
The Rise Of Heraldry 1100 To 1300

Heraldry is defined as “the systematic use of hereditary devices centered upon the shield.” Although relatively unknown and unpopular by the start of the twelfth century, by 1300 heraldry became an essential element of chivalric culture across Europe. By following the rise of heraldry from its proto-heraldic roots in the twelfth century, it is evident that the growing prominence of heraldry can be credited to several important political and social factors. Although heraldry likely began as a means of distinguishing militaristic and political identities, it reaches its peak as a method of asserting one’s social status and impressive family legacy.

The origins of heraldry in chivalric warfare were not seen until the early eleventh century. The Bayeux Tapestry, a large decorative weaving depicting the Battle of Hastings created in 1070, provides perhaps the first example of characters identified by visuals on their shields. Interestingly, the characters of the Bayeux Tapestry who reappear in different scenes are depicted with different shields bearing different designs in each. For this reason, many scholars refer to this as a form of “proto-heraldry;”^[footnoteRef:1] a precursor to the particular visual identification that arose in later centuries, instead of an example of heraldry itself. [1: Marianne J. Ailes, 'Early Medieval Literature,' *The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies* 52 (1990): , www.jstor.org/stable/20868279. pp. 46]

Early literary sources also confirm the use of particular arms to distinguish one knight from another. In Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, written in the early twelfth century, the knight Lancelot describes how he wants to fight using arms that are not his own to conceal his identity.^[footnoteRef:2] It is worth mentioning that Chretien’s handling of heralds implies that they would be familiar to the noble classes who would read his texts. Chretien does not offer any sort of explanation of heralds to the readers, suggesting they would already have an understanding of their function.^[footnoteRef:3] This similarly confirms the idea that knights during this time were interested in being recognized in battle by their personalized arms, and that in the early twelfth century a courtly audience would have been familiar with them. [2: Ernst Soudek, 'The Origin and Function of Lancelots Anonymity in Chretiens 'Le Chevalier De La Charrette', ' *The South Central Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (1970): , doi:10.2307/3187999. pp. 220] [3: Lani Visaisouk, *Heraldry and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Erik Kooper and Martine Meuwese, Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2006 (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2006). pp. 6]

This introduces the idea that that the use of heraldry was very important during this time for political reasons; specifically, in distinguishing one’s allegiance or political status. It is likely that distinguishable arms first arose as a way to distinguish a man on one side of combat from the other. This is evident in the *Song of Roland*, an early chivalric poem, describes the Saracen army as having “noble shields” of “white, blue, and red,”^[footnoteRef:4] where the army of Charlemagne wear “helmets that shone with precious stones and their shields and their broidered tunics.”^[footnoteRef:5] Many chivalric knights would wear specific arms as a means of linking themselves to their service and victory in particular military campaigns. Additionally, in accordance with the feudal system, knights under the same lord would wear the same colors on their arms to represent their shared lord to whom they owed service. [4: *The Song of Roland*, tr. J. Crosland (London, 1924). pp. 21] [5: *The Song of Roland*. pp. 30]

Prior to the year 1100, many knights bore shields that featured geometric patterns or creatures and symbols, yet these early examples of heraldry were different from designs that followed in the fact that they followed no regulations. For this reason, the examples described above cannot truly be classified as examples of heraldry. By the thirteenth century, the symbols and patterns which composed one's specific arms were codified in "the language of heraldry," known as blazon. Blazon breaks up one's shield into the field, the face of the shield, the charge, the principle symbol on the front of the shield, the dexter, the right side, and the sinister, the left side.[footnoteRef:6] It also restricted the colors one could use into five tinctures and named all possible patterns to a design. Using terminology such as this, one could accurately describe the precise design of one's shield and be completely understood by anyone else who understood this "heraldic vocabulary." [footnoteRef:7] Blazon came to be a "visual language" for the nobility which children would be taught at birth. From this came a new profession known as heralds, whose roles were to learn the heraldry of other families and familiarize themselves with the particular rules of blazon.[footnoteRef:8] The systematic way of labeling demonstrates the significance of heraldry during the 13th century. Blazon is particularly significant because it linked specific arms to a specific person, instead of a group of people under one common lord. [6: Visaisouk, *Heraldry and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur*. pp. 9] [7: Visaisouk, *Heraldry and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur*., pp. 9] [8: Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909). Pp. 27]

