

# A beginner's guide to designing heraldry

## What is a heraldic device?

A heraldic device (or "Coat of Arms" if you have an Award of Arms) is a bit like a personal logo. You can paint it on your shield, sew it on your garb or display it on a banner to show that you are at an event. Registering your device ensures that it is unique and recognised as yours in the entire SCA, and can be painted on a scroll if you receive an award.

Groups like shires, baronies and kingdoms also have heraldry. At court, a herald may wear a tabard bearing the arms of the kingdom to show that they are speaking for the Crown.

A common misconception is that your device should tell people what you do in the SCA, e.g. someone with a Scottish persona should have a thistle, or an archer should have arrows, but this is not how heraldry worked in period. Often it was a reference or pun on the owner's name, known as a "cant", such as the arms of the Spanish provinces of Castile and León which feature a castle and a lion.

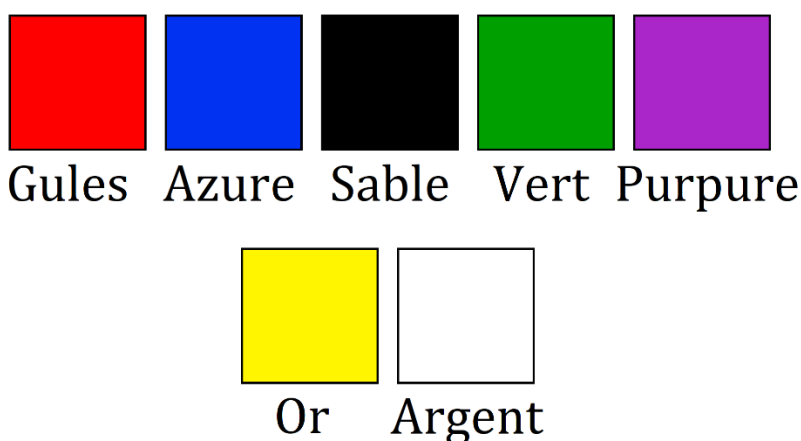
Heraldry also varied from region to region and changed over time. If you prefer to base your persona on a particular time and place, you may want to start by looking at period examples of heraldry from that culture. Alternatively, you can simply design something you like the look of.

## The Field

The background layer of a heraldic device is called the field. This can be plain, patterned or divided.

## Tinctures

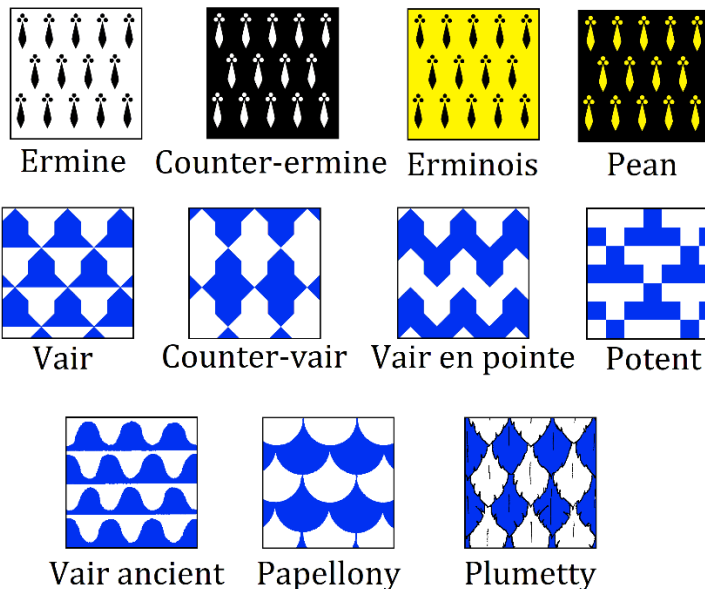
Colours in heraldry are known as tinctures. These are divided into two groups: the colours and the metals.



Or and argent are the metals, representing gold and silver. You can use metallic shades for these when using your heraldry after it is registered, but when submitting your registration they should be left as plain yellow and white for the sake of clarity. All tinctures should be bold, bright shades. Often colour printers don't produce them well.

## Furs

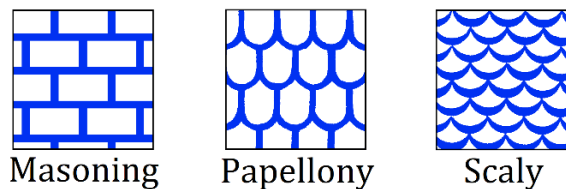
Furs can be a combination of any colour and any metal. There are two main categories; ermine-type furs and vair-type furs. Ermine-type furs are metals or colours depending on their background tincture, while vair-type furs are neutral. Ermine spots can be drawn in a variety of styles.



