

Section I: The Foundations

1.1. What is Heraldry?

If you pick up a book on this subject, the title will almost certainly be "Heraldry." However, if we want to be technically precise right from the start, we are actually studying Armory.

Strictly speaking, "Heraldry" covers everything that a herald does. In the Middle Ages, heralds were the public relations officers, diplomats, and referees of their day. They carried messages between hostile armies, marshaled state processions, and officiated at tournaments. Because they needed to recognize the combatants in these tournaments by the devices on their shields, they became the experts in "armory", the science of coats of arms. Over time, this specific duty became so prominent that the term *Heraldry* swallowed the term *Armory*, and today we use them interchangeably.

The Origins: Necessity, not Mythology

You will often hear people try to trace heraldry back to the Totems of the Native Americans, the standards of the Roman legions, or even the tribes of Israel. While it is true that man has used symbols to distinguish themselves since the dawn of time, this isn't "heraldry" in our sense.

True heraldry is defined by a systematic use of hereditary devices centered on a shield. The sources are quite clear that this system did not exist at the time of the Norman Conquest. When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, the knights on the Bayeux Tapestry carried shields with decorative crosses and dragons, but these were not hereditary family marks. A son did not bear the same device as his father.

Heraldry as we know it now appeared quite suddenly across Western Europe between 1135 and 1155. The catalyst for this explosion of color was a revolution in military technology: the closed helmet.



In the 11th century, a knight wore a helmet with a simple nose-guard (nasal), leaving part of his face visible. By the early 13th century, the "pot-helm" or "great helm" had developed, covering the entire head and face in steel. Suddenly, a leader on the battlefield became anonymous. To prevent the disaster of attacking one's own commander, knights began painting simple, bold geometric shapes or animals on their shields. To make the identification even clearer, they embroidered the same designs on the linen surcoat they wore over their chainmail to protect it from the sun and rain. This is the literal origin of the phrase "Coat of Arms."



Because a son wanted to be associated with the reputation and honor his father won in battle, he naturally adopted his father's device. Thus, the system became hereditary, and the science of Heraldry/Armory was born.

1.2. The Great Misconceptions

Before we can learn the rules of heraldry, we have to unlearn the myths. Popular culture and commercial "bucket shops" have generated a fog of errors that most people accept as fact.

The "Family Crest" Fallacy

This is the most common error in the book. You will constantly hear people say, "I'm looking for my family crest." In heraldry, the Crest is a specific object: it is the 3D device modelled on the top of the helmet, which sits above the shield.

The crest is only one part of the whole achievement. To call the whole design a "crest" is like calling a whole suit of clothes a "shirt." More importantly, not every coat of arms has a crest. In the early days, many knights bore shields but had no crests on their helms. While you cannot have a crest without a coat of arms, you can certainly have a coat of arms without a crest.

The "Surname" or "Family Arms" Myth

There is no such thing as a "Coat of Arms for the name of Smith." Arms are not granted to a surname; they are granted to a specific individual and his direct descendants.

Just because you share a surname with a person who has a coat of arms does not mean you are related to him, or that you have any right to use his arms. In Scotland, the rules are even stricter: only the head of the family may bear the undifferenced arms, and every younger son must continually change (or "difference") the design to show his specific place in the family tree. There may exist the Arms of a person with the surname Tamber, but that doesn't mean those are the arms of everyone with the surname Tamber.

The "Bucket Shop"

This leads us to the "Bucket Shop", a derogatory term for commercial firms that sell "family arms" on scrolls or plaques. These companies are all over the Internet and easy to find, they generally take a surname, look it up in a general registry (like *Burke's General Armory* or *Rietstap's*), and sell you the coat of arms belonging to the first family of that name they find. In fact, different websites may show different arms for the same "family name" because, well, there are multiple people with the same surname that have been granted arms over the centuries...so which one is really "yours?"

If your name is "Wright," they will sell you the arms of a Wright family. But if you are not descended from the specific Wright to whom those arms were granted, you have no more right to use them than you have to claim a stranger's house just because his name is also Wright.