With this in mind, it was important for Kings to use his highly specific arms as evidence of his political capital. In 1215 King John wrote to King Reginald of Cornhill to have made tunics and banners "made with beaten metal with our arms in gold." [footnoteRef:9] In his study of this specific request, historian Nicholas Vincent describes how King John made another order of tunics and banners in 1208, at the same time of year as well. At this time, April of 1208, near Easter time, King John was not involved or planning any sort of military campaigns.[footnoteRef:10] For this reason, one can imply that these commissions were made as purely decorative means, as visual representation of John's wealth and triumph. This exemplifies an important role of heraldry, to demonstrate strength and influence. For this reason, arms decorated the homes and property of their families, through banners and tunics as described by King John, as well as through stained glass windows and customized objects varying from simple bowls to burial tombs. [9: Nicholas Vincent, 'The Magna Carta Project,' *Feature of the Month - King John's Banners and Battle Flags*, April 2015, accessed March 15, 2019, http://magnacarta.cmp.uea.ac.uk/read/feature_of_the_month/Apr_2015_4.] [10: Vincent, "King John's Banners and Battle Flags"]

Another means by which heraldry came to represent one's specific glory is through tournaments, which characterize the twelfth to the fourteenth century. Knightly heraldry played a particularly large role in tournaments. Because the earliest semblances of heraldry are found at the exact same place and period of time as early tournaments, it is clear that the importance of heraldry was fueled by this tournament culture.[footnoteRef:11] In early tournaments, knights had used similar proto-heraldic means of identifying themselves in tournaments. In his analysis of the nature of tournaments, historian Edgar Prestage provides the example of knights dressing in all one color, such as the Red Knight we are introduced to in Chretien de Troyes *Perceval*, or other more ornamental methods such as "a red sleeve embroidered with pearls," or fanciful chains.[footnoteRef:12] Following the codification of heraldic designs through Blazon, the identity of the participating knights in tournaments became unmistakable. By competing in these tournaments dressed in their specific arms, any successes would be immediately traceable to themselves and their family. [11: David Crouch, *Tournament*, vol. 4 (London:

Hambledon and London, 2006). pp. 8] [12: Edgar Prestage, *Chivalry* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, Limited, 1928). Pp. 103]

On a smaller scale, individuals were able to assert their own status through simply owning arms in the first place. Although it seems that knights and arms were a natural pairing, in reality, knights were “at the very bottom of the social scale” in reference to who could actually bear arms.[footnoteRef:13] Generally, the distribution of arms was limited to the king, then barons and members of the nobility, and finally some knights. For this reason, it is fair to say that arms would be used to set apart noble families, or families who were particularly close to the King, who would grant them the right to bear arms.[footnoteRef:14] By 1180 knights were beginning to be seen as “lower levels of aristocracy,” and were therefore expected to present themselves as such. For this reason, there became fewer and fewer knights as the wealth of the class increased. Knights at this time would assume the heraldry and trappings which previously belonged to their lords.[footnoteRef:15] [13: Visaisouk, *Heraldry and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur.*, pp. 8] [14: Visaisouk, *Heraldry, and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur.*, pp. 8] [15: Crouch, *Tournament.* pp. 141]

Regardless, it is evident that the possession of arms was relatively limited to an elite group of people. This underscores the importance of heraldry as a means of publicizing one's lineage, and the honor of a family's collective honor. Essential to one's understanding of heraldry is the fact that one's arms were hereditary. Perhaps the earliest example of this hereditary adoption of particular arms is through Henry I of England, who in 1127 invested Geoffrey Plantagenet a blue shield adorned with golden lions. This shield was adopted by Geoffrey's grandson William Longespee, the Earl of Salisbury, and is depicted on his tomb in 1226.[footnoteRef:16] To bear the arms of one's family is to also publicly wear one's familial honor. Edgar Prestage describes how decorative arms were “assumed as personal, distinctions for the moment, not like armorial bearings, worn for the honor of the house.”[footnoteRef:17] [16: 'Self-Representation in Heraldry,' Central European University, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://web.ceu.hu/medstud/manual/SRM/heraldry1.htm>.] [17: Prestage, *Chivalry.* pp. 103]

It is for this reason that the popularity of heraldry spread outside of the traditional knights and lords, to noblewomen as well by the middle of the thirteenth century. Noblewomen in this time period proudly displayed the arms of their family. For example, Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I, was buried with heraldry depicting both “her natal arms of Castile and Leon, her marital arms of England, and her own arms as countess of Ponthieu.”[footnoteRef:18] When women married, they could combine their families into one shield, by dividing it “into two equal portions, the husband's arms on the dexter and his wife's on the sinister.” The popularity of heraldry outside of men and knights only reinforces the idea of its growing popularity and importance in society. [18: Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200-1500* (London: Routledge, 2015).]

It is evident that heraldry quickly grew in prominence from the early twelfth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century. Although originally used as a means of distinguishing oneself in combat, through the standardization of elements of heraldry in Blazon, heraldry quickly became highly specific to individuals and their individual lineages. This changed the function of heraldry from strictly political to social as well. Knights boasted their arms in the pageantry of tournaments, and members of noble families proudly displayed their arms as a way of making their pedigree visible and honoring their heritage. The significance of heraldry remains pertinent even today as a link between families and their chivalric ancestors.

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