



Parts of a Coat of Arms

The Origins of Heraldry

There has always been a need, especially in times of conflict, where armies had to identify themselves. This would have been done by displaying banners.

An Historical Overview

Heraldry, the system by which coats of arms and other armorial bearings are devised, described, and regulated, has a fascinating and intricate history that stretches back to the medieval period. This art of bearing arms developed as a means of identification in battle and tournament and eventually evolved into a sophisticated system of symbols representing lineage, property, and personal achievements.

The Beginnings of Heraldry

In Europe the roots of heraldry can be traced back to the 12th century during the era of the Crusades. As knights donned armour that obscured their faces, it became necessary to adopt a method of identification. The solution was to paint distinctive symbols on their shields and surcoats (a type of outer garment), which allowed knights to be recognized from a distance. These symbols were initially personal and unique to each knight, reflecting their deeds and characteristics.

The Influence of the Crusades

The Crusades played a pivotal role in the development of heraldry. As knights from various European regions converged to fight in the Holy Land, the need for distinguishable symbols grew. This period saw the introduction of many of the elements that would become standard in heraldic design, such as the use of geometric shapes, animals, and mythical creatures. The simplicity and boldness of these early designs ensured they could be easily recognized on the battlefield. There is also evidence that ordinary soldiers would have a device, such as a cross, painted on their outer garment.

The Formalization of Heraldry

By the 13th century, heraldry began to be formalized. The growing complexity of coats of arms necessitated the creation of a system to describe and regulate them. This led to the establishment of heraldic authorities, such as the Court of the Lord Lyon in Scotland and the English College of Arms. These bodies were responsible for the granting and recording of arms, ensuring adherence to the established rules and traditions of heraldic design.

Heraldic Language and Rules

The language of heraldry, known as blazoning, developed alongside the practice. Blazon is a specialized vocabulary used to describe coats of arms in precise terms. For instance, a lion depicted on a shield would be described by its "attitude" such as rampant, its tinctures and posture. The rules of heraldry also dictated the use of specific colours (tinctures), basic, simple geometric shapes (ordinaries), and charges (a symbol or emblem) to maintain clarity and avoid duplication.

Heraldry in Society

Heraldry soon transcended the battlefield and became an integral part of medieval and Renaissance society. It was used to signify noble lineage and ownership of property, appearing on everything from seals and tombstones to stained glass windows and manuscripts. The practice spread beyond the nobility, with towns, guilds, and even individuals adopting coats of arms.

Heraldic Art and Symbolism

The art of heraldry is rich in symbolism. Each element of a coat of arms carries specific meanings and connotations.

The Evolution of Heraldry

As heraldry evolved, so too did its applications. By the Renaissance, it had become an elaborate and codified system, influencing art, architecture, and literature. The Renaissance period saw the proliferation of armorial bearings across Europe, with families commissioning elaborate coats of arms that reflected their heritage and aspirations.

Heraldry Beyond Europe

While heraldry is most commonly associated with European traditions, similar systems of identification and symbolism existed in other cultures. In Japan, the use of mon (family crests) shared many similarities with European heraldry, serving as emblems of lineage and identity. These cross-cultural parallels highlight the universal human need for symbolic representation.

Modern Heraldry

Today, heraldry continues to be practiced and respected, though its role has shifted from martial identification to a ceremonial and symbolic function. Many countries maintain heraldic authorities that oversee the granting and regulation of coats of arms. In the United Kingdom, the Court of the Lord Lyon and the College of Arms perform these duties, ensuring the continuation of heraldic traditions.

Heraldry in the Modern World

Heraldic designs are still used by individuals, institutions, and organizations to signify heritage, achievements, and identity. Universities, cities, and corporations often have their own coats of arms, which are displayed on official documents, buildings, and regalia. Sporting bodies such as football teams often have a coat of arms and use their livery colours (invariably the first colour and the first metal mentioned in their blazon) for their strips.

The Role and Functions of the Lord Lyon in Scotland

Introduction

The Lord Lyon King of Arms is a unique and ancient office within the Scottish legal and ceremonial framework. With responsibilities ranging from the oversight of state ceremonies to the regulation and granting of heraldic arms to individuals, civic bodies and corporations. The Lord Lyon presides over the Court of the Lord Lyon, which is the oldest heraldic court in the world.

Historical Background

The office of the Lord Lyon dates back to at least the 14th century, but its origins can be traced back to the High Sennachie of the Celts.

Granting and Confirming Arms

The Lord Lyon is entrusted by the King to grant new coats of arms to individuals and organizations in Scotland. The granting of arms is more than a ceremonial honour; it is a legally recognized symbol of identity and heritage. Anyone living in Scotland may petition the Lord Lyon for a Grant of Arms provided they are "virtuous and well deserving".

Eligibility:

You are a permanent resident of Scotland

You own property in Scotland

You were born in Scotland

You own a Scottish feudal barony

You are a descendant of someone who was granted arms in Scotland, provided you share the same surname.

If successful, you will receive a document (Letters Patent) that is illuminated by hand on vellum and your arms will be recorded in the Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland.

The Lyon Register

All granted and confirmed arms are recorded in the Lyon Register, officially known as the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland. This register, dating back to 1672, is a comprehensive and meticulously maintained record of Scotland's heraldic arms. It serves as an official archive and a valuable resource for historians, genealogists, and heraldic scholars.

Recognition of Clan Chiefs

The Lord Lyon has the authority to recognize and confirm clan chiefs, who are the clan's legal representative, according to Scots law. If a legitimate heir of the last chief cannot be found armigers of the clan may form a committee (a derbhfine) and contact Lord Lyon to discuss how a new chief may be appointed. See on The Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs website.

Regulation of Tartan

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Legal Jurisdiction and Fees

Fees paid for granting coats of arms are directed to the Treasury. The misuse of heraldic arms is a criminal offence in Scotland. Prosecutions for the misuse of arms are brought before Lyon Court, where the Lord Lyon serves as the sole judge. This court has the authority to impose penalties and enforce compliance with heraldic law. Misuse of arms can include the unauthorized use of arms, or fraudulent to arms. Decisions made by the Lord Lyon can be appealed to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, Scotland's supreme civil court. However, there is no appeal process if the Lord Lyon refuses to grant a coat of arms, as this decision is considered an exercise of ministerial function rather than a judicial one. Nonetheless, an appeal by way of judicial review may be successful if it can be demonstrated that the Lord Lyon acted unreasonably or outside the bounds of his authority.

Conclusion

The Lord Lyon King of Arms is a custodian of Scotland's heraldic heritage, ensuring that the traditions and legalities of armory are upheld. From overseeing state ceremonies to granting and confirming coats of arms, the Lord Lyon's role is integral to the cultural fabric of Scotland. The office's enduring significance is a testament to the importance of heraldry in Scottish history and identity, preserving a legacy that continues to resonate in modern times.

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