



“Coats of Arms” - Where Did They Come From?

Early Recorded History

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Moses, in an earlier life an Egyptian prince and a general under royal Egyptian patronage, commanded a successful army against Ethiopia. It appears that his leadership skills learnt as an Egyptian army general were put to good use and probably stretched to the limit as he guided, trained and marshalled the Israelites through their desert wanderings. I am sure there were many times when he perceived God’s hand had guided his earlier life, whether commanding an army of soldiers for Pharaoh or tending a flock of sheep for Jethro; in preparation for this forty-year wilderness campaign. Unlike the rest of the camp, Moses was possibly the only Israelite who had never been subjected to slavery until a new generation born during their forty years of wandering in the desert reached adulthood. Consequently, his mindset would have been vastly different to anyone else’s and probably contributed greatly to the numerous misunderstandings and conflict we read about within their own ranks in the history of that time. The camp layout, the organization, and many of the laws governing their society speak to us of a man ideally suited, with extensive knowledge—the translator of Josephus, William Whiston, calls it “*sagacity*”—(a readiness of apprehension; discriminative intelligence; acute, practical judgment.)—in marshalling large groups of people in the field and on the move.

Interestingly, it was during this period of their history that heraldry became a significant part of Israelite life, where each tribe had their own standard or banner and rallying point:

“The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘Everyone of the children of Israel shall camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father’s house’...so they camped by their standards, and so they broke camp, every one by his family, according to their father’s houses.”

Numbers 2:1-34

It appears the tribes were divided into four brigades grouped around the four sides of the central Meeting Tent, and known to us as the Tabernacle, where the presence of God dwelt, albeit hidden within a cloud that settled over the tabernacle and which lit up at night to become a fiery pillar. On each side three tribes made up a brigade with the central tribe on each side nominated as the brigade leader. The banner of the family in the centre on each side was not only a tribal one but a brigade rallying point as well. These four central brigade leaders were as follows;

Tribe:	Matriarch	Located:	†Zodiac Sign:	Primary & Secondary Banner Signs:
Dan	*Bilhah	North	Scorpio	∞Eagle (brigade banner); white horse
Reuben	Leah	South	Aquarius	Man; Water
Judah	Lear	East	Leo	Lion; Grape Vine or Fig Tree
Ephraim	Rachel/#Asenath	West	Taurus (horn)	Bull/wild ox/Unicorn; Horn, Olive Tree

The supporting tribes were grouped with their respective Brigade leaders as follows...

Tribe:	Matriarch	Located:	†Zodiac Sign:	Primary & Secondary Banner Signs:
Asher	*Zilpah	North	Sagittarius	Cup or goblet,
Naphtali	*Bilhah	North	Capricorn	Stag or hind,
Simeon	Leah	South	Pisces	Sword; Fortified Gate
Gad	*Zilpah	South	Aries	Mounted troop leader; Group of tents
Issachar	Leah	East	Cancer	Burdened ass,
Zebulun	Leah	East	Virgo	Ship,
Manasseh	Rachel/#Asenath	West	Taurus (horn)	Olive branch /Bundle of arrows / No.13
Benjamin	Rachel	West	Gemini	Wolf,
Levi	Leah	Centre	Libra	Breastplate; Portcullis

* Bilhah was Rachel's personal maid, and *Zilpah was Leah's personal maid. Each maid bore two sons to Jacob.
– Genesis 29:32 – 30:24.

Asenath, daughter of Poti-pherah, the priest of On, was Joseph's wife and bore him two sons. Joseph, as Jacob's first son by Rachel, his favourite wife, received through his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh the family birthright blessing and a double portion.
– Genesis 48:8-22.

Leah's eldest sons Reuben Simeon and Levi, because of indiscretions and shame they brought to Jacob and the family, were passed over in favour of her fourth son, Judah, who received the promise of an everlasting royal dynasty that was later fulfilled in the Judaic dynasty of David.
– Genesis 49:3-7.

† Zodiac Sign—Even as early as their father Jacob's death-bed, it appears that each of the 12 tribes had chosen, or been allocated one of the 12 constellations forming the Zodiac as their "mark" of recognition. This leads to conjecture about whether Joseph's teenage dream, that got him into so much trouble with his brothers, was inspired by this understanding
– Genesis 49.

∞ An eagle, the natural enemy of both the snake and scorpion, was substituted for the scorpion or snake on Dan's brigade banner.

Since the early 13th century, Coats of Arms and Heraldry have been a source of great fascination as well as a subject of true historical importance. It is easy to understand why more than half a million Coats of Arms recorded by individuals with their respective family names are still being researched and studied after more than seven centuries.