Section II: The Anatomy of an Achievement

Now that we have cleared away the myths, we can look at what actually makes up a "Coat of Arms." As we established, the proper term for the whole collection of items, shield, helmet, crest, and supporters, is an Achievement.

You can think of an Achievement as a composite diagram of a knight and his equipment. It isn't just a logo; it is a representation of a person (or a corporate body acting as a person) dressed in their full heraldic uniform.

2.0. The Golden Rule: Authority vs. Assumption

Before dissecting the parts, we must draw a sharp line between two very different worlds of heraldry: the Regulated and the Unregulated.

The British System (Authority) In jurisdictions with an active legal heraldic framework, principally England, Scotland, Ireland, and Commonwealth realms like Canada and South Africa, you cannot simply "invent" or assume your own arms. It is a matter of both civil and heraldic law.

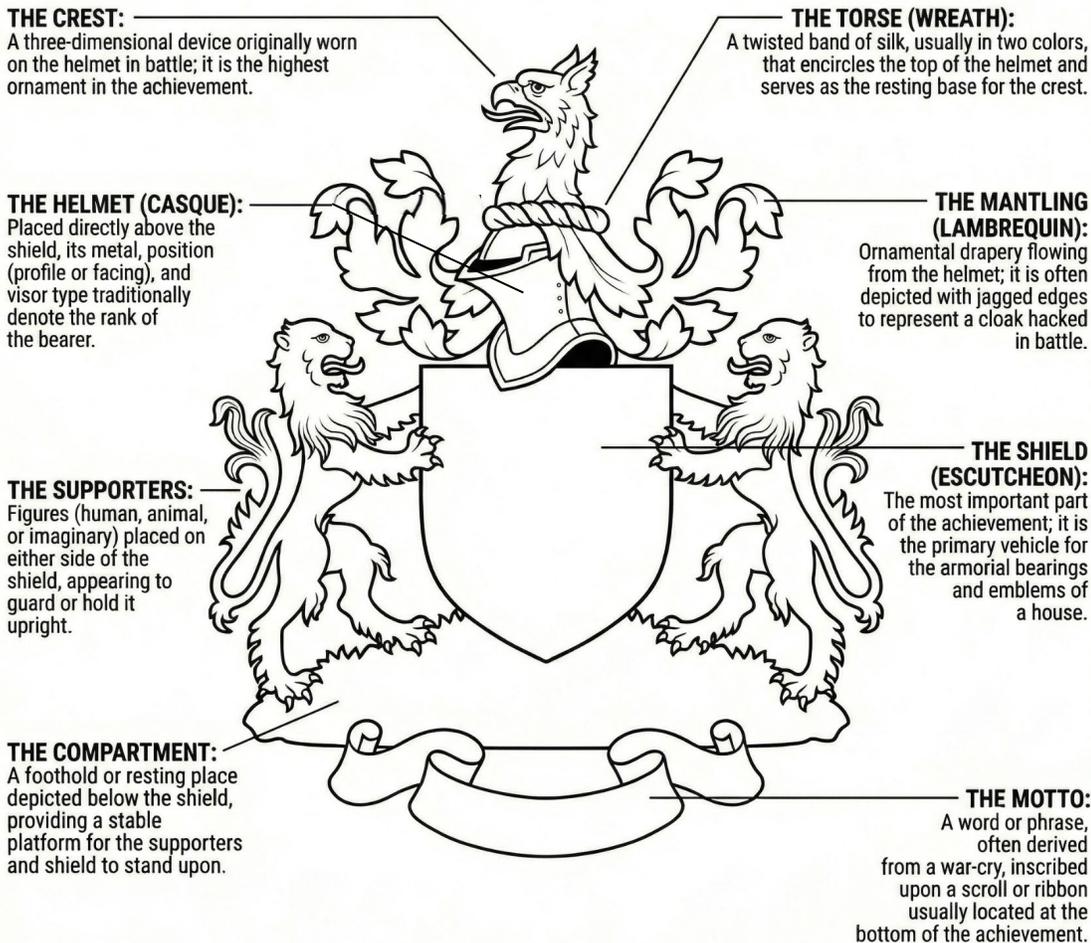
Granting: Arms must be granted to you by the Sovereign's delegated authority (the Kings of Arms at the College of Arms in London, the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh, or the Chief Herald in Dublin).

