



By the Boke

An educational series of articles presented by the Northshield College of Heraldry.

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How to be a Commenter for the Northshield College of Heraldry

By Aryanhwy merch Catmael, Boke Herawde

I. The role of commentary in the submissions process

Last month's article discussed the process that a submission goes through from the time it is sent off by the submitter to the time that it is ruled up on by the Laurel, Wreath, and Pelican Sovereigns of Arms. The two most important periods in the submissions process timeline are the internal commentary period and the external commentary period. The focus of this month's column is the internal commentary.

Each month, submissions received in the previous month are collected by Compass, who creates the Internal Letter of Intent. These ILoIs can be found both at Keythong's homepage, <http://www.northshield.org/keythong/letters.html>, as well as the Northshield Commentary website,

<http://www.northshield.org/keythong/commentary>.

Submissions are open for commentary for a month; anyone can review the submissions and post information which can be used by Keythong to determine whether the submissions need to be returned for further work or can be sent on to the College of Arms for a second period of commentary. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief "how-to" guide for new commenters who do not have extensive knowledge of the Rules for Submissions (<http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/rfs.html>) or the precedents (<http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/precedents.html>), or any specific armorial or onomastic knowledge; a future article will be geared towards the intermediate/advanced commenter.

II. Why comment?

Commentary is the single best way to improve your heraldic knowledge. You can learn a lot both by reading what other commenters have to say as well as searching for answers to questions on your own. There is no better way to build your heraldic skills than to put them to use.

Commentary is also essential to the submissions process. No submissions herald is all-knowledgeable. The commentary period is designed so that no decision on a submission is made on the basis of one person's knowledge alone. The internal commentary serves two primary purposes: To provide support for submissions that may not have come adequately documented or researched, so that these submissions can be forwarded to the College of Arms for consideration for registration, and to provide specific reasons why a submission cannot be registered, so that the submission can be returned for further work by Keythong, thus cutting 6+ months off the time of processing submissions, allowing for a new design to be submitted much faster.

II. The Northshield Commentary System

The main place that commentary is collected for use by Keythong is the Northshield Commentary website. To use this site, you need a user name and password. Anyone may create an account, and instructions how to do this can be found on the website. Once you have an authorized account, you can post commentary on any of the open submissions. Anyone, whether or not they have an account, is able to read the commentary that has been generated by others: In

Northshield, internal commentary is a completely open system, and we encourage everyone to get involved.

There are two main categories of submissions: Name submissions and armory submissions. (There is a third category, administrative actions and errata, but these usually require little commentary and will not be discussed in this article). I shall discuss each in turn.

III. Names

Many people think that if they have no knowledge of medieval naming practices, then they have nothing useful to contribute in terms of commentary on names. This is not true. There are many things that anyone, even without access to any resources, can contribute to:

1. **Spelling** — Does the spelling of the submitted name match the spelling in the provided documentation? If not, one of the spellings may be either a typo or an error. In any case, it is useful to bring this to the attention of Keythong.

2. **Documentation** — If you have access to the sources cited for documentation, you can confirm that the cited element is in fact found in the source. Many times names are documented via web pages, and thus it is easy to make such confirmations. Other documentation-related questions you might be able to answer are: Are the title and author of the source cited correctly? Is the URL, if applicable, correct? Are the right page numbers and headers for books listed?

Sometimes names are submitted without appropriate documentation. Even if you do not have access to reference books, you can still contribute to documentation by trolling the web. A good place to start is the Medieval Names Archive, <http://www.panix.com/~mittle/names>. The articles here are arranged by language/culture. It is a tremendous help when people search these articles to determine if an undocumented element can be found in any of them. Another good place to look, if you think you have a "problem" element, is the Collected Precedents of S.C.A: Name Precedents, <http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/precedents/CompiledNamePrecedents/index.html>.

3. **Conflict with non-SCA people** — Rules for Submissions I.3.a says that a "name or piece of armory that creates a false impression of the identity of the submitter will not be registered. Someone may not claim to be another, either directly by using a name or armory that is identical to another's, or by unmistakably claiming close relationship to an individual who is in fact unrelated." One consequence of this is that we protect the names of individuals who are well-known enough to have an entry in a standard encyclopedia. If you have access to an encyclopedia, you can look up the submitted name to see if there is such a conflict.

