Heraldry for non-Heralds
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It has come up recently in the on-line discussion list that heralds use a language that is very convoluted and hard for non-heralds to translate. So, as a non-herald, I decided to present a quick and dirty guide to what “heraldese” is all about. For those of you who ARE heralds, just move along – nothing of interest here for you to read…

Heraldese is about trying to describe pictures. The theory is that in the Middle Ages, people would have some sort of design or emblem to describe them (like the Nike Swoosh, or the Golden Arches), a symbol that when you saw it you would think of that person or family. Since in many cases it might be easier to have a print description of these than a drawn picture (after all, trying to index them by picture is very difficult, and to keep them reasonably unique, you need to be able to file all the similar ones together so they can be easily compared – heralds call this comparison “conflict checking”).

This description (called a “Blazen”) is in a specific format, using terms that rarely vary in their traditional meaning (which has a lot to do with why they are in medieval French).

The design or emblem is called a “Device”. There are other terms that are used as though they mean the same thing, but don’t exactly, such as “Arms” or “Badge”. Arms are a Device that has been earned by your rank (on other words, you have an AoA), and that’s been registered with the College of Arms. You can register a device without an AoA, but it’s not your Arms until you have been Awarded Arms. It might be best if you think of it as Arms are an award, the Device is the thing on the Arms. A Badge on the other hand, is not an award, it’s a simple Device that’s used to just brand your property.

When you see a Blazon, the first thing described is the background (or “Field”). It will be a color, a metal, or a fur (these are collectively called “Tinctures” which is not a term I have heard often in the SCA). So “Vert, a Pumpkin” would be a green background with a pumpkin on it. There are four basic colors: Black (Sable), Red (Gules), Green (Vert) and Blue (Azure). There are two basic metals: Yellow or Gold (Or), and White or Silver (Argent). If you see anything else, it’s almost certainly a “Fur” which means it’s one of those convoluted messes of colors or weird spots.

Next is the “Ordinary” which means it’s the way the background is divided up. Sometimes the Ordinary will come first, usually with a “Per” or “on a” as the first word, but usually not. There are about 36 fields and subfields, with even more variations, but the more popular ones are a Pale (a fat line up the middle), Pile (a triangle that emerges from the edge), Bend (a fat diagonal line going either right or left – a “bend sinister” is just a diagonal line moving to the left), Saltire (a fat X), Chevron (a fat V), a Pall (a fat Y). “Per something” means that the ordinary is really just a field divisions, not fat line. For example: “Azure, a bend Vert, a pumpkin” is really just a blue field with a big fat green diagonal line going to the right, with a pumpkin on it. While “Per bend, azure and vert, a pumpkin” is a field divided by a diagonal line going to the right, blue on top, and
green on the bottom, with a pumpkin on it. You’ll notice that things are described object then color. That’s a French thing – like Baton Rouge, Red stick.

The pumpkin in the examples above is the “Primary” or the main charge of the device. It’s the main thing of the device. After the primary come more specific details for the picture, but to keep this short, I’ll leave this here.