Legal Property: Once granted, these arms are a form of personal property, protected by law. In Scotland, usurping arms is actually a statutory offence involving fines and the confiscation of goods. In England, the Court of Chivalry, though rarely convened, still holds jurisdiction over the illegal use of arms.

The Rest of the World (Assumption) In most other countries (such as the United States, and largely in modern Europe outside of state heraldry), there is no government office that grants personal arms. Here, you are free to assume arms. That is, you may design a coat of arms and simply start using it.

The Caveat: While you *can* legally assume whatever you like in these countries, heraldic tradition suggests you *should* not assume symbols that imply a rank you do not hold. Just because no policeman will stop you from wearing a gold crown or using supporters, doing so is widely regarded by armorists as a breach of etiquette and taste.

Anatomy of a Heraldic Achievement



2.1. The Shield (Escutcheon)

The shield is the heart of the matter. You can have a shield without a crest, but you cannot have a crest without a shield. In the language of heraldry, the surface of the shield is called the Field, and the devices painted on it are called Charges.

Shape: The shape of the shield is purely a matter of artistic taste and varies by era and country. However, most heraldic artists prefer the classic "heater" shape (like the bottom of a flat-iron) used in the 13th and 14th centuries.

A Note for the Ladies: Traditionally, women (except for the Sovereign) do not use a shield, as they did not go to war. Instead, the arms of an unmarried woman or a widow are displayed on a Lozenge (a diamond shape).

Dexter and Sinister: In heraldry, Dexter means Right, and Sinister means Left. *However*, these directions are determined from the point of view of the person *holding* the shield, not the person looking at it. Therefore, the Dexter side is on the viewer's Left.

2.2. The Helmet (Helm) and Mantling

Resting on top of the shield is the Helmet.

In the British System: Strict rules often dictate the type of helmet based on rank. For example, a Gentleman uses a steel helm with a closed visor; a Knight uses a steel helm with an open visor; and Peers and Monarchs use specific gold or silver barred helmets.

In Other Countries: These rigid rules often do not apply or are ignored. In Germany, for instance, the type of helm distinguished the nobility from the burghers, but the complex British system of turning the helmet sideways or frontways to denote rank is unknown.

The Mantling (Lambrequin)

Flowing down from the helmet is a mass of swirling cloth called the **Mantling**. Its practical purpose during the Crusades was to catch the sun, preventing the metal helmet from overheating, and to deaden sword blows. In heraldic art, it is usually depicted in the two main colors of the arms (the "livery colors").



2.3. The Crest and Wreath (Torse)

The **Crest** is the object placed on the very top of the helmet. It was originally a 3D object made of light wood or leather, used to make a commander look taller and more imposing.

The Torse/Wreath: To secure the mantling (and later for jousting, to hide the ugly join where the crest attached to the helm), a twisted silken scarf was wrapped around it. This is the Wreath or Torse, usually shown as six twists of alternating color.

Usage: While you *can* use a crest on stationery, in a full heraldic achievement it must sit on a helmet. It should not float in mid-air, though this was a common artistic error in the Victorian era.

2.4. Supporters and Compartments

If you look at the Royal Arms, you will see a Lion and a Unicorn holding up the shield. These are Supporters.

The Prohibitions: In the regulated jurisdictions (UK, etc.), the right to use supporters is a jealously guarded privilege restricted to the highest ranks: Peers, Knights of the Garter/Thistle, Knights Grand Cross, and major corporations. An ordinary gentleman is *not* entitled to them.

The "Free" Zones: In countries without an heraldic authority (like the US), there is no law stopping you from designing arms with lions, eagles, or dragons holding up your shield. However, because supporters are historically associated with high nobility and peerage, assuming them when you are a private citizen is often viewed as "heraldic pretension" and generally discouraged.