4. **Submissions History** — There are a number of questions relating to the history of a submission that also need to be answered, and can primarily be answered through on-line resources. If the name is not a new submission, when was it returned? Was it returned by a kingdom-level herald, or was it returned by Pelican? What was the reason

for return? Does this new submission address the previous reasons for return? The SCA Letters of Acceptances and Return, <http://www.sca.org/heraldry/loar>, Rouge Scarpe's database, <http://www.midrealm.org/heraldry/rougescarpe/search.html>, and the Northshield websites referenced above are places to look for answers.

5. Rules violations — Even if you are not very familiar with the Rules for Submissions on names, you can still read through RfS II-VI, and see if there are any blatant violations of the rules concerning offensive names, presumptuous names, etc.

IV. Armory

Just as with names, there is much that you can contribute to armorial commentary even if you don't have extensive knowledge of period heraldry, conflict checking, etc.

1. Blazon — Are there typos in the submitted blazon? Are the correct words (the first word of the blazon, the tincture Or, any proper nouns, and nothing else) capitalized? Is there a comma after the field tincture? All of these things need to be checked, and corrected, if needed, before a submission is registered. Is the blazon grammatical? Is the primary charge blazoned first? Even if you are not sure if your blazon is better than the submitted one, don't hesitate to offer it; by doing so, you will give others a chance to confirm your blazon or suggest improvements. (Remember, part of the purpose of commentary is education, of everyone involved).

2. Identifiability — RfS VII.7.a requires that "elements must be recognizable solely from their appearance". Can you recognize the elements? If not, what is the reason for unrecognizability? Is it because of the colors used? Or because of how the charge is drawn? If you think that a charge can be made more recognizable by an alternative drawing, suggest this.

3. Reproducibility — RfS VII.7.b requires that "elements must be reconstructible in a recognizable form from a competent blazon." Given the blazon, would you come up with something reasonable close to the submitted picture? If not, then perhaps the blazon needs tweaking - see IV.1 above.

4. Contrast — RfS VII.2 discusses the issues of contrast; compare the submitted armory to the requirements laid out in this rule. Does the armory satisfy all requirements?

5. Other rules issues — The RfS concerning armorial submissions are VII-XI. If you are feeling particularly ambitious, compare each submission to each rule, and note any possible rules violations that you think there might be. Even if you are not sure whether something violates a rule, mention it: Someone else will hopefully be able to confirm or deny your suspicions. If no one is, then at least Keythong can note the question when sending the submission to the College of Arms.

6. Submissions History — Each armorial submission must be connected with a name that is either in process or registered. Check to make sure that there is an accompanying name submission. If it is in process, verify where in process it is. Make sure that the name is spelled correctly. If it is registered, confirm that it was registered at the date stated. Again, check spelling. The same other questions listed in III.5, for names, apply to armorial submissions as well.

V. General commentary strategies.

Always cite your sources. If you have a rule or a precedent to back up an assertion, include it in your commentary. If you've found a website that provides further documentation, list the title, author, and URL of the page, as well as summarizing the relevant information in the article. Remember always that one of the main purposes of commentary is to help Keythong make decisions about submissions; Keythong cannot return a submission for further work unless there is a clear rules violation. On the flip side, many times a problematic submission cannot be sent forward unless there is clear rules support. The more citations that commenters can include, the easier it will be for Keythong to make a decision.

"One way to approach commentary is this: Let the submission be a bunch of questions and you provide the answers. As you can see, most of the areas of comment that I discussed above in sect. III and sect. IV are geared towards this method. Does this piece of armory meet the rule of contrast? Are these name elements dated before 1600? If you can answer at least one question generated by a submission, you've contributed something valuable to the project. And there are other questions that you can answer, such as why: If there is a particularly striking armorial submission, don't just say "I like this"; say why. Does it follow period style? Is it a clean, simple design? And the same for names."

VI. A final note

I sometimes hear that people find doing commentary intimidating, that they are afraid of saying something wrong or stupid. To this I say, remember that no herald sprung full-bodied from the mind of a Sovereign of Arms. We were all new to this once. (My first letter of comment consisted of two things: a spelling correction, and a timid statement that I wasn't sure I could recognize a two-headed swan as it was drawn). The way to learn is by doing. If you wait till you know everything before you start commenting, you never will. Think of this experience as an opportunity to expand your knowledge and help the submitters of Northshield. No one knows everything, and we all make stupid mistakes: Why not come and join us?