new coats of arms for worthy candidates. Since authority for deciding all matters having to do with the granting of coats of arms was vested in the Royal Heralds, the whole system quite naturally is now referred to as Heraldry.