Just because you *can* assume them doesn't mean you *should*. Most heraldic scholars advise Americans and others in unregulated jurisdictions to omit supporters to avoid the appearance of claiming a rank they do not possess. But at the end of the day, in these countries, it is a matter of personal taste, not law.

The Compartment: Supporters need something to stand on. This foothold is called the Compartment, usually drawn as a grassy mound or elaborate scrollwork.

2.5. Mottoes, Badges, and Crowns

Mottoes: A short phrase usually placed below the shield. In England, these are not strictly hereditary and can be changed at will. In Scotland, they are a fixed part of the grant and cannot be changed without permission.

Badges: Distinct from the crest, the Badge was the logo used for a lord's "team" or retainers. It is a separate emblem that can be used alone (like a button or a brooch).

Crowns and Coronets: In the British system, coronets are strictly reserved for the Peerage (Dukes, Earls, Barons) and the Royal Family.

Taste vs. Law: If you live in a republic, you *could* put a coronet on your arms. But unless you actually hold a title from a former monarchy, doing so is widely considered the height of bad taste, a false claim to nobility that heraldry is meant to identify, not fabricate.

Section III: The Language of Blazon

To the uninitiated, the language of heraldry sounds like a magical incantation or a garbled mix of French and English. It is called **Blazon**.

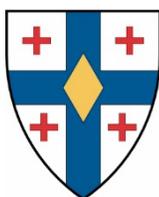
Blazon is simply a technical description of a coat of arms. Its purpose is scientific precision: a person should be able to read a written blazon and draw the coat of arms perfectly without ever having seen it. Because of this need for accuracy, the language follows a strict syntax, but once you understand the formula, it is remarkably logical.

3.1. The Rules of Description

The first rule of blazon is that you must describe the shield layer by layer, starting from the back and moving forward. You never describe a shield merely by what catches your eye first.

The Sequence

1. **The Field:** You always begin by naming the color of the background (the Field).
2. **The Principal Charge:** Next, you name the main object or central geometric shape (the Ordinary) that sits directly on the field. You describe what it is, what position it is in, and finally, what color it is.
3. **Secondary Charges:** You then describe objects that are placed around the principal charge (e.g., "between three stars").
4. **Charges on Charges:** Finally, if the central object itself has things painted on it, you describe those last.



So in this example, the blazon would be:

1. Argent,
2. a cross Azure
3. within four crosses Gules
4. charged with a lozenge Or.

The "No Tautology" Rule (avoid repetition of terms)

Classical heralds hated repeating a word. If the shield was red, and a lion on it was also red, they would not say "Red ... a lion Red." This gave rise to a code of substitution to avoid tautology:

- **"Of the first":** Means the colour of the first tincture mentioned (the field).
- **"Of the second" / "Of the last":** Means the colour of the second or last tincture mentioned.
- **"As many":** Used to avoid repeating a number (e.g., "between three roses and *as many* lilies").

Note: While this makes for elegant, poetic reading, it can be confusing. Modern heralds often relax this rule in favor of clarity, preferring to repeat a word like "Gules" rather than forcing the reader to count backward to find out what "of the third" means. "Gules", *I know, what does that mean?* I explain that below.

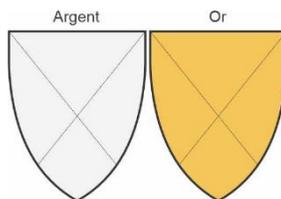
3.2. The Tinctures (The Colors Palette)

Heraldry uses a very limited, bold palette known as Tinctures. These are divided into three specific categories: Metals, Colours, and Furs.

The Metals

There are only two, representing the high-value materials of the medieval world:

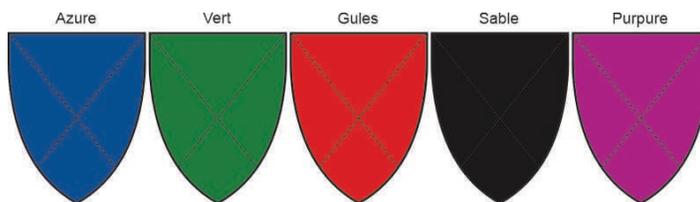
- **Or:** Gold. In painting, this is usually depicted as Yellow.
- **Argent:** Silver. In painting, this is almost always depicted as White.



