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By the Boke: Designing Medieval Armory

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Focus of this article

Heraldic arms began appearing in several parts of Western Europe in the early to mid-12th century; by the last quarter of the century they were widely used, especially in England, north-west France, and the Low Countries. The custom of using arms spread through most of Europe by the end of our period; many, but not all, cultures adopted the practice. Of course, from the 12th to the 16th century, and across all of Europe, heraldic style did vary. However, some remarks can be made about “core” style, style that is appropriate for pretty much any time period and culture that used arms. The focus of this article will primarily be this core style; at the end I will discuss some practices specific to certain cultures.

This is not intended to be a basic introduction to heraldry - I don't define the tinctures or the names of charges. Your local herald can supply you with that information.

Common designs and elements

Medieval armory tended to be very simple in design, using two or three tinctures and two or three types of charges, with many arms using just two tinctures and one type of charge, e.g. “Or, a chief gules”, “Sable, three increscents Or.” Geometric charges, like chevrons, pales, chiefs, fesses, bends, and crosses, were highly favored. It was rare to find arms with more than four types of charges, and each group of charges was generally made up of the same type. The idea of “my life of arms”, i.e., a single charge to represent each interest of the bearer, is not found in medieval armory of individuals (armory of guilds would often have charges related to their trade).

Certain tinctures were more common than others; one study of European arms in the Middle Ages shows that gules was by far the most common tincture, followed by argent and Or in almost equal proportions, and then by sable and azure, again in almost equal proportions, followed by vert in an almost negligible amount; the furs and purple do not show up on the chart at all (Pastoureau 82). For contrast, consider the following relative frequencies of field tinctures from one study of approximately 300 arms from late-period Cornwall:

Field tincture	Number	Percent
Argent	110	40.6%
Sable	43	15.9%
Gules	34	12.5%
Or	25	9.2%
Azure	18	6.6%
Divided	18	6.6%
Ermine	14	5.2%
Vair	2	.07%
Vert	1	.04%

Arms using a combination of the most common tinctures will be more typical than those using the less common tinctures.

Certain designs and arrangements were also common throughout all heraldic jurisdictions. These include:

- A central ordinary, such as a bend, fess, chevron, or pale, surrounded by three or six charges
- A cross or saltire surrounded by four charges
- A non-ordinary surrounded by three charges
- Two or three ordinaries, such as three fesses, three chevrons, or three bends
- Three charges, arranged two and one
- Six charges, arranged three, two, one
- A field with no charges, divided between two tinctures
- A field with strewn charges, and a central primary charge
- A plain field with a charged chief
- A quartered field with four charges

In each case, the charges would all be of the same type; for example, “Azure, a fess between three roundels Or” would be unremarkable medieval armory, but “Azure, a fess between two roundels and a stag Or” would be less likely.

Regional specifics

Of course, some motifs are more common in some parts of Europe than in others. For those interested in having arms that match their personas perhaps a bit more closely, here are some general remarks about motifs specific to certain areas.

England

The motif of putting a fess between two chevrons shows up quite a bit in early period English armory, and doesn't seem to be so common in other places. Also, the combination of gules and vair is significantly more common here than elsewhere.

Iberian peninsula

While in English, French, and German arms, six charges were usually arranged three, two and one, in Spain and Portugal, six charges were often arranged two, two, and two. Ordinaries of chain, such as saltires, crosses, and bordures, are also particularly common here, as well as the use of saltorels on bordures. Another common motif in Iberian armory is that of charges checky.

Sweden

The Swedes went in for some pretty bizarre designs that you don't see anywhere else. They favored geometrically complex lines of division, as can be found in Raneke (41-42). Nebuly, a line of division extremely uncommon elsewhere, shows up here as both a field division and a line of division for ordinaries. Other common motifs include chevrons with a single charge in base, fleurs-de-lys cut in half vertically and either used like that or connected to another charge divided vertically. Different types of flowers and leaves were also common.

Germany

Two charges are distinct to Germany and give a very German flavor to arms in which they are used. These are the nesselblatt and the seeblatt. The nesselblatt is a stylized nettle leaf, and the seeblatt a stylized lily pad. Pictures of these can be found in Siebmacher and Popoff.

Hungary

Hungarian armory is uniformly surprising. While most other cultures favored simplicity, much Hungarian armory from the end of our period was quite complex. However, this complexity didn't necessarily come from using many different types of charges, but rather from the types of charges themselves. For example, one coat of arms granted in 1587 has a green base, a blue field, a man dressed in red holding some wheat in his hand facing some sheafs of wheat. Another coat, granted in 1532, has a green base, a blue field, an armored man on horseback, an armored man on foot, and a dead horse on the base (it appears to be the representation of a battle scene). These coats are examples of two Hungarian motifs, one moderately common, one exceedingly common. The first is the use

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of people, often more than one and in naturalistic settings; this was never common in most European armory, but shows up moderately frequently in Hungarian. The second is the use of a green base on a blue field. Of 267 grants of arms made before 1600, 11 have a green trimount on a blue field, 14 have one on a red field, 26 have green mounts or bases on a blue field, and 12 have green mounts or bases on a red field. This means that 23.4 percent of surviving, known, period grants from Hungary have this motif in some form.

Concluding remarks

The best way to design armory appropriate for your persona is to look at lots of arms from your time period and culture, and design similar arms. Unfortunately, that is not always possible. In many cases, however, browsing any sort of book of medieval armory will give you a feel for what sorts of motifs were common and which were not.

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