How the term "Coat of Arms" evolved makes an interesting story. Because wars were almost a continual occurrence during the Middle Ages, more and more armour was added to a knight's battle uniform until the medieval warrior was finally protected from head to toe. The metal suit of armour always included a helmet to protect the head, thus it was virtually impossible to tell one knight from another. In order to prevent any mishaps on the battlefield, such as one friend injuring another, a means of identification was necessary. A colourful solution first came as knights painted patterns on their battle shields. These patterns were eventually woven into cloth surcoats which were worn over the suit of armour and serving a dual purpose of identification and as protection from the sun's heat. In fact, it was common for a knight's horse to be draped in a fancy cloth surcoat with its master's Coat of Arms emblazoned on the side.

This colourful identification was certainly displayed with great pride. As more designs were created, it became necessary to register or copyright these designs, to prevent two knights from using the same insignia. Records were kept that gave each knight exclusive rights to his arms. In many cases, records were then compiled listing the family name and an exact description of its Coat of Arms. These are called "armorials" or "blazons." The word "heraldry" is associated with Coats of Arms due to the role of the "herald" in recording the blazons and comes from a common practice at a medieval sporting event. Tournaments (or jousting contests) were popular during the days of knighthood, and as each soldier was presented at a tournament, a herald sounded the trumpet and then announced the knight's achievements and described his Arms. The heralds would then record the Arms as a way of ensuring that a family maintained its protective rights to have and use its individual Arms.

Heraldry and History

Coats of Arms are intertwined with heraldry and history. Heraldry offers a fascinating study of medieval lifestyles where we are able to surmise much regarding our forefathers. Historically, different creatures of nature denoted certain characteristics, and various inanimate shapes implied certain traits, historical factors or aspirations. For example, the chevron symbolized protection and has often been placed on Arms to tell others that its bearer achieved some notable feat. A symbol (or charge) placed on a Coat of Arms usually provided clues to a person's being. Some Arms are an artistic interpretation of a person's name, e.g. many of the Fisher Arms include dolphins or fish. Many Arms reveal a person's occupation. Others tell about less tangible characteristics, such as the early bearer's hopes, wishes and aspirations. For example, hope is shown by a wheat garb or sheaf, and joy by garlands of flowers or a red rose. Crosses and religious symbols often meant the person felt a closeness to his god, or could have symbolized that the knight was a veteran of one of history's bloodiest series of battles—The Crusades. Heraldic research is full of proud warriors boasting their war records via their Coats of Arms.

The first Arms were quite simple, consisting only of the shield. The design was set off with a horizontal or vertical band, star or half-moon; however, the renderings became more complex during later times. Immediately above the shield is the helmet, the style of which depends on the country and the status of the early bearer. The wreath, or torque, is mounted on top of the helmet. The crest wasn't included on the Coat of Arms until the 13th century.

The crest was the emblem that survived when the banner was destroyed and the shield shattered, as a rallying symbol of the knight's courage. It was painted on leather, sometimes thin metal or even wood, and was attached to the helmet, so that allies could easily pick out who was who. The lambrequin or mantling, now represented in strips, was once cloth which hung down from the helmet to cover the back of the neck. It meant that the bearer had been to battle. The mantling in most instances is of secondary importance to the shield and crest. Standardized mantling has been designed and often used to illustrate and enhance different Coats of Arms.

Some families have also passed down mottos through the ages. They may have begun as war cries or were a variation of a family name. They might express piety, hope or determination, or commemorate a deed or past occasion. The historical tradition of Coats of Arms became more complicated as the designs became more complex. By 1419, Henry V of England found it necessary to impose rigid legal regulations over the use of Coats of Arms because court battles were becoming quite numerous.

The King forbade anyone to take on Arms unless by right of ancestry or as a gift from the Crown. Later Henry VIII even sent the heralds (now Royal Authenticators of Arms) into the shires on what were called "visitations." Unbelievable as it may seem to us today, these "visitations" were held once every generation for almost two centuries for the sole reason of officially verifying, listing or denying Arms in use. It is interesting to note that the language most commonly used by the heralds was Norman-French, the court language of the time. For instance, the blazon written in the Norman-French language, "*D'azur a une fortune, posse sur une boule d'or,*" can be translated as follows, "Blue with the figure of fortune standing on a gold ball." Interestingly, you'll find that even the most complex blazon is normally only one sentence long.

The Bearing of Arms

Under most heraldic rules, only first sons of first sons of the recipient of a Coat of Arms are permitted to bear their ancestor's Arms. Younger sons may use a version of their father's Arms, but the rules of heraldry say that they must be changed ("differenced") somewhat. If the bearer of a Coat of Arms (called an "Armiger") dies without male heirs, his daughter may combine her father's Arms with her husband's Arms. This process is called "impaling." Although these principles seem very archaic, stiff and formal today, they do give us an idea of the rich, protective tradition which surrounded heraldry through the ages.