The Colours

There are five standard colours. They are almost always known by their old Norman-French names:

- **Gules:** Red.
- **Azure:** Blue.
- **Sable:** Black.
- **Vert:** Green.
- **Purpure:** Purple. (This is much rarer than the others).



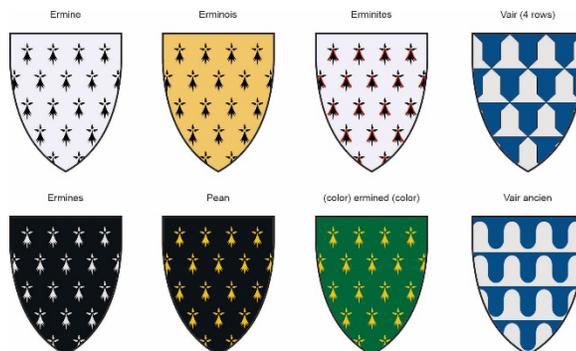
Note: You may encounter "Stains" like *Tenne* (orange) or *Sanguine* (blood-red), or the sky-blue *Bleu Celeste*, but these are later inventions or rarities and not part of the ancient, standard palette.

The Furs

These are patterns representing the actual animal pelts used to line cloaks and mantles.

Ermine: Represents the winter coat of the stoat. It is white with a pattern of black spots (representing the black-tipped tails). There are variations, such as *Ermines* (black with white spots) and *Erminois* (gold with black spots).

Vair: Represents the skin of the squirrel (blue-grey on the back, white on the belly). It is depicted as a pattern of interlocking blue and white bell-shapes or cup-shapes.



Proper

If an object is shown in its natural, realistic colors (like a tree with a brown trunk and green leaves, or a fox in its natural russet), it is described as Proper.

3.3. The First Rule of Tincture

This is the most important rule in heraldry, and the one most frequently broken by amateurs. It is a rule of contrast and visibility, born on the battlefield. The reason for this rule is simple, imagine yourself on a medieval battlefield and trying to get instructions quickly by looking at your boss, but he is wearing a surcoat that resembles others and with a poorly visible stripe. That is why high visual contrast was needed for quick identification, thus the no color on color, or metal on metal.



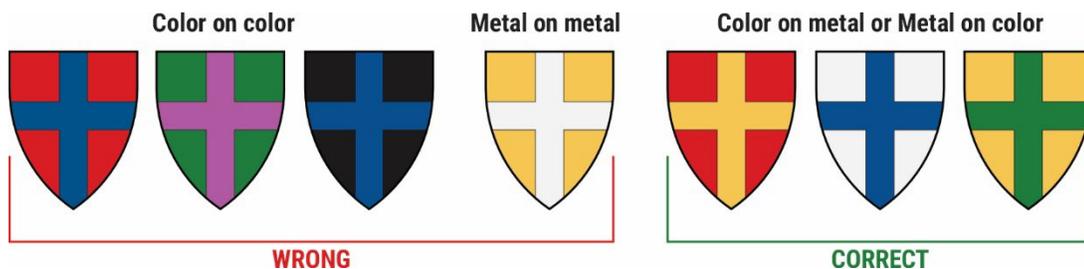
Who is the Baron of Idelsey and who is the Earl of Twomgarry?



Which Knights are easier to identify quickly?

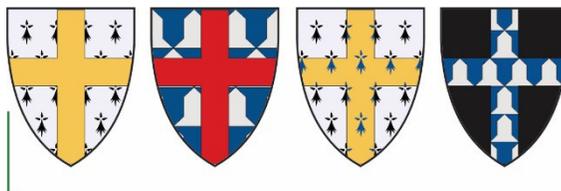
The Rule: You may never place a Colour on a Colour, or a Metal on a Metal.