These are stylised depictions of animal furs used in high-status clothing. Ermine is a weasel in its winter coat, and vair is a type of squirrel.

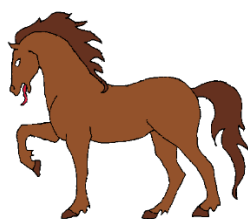
## Field Treatments

Field treatments must also be a colour and a metal.



## Proper

If an animal, plant or object has a well-known natural colour scheme, this may be used instead of a heraldic tincture. This can allow the use of colours like brown, pink or orange, or to show an animal with its natural markings.



A brown horse proper



A fox proper



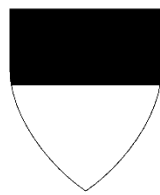
An orange tree proper

## Field Divisions

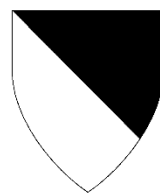
Simple field divisions:



Per pale



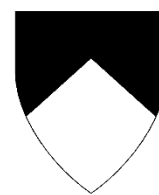
Per fess



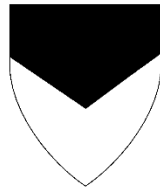
Per bend



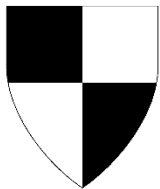
Per bend sinister



Per chevron



Per chevron inverted



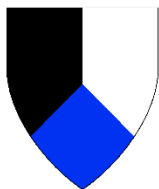
Quarterly



Per saltire

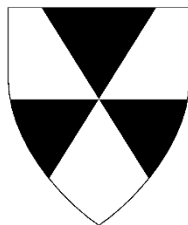


Per pall

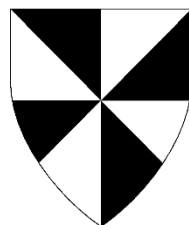


Per pall inverted

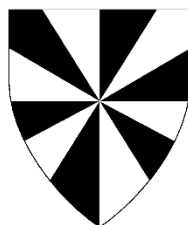
Complex field divisions:



Gyronny of 6



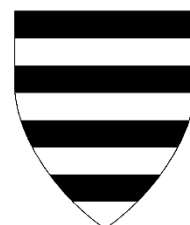
Gyronny of 8



Gyronny of 12



Paly



Barry



Bendy



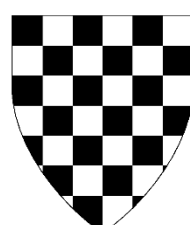
Bendy sinister



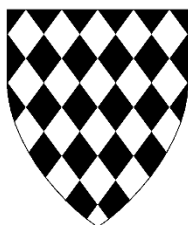
Chevronelly



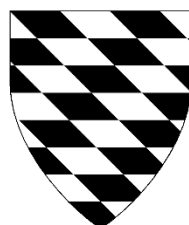
Chevronelly inverted



Chequy



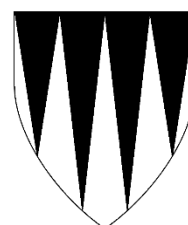
Lozengy



Barry bendy



Paly bendy



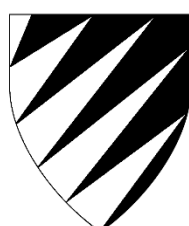
Pily



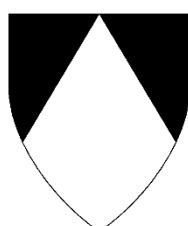
Pily barry



Pily bendy



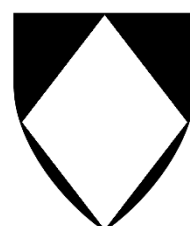
Pily bendy sinister



Chapé



Chaussé



Vêtu

## Charges

Anything that goes on top of the field is known as a charge. These can be animals (real or mythical), people, plants, objects or geometric shapes and symbols. Charges can sit on the field or on top of other charges, either entirely or overlapping onto the field on either side. Charges can also be divided, just like the field. Animate charges (animals or people) can "maintain" (hold) other charges.

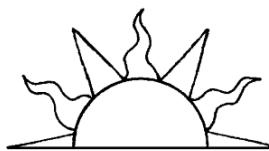


The coat of arms of Norway feature a lion maintaining an axe.

Many charges can be cut in half, with only the front or top half showing.