There are over one million surnames in use throughout the world today. However, less than 75,000 of these names can be associated with a Coat of Arms. Even though a Coat of Arms may have been granted to a person with your surname, you may, or may not be related by blood to this early namesake. However, you may wish to adopt this crest for your own use today, or, it is possible to have your very own Coat of Arms designed and registered depending on the country in which you reside.

The Symbols And Meanings Of Heraldry

You can easily learn the different terms of heraldry and the parts of the Coats of Arms. A complete Coat of Arms consists of a shield, crest and motto (if one exists). The shield, or escutcheon, is the main element. The crest (usually an animal) rests on top of the shield. The motto may be in any language, but is usually Latin, French or English.

For many Coats of Arms, the researcher will find a helmet, or supporters, or both added to the shield. Many Coats of Arms include accessories such as the mantling and wreath. The mantling was originally used to protect the knight from the direct rays of the sun and to protect his helmet from rust and stains. The wreath symbolizes the device used to cover the point where the crest was attached to the knight's helmet. It is important to note that the word "blazon" is the correct technical description for a Coat of Arms.

Parts of the Shield

The right side of the shield (from the knight's viewpoint) is called the dexter side, and the left is the sinister side. The term "tincture" is the name given to the colours used in a Coat of Arms. The tinctures represent two metals, seven colours and various furs.

The Field:

The blazon of the Coat of Arms gives the tincture to the field first. For shields which have more than one tincture, partition lines in various forms are depicted. Each type of line has its own heraldic term. When a straight line divides the shield horizontally the shield is said to be blazoned "per fess"; vertically, "per pale"; diagonally from dexter to sinister, "per bend"; and diagonally from sinister to dexter, "per bend sinister". The lines which are not simple or straight have special names, such as wavy, indented, or raguly. A shield may be "quartered", or divided into four equal parts. Some shields have bands of colour called ordinaries that have special meanings because of common usage.

The Charge:

The blazon gives the description of the charge next. Almost anything that can be symbolized in colour or form can be a charge. Charges include representations of animals; people, monsters, divine beings, and manmade objects. Many charges are often one word that simplifies the task of describing them. For instance, a lion standing on one hind leg with the front paws raised is called "rampant". An eagle looking over its right shoulder and with its talons and wings outstretched is called "displayed".

The charges on the field you will most likely see are the lion, the rose and the lily, the most widely used designs. Then there are the ordinaries: the honourable ordinaries and the sub-ordinaries. These are geometrical figures used as the charges on the field. The seven honourable ordinaries are the bend, the chevron, the chief, the cross, the fess, the pale and the saltire. The 14 sub-ordinaries are the annulet, the billet, the bordure, the canton, the flaunch, the fret, the gyron, the inescutcheon, the label, the lozenge, the orle, the pile, the roundel and the tressure. The partition lines are used to separate the field and to border the honourable ordinaries and sub-ordinaries. The eight basic styles are indented, inverted, engrailed, wavy, nebuly, embattled, raguly and dove-tailed. The ordinaries and partitions were added onto the shield to strengthen it. These were painted to enrich the decoration on the field and eventually became a traditional component of the shield and of the charges.

The Colours and Firs:

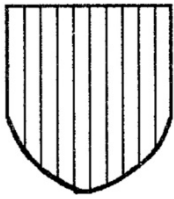
You'll find that even the hues used in heraldry represent a clue about the bearer. The tinctures used are divided into metals, colours and furs. The metals used are gold and silver. Gold (or yellow) denotes generosity, valour or perseverance. Silver (or white) represents serenity and nobility. The colours are red, green, black, blue and purple. Red represents fortitude and creative power. Green means hope, vitality and plenty, while black is for repentance or vengeance. Blue and purple represent loyalty and splendour.

The furs most commonly used are Ermine and, Vair. Ermine represents dignity and nobility; Vair, a high mark of dignity. Rarely used are the colours reddish-purple and orange-tawny, both said to be marks of disgrace due to "abatment of honour". Because designs were so important on the battlefield, so was the display of colours. The important rule to remember here is that metal is always displayed on colour and colour always on metal. For example, blue on gold, not blue on green, as it would lose its clarity or distinctiveness of design.

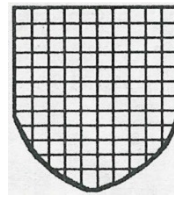
Tinctures Used In Heraldry

The tinctures used in heraldry are divided into metals, colours and furs. These are indicated in black and white drawings by a system of lines or dots that was introduced in the 17th Century by the Italian Herald Silvestre de Petra-Sancta.