If your shield is Blue (Colour), you cannot put a Red (Colour) lion on it; the low contrast would make it invisible at a distance. You must put a Gold or Silver (Metal) lion on it. Conversely, if your shield is White (Metal), you cannot put a Yellow (Metal) stripe on it; you must use a Colour (Red, Blue, Black, etc.).



The Exceptions:

- **Furs:** The furs (Ermine and Vair) are considered or neutral. You can put a fur on a color, or a color on a fur.
- **Proper:** An object blazoned "Proper" is also considered neutral.



ALLOWED (but rare)

Composite Charges: If a lion is checkered Gold and Red, it consists of both metal and color, so it can technically be placed on any background. There is one famous, deliberate violation of this rule in history: the Arms of Jerusalem (Gold crosses on a Silver field). This was done intentionally to show that the Kingdom of Jerusalem was so holy it was above the laws of men; however, practically everywhere else, the rule is strictly observed. Here is the revised draft for Section IV of the primer, expanded to include the infinite variety of charges, the nature of chimerical beasts, and the inclusion of modern custom symbols.

Section IV: The Charges

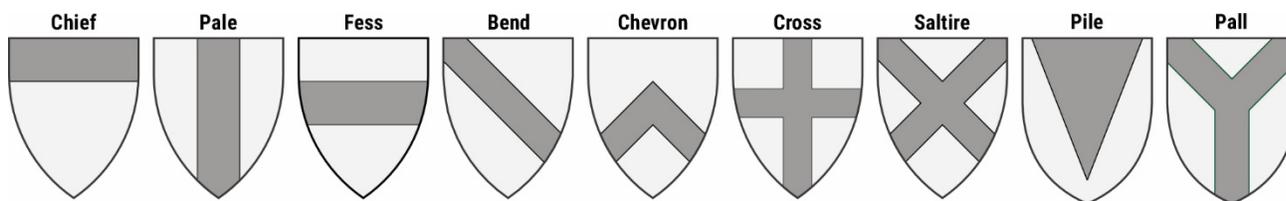
Having prepared the shield and selected the colors, we now populate the field with the symbols that identify the bearer. These symbols are known as Charges. While the early knights mostly stuck to bold geometric shapes and fierce predators, the heraldic catalog has expanded to include "almost every object on the earth or in the heavens or under the sea".

To bring order to this vast array, armorists divide charges into three main groups: the Ordinaries (simple geometric shapes), the Sub-Ordinaries (lesser geometric shapes), and Common Charges (everything else, animate, inanimate, or monstrosities).

4.1. The Ordinaries

These are the "Honourable Ordinaries," the oldest and most dignified charges in heraldry. They are simple, bold, straight-lined shapes that likely originated from the structural bands used to strengthen a physical shield.

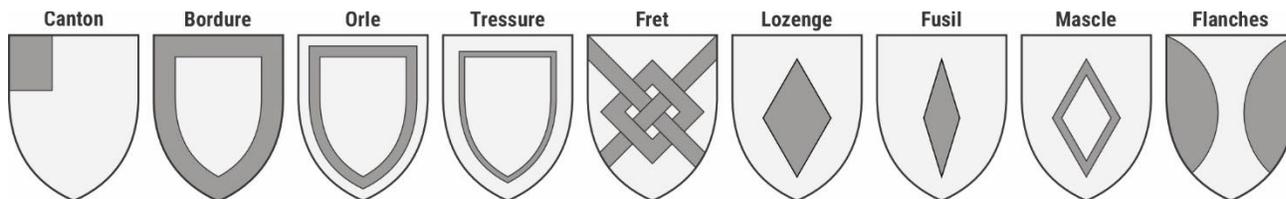
- **The Chief:** A broad horizontal band occupying the top third of the shield.
- **The Pale:** A vertical band running down the center of the shield.
- **The Fess:** A horizontal band running across the center of the shield.
- **The Bend:** A diagonal band running from the dexter chief (top left) to the sinister base (bottom right).
- **The Chevron:** An inverted V-shape, like the rafters of a house roof.
- **The Cross:** The huge preponderance of this charge is owed to the Crusades; it unites the Pale and the Fess.
- **The Saltire:** A diagonal cross, or St. Andrew's Cross.
- **The Pile:** A wedge-shape issuing from the top of the shield and pointing downwards.
- **The Pall (or Pairel):** A Y-shaped figure, representing an ecclesiastical vestment.



4.2. The Sub-Ordinaries

These are geometric charges of slightly less importance than the Ordinaries, and writers often disagree on which shapes belong in this category.

- **The Canton:** A square placed in the upper dexter corner. It is smaller than a Quarter and often covers other charges.
- **The Bordure:** A border running around the entire edge of the shield.
- **The Orle:** An inner border that does not touch the edges of the shield.
- **The Tressure:** A narrow Orle, usually double and decorated with fleurs-de-lis (as in the Royal Arms of Scotland).
- **The Fret:** A figure resembling a mascle (hollow diamond) interlaced with a saltire.
- **The Lozenge, Fusil, and Mascle:** Variations of the diamond shape. The *Lozenge* is a solid diamond; the *Fusil* is elongated; the *Mascle* is voided (hollowed out).
- **The Flanches:** Curved "bites" taken out of each side of the shield.



4.3. Animated Charges

When we move to living creatures, the stylized art of heraldry takes over. Animals are drawn and stylized to look fierce and active; they are symbols of power, not photographs. There are as many possible animal charges as there are real animals in nature.

- **The Lion:** The "King of Beasts" is the most popular animal. It must be described by its *attitude* (pose), such as *Rampant* (fighting), *Passant* (walking), or *Sejant* (sitting).
- **The Eagle:** The "King of Birds," usually depicted *Displayed* (wings spread).
- **The Heraldic Tyger:** Distinct from the "Bengal Tiger" of nature, this creature has a wolf-like body, a beak, and a tuft of hair on the nose.

4.4. Monsters and Chimeras

Heraldry is a zoo for the mythological. Early heralds, often working from the faulty descriptions and the imagination of travelers, created "misbegotten hybrids" by combining parts of known animals to create new, symbolic monsters. These are often broadly termed Chimerical figures, creatures compounded of seemingly incongruous elements.

- **The Chimera:** While "chimerical" is a general term, the specific *Chimera* is a monster with the head and breast of a woman, the forepaws of a lion, the body of a goat, and the hind-legs and tail of a dragon or griffin.
- **The Griffin:** The forepart of an eagle (with ears) and the hindpart of a lion.
- **The Dragon:** A four-legged reptile with bat wings and a barbed tail.
- **The Wyvern:** Often confused with the dragon, but strictly having only *two* legs and a serpentine tail.
- **The Cockatrice:** A wyvern with a rooster's head.
- **The Sea-Lion:** A lion's head and upper body conjoined to the tail of a fish.
- **The Male Griffin:** A wingless griffin adorned with spikes or rays of gold issuing from its body.

These combinations are limitless; heralds have created the *Lion-Dragon*, the *Sea-Stag*, and even the *Allocamelus* (head of an donkey, body of a camel).

4.5. The Infinite Scope (Custom Charges)

There is a common misconception that you can only use "medieval" objects in heraldry. This is false. The list of charges is practically infinite. The rule is simple: **Anything that can be depicted can be a charge.**

While heralds generally try to steer clients toward traditional symbolism, modern and industrial objects have frequently been granted when appropriate:

Scientific: Sir William Herschel bore a "40-foot reflecting telescope" on his shield. A "DNA double helix" was granted in 1966, and the "atom" has appeared in the arms of electronic societies.

Industrial: There are grants featuring steam locomotives, sewing machines, and battleships.

Landscape: In the 18th century, "Landscape Heraldry" became popular, depicting specific fortresses or naval battles (like the Battle of the Nile) realistically on the shield, though this is now considered a stylistic degradation.

The Golden Rule for New Charges

Regardless of whether you are using a 12th-century lion or a 21st-century microchip, the Basic Rules still apply. The object must be stylized to fit the space, it must be recognizable in silhouette, and it must obey the Rule of Tincture (no metal on metal, no color on color). A red locomotive cannot be placed on a blue shield; it must be gold or silver to ensure it is visible at a distance.