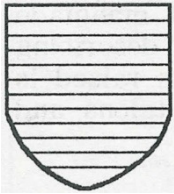
THE COLOURS



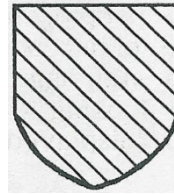
Red-Gules depicted by perpendicular lines, represents fortitude and creative power.



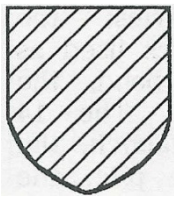
Black-Sable depicted by crossed lines, represents repentance or vengeance.



Blue-Azure depicted by horizontal lines, represents loyalty and splendour.



Green-Vert depicted by lines from top right to lower left part, represents hope, vitality & plenty.

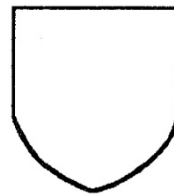


Purple-Purple depicted by lines from top left to the right lower corners, represents loyalty.

THE METALS

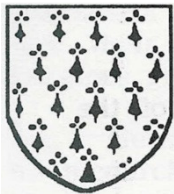


Gold-Or depicted by dots or points, denotes generosity, valour and perseverance.

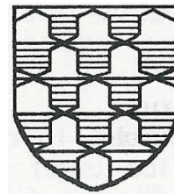


Silver-Argent or White depicted by a white space, represents serenity & nobility.

THE FURS



Ermine-Erm depicted by a white field with black spots, represents dignity & nobility.



Vair-composed originally of fur pieces but now silver & blue flower shapes in contrasting rows, represents a high mark of dignity.

Ordinaries, Partitions & Charges Most Frequently Used on Coats of Arms

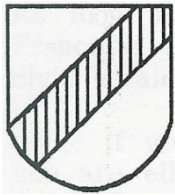
The ordinaries in heraldry are believed to have originated from the bars of wood or iron that were used to strengthen or fasten the early shields. Generally, they are very simple geometric forms and were the earliest heraldic figures. They included the Bar, Barre, (or Bend Sinister), Bend, Chevron, Chief, Cross, Fess, Pale and Saltire or Saltier.



BAR – one of the Honourable Ordinaries, being one-fifth of the shield.



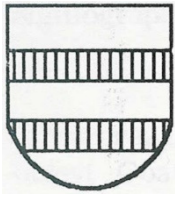
BEND – One of the Honourable Ordinaries.



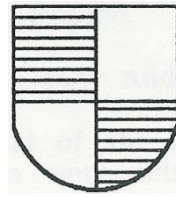
BARRE (or Bend Sinister) – one of the principle Ordinaries.



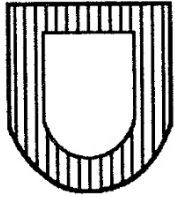
BENDLET



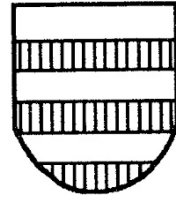
BARRY



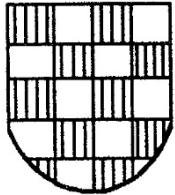
QUARTERED



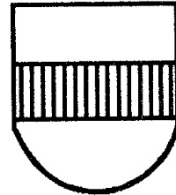
BORDER – a Sub-ordinary.



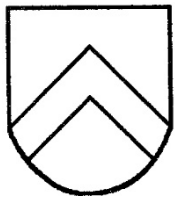
FASCES



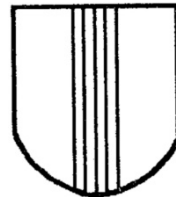
CHEQUY – a Sub-ordinary.



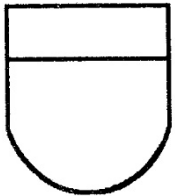
FESS – one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



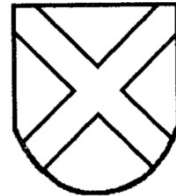
CHEVRON – one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



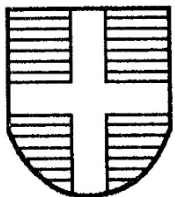
PALE – one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



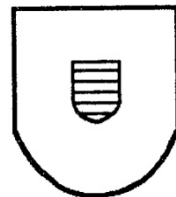
CHIEF –one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



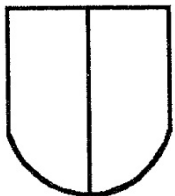
SALTIRE or SALTIER – one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



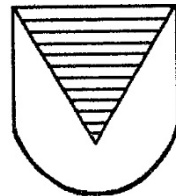
CROSS – one of the Honourable Ordinaries.



INNER SHIELD – (or escutcheon) – a Sub-ordinary.



PARTY PER PALE



PILE – a Sub-ordinary.