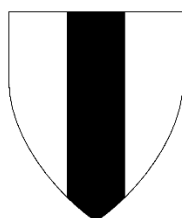
A demi-bear



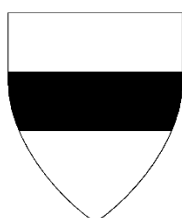
A demi-sun

Ordinaries are a group of charges that go right to the edges of the field. Many of them follow the same lines as the field divisions, and have similar names.

Central Ordinaries:



Pale



Fess



Bend



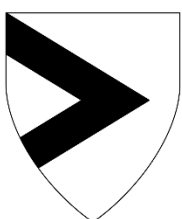
Bend sinister



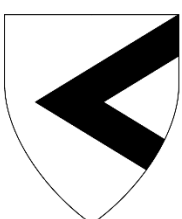
Chevron



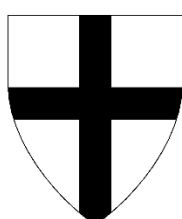
Chevron inverted



Chevron couched from dexter



Chevron couched from sinister



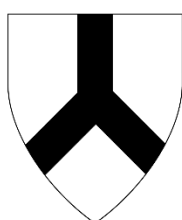
Cross



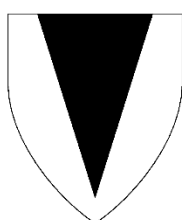
Saltire



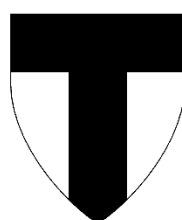
Palle



Palle inverted

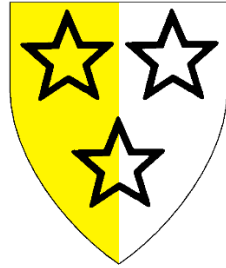


Pile

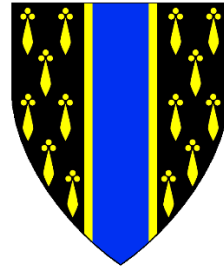


Chief-pale

Central ordinaries (except for the chief-pale) and very simple charges like stars, hearts and geometric shapes can be voided (hollow) or fimbriated (outlined).

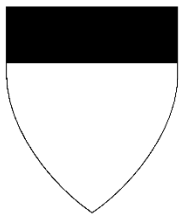


Per pale Or and argent,  
three mullets voided sable

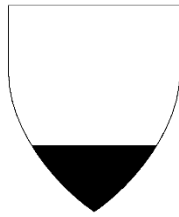


Pean, a pale azure fimbriated Or

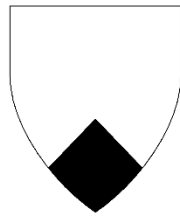
Peripheral ordinaries:



Chief



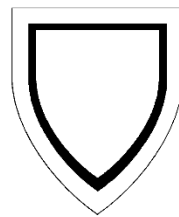
Base



Point pointed



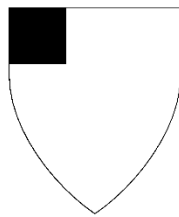
Bordure



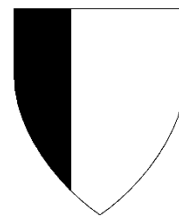
Orle



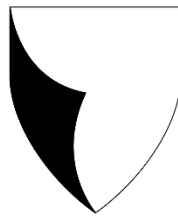
Flanches



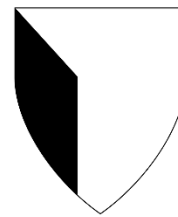
Canton



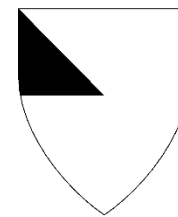
Tierce



Gore



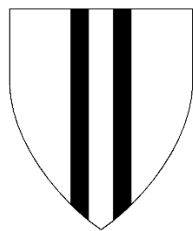
Gusset



Gyron

### Diminutives and cotising

Some ordinaries can occur as multiple smaller versions known as diminutives.



Two pallets

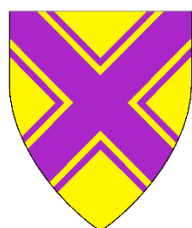


Three bendlets

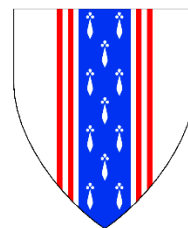


A double tressure  
(diminutive of the orle)

Cotises are thinner “racing stripe” lines that go to either side of a central ordinary. They can be the same tincture as the ordinary or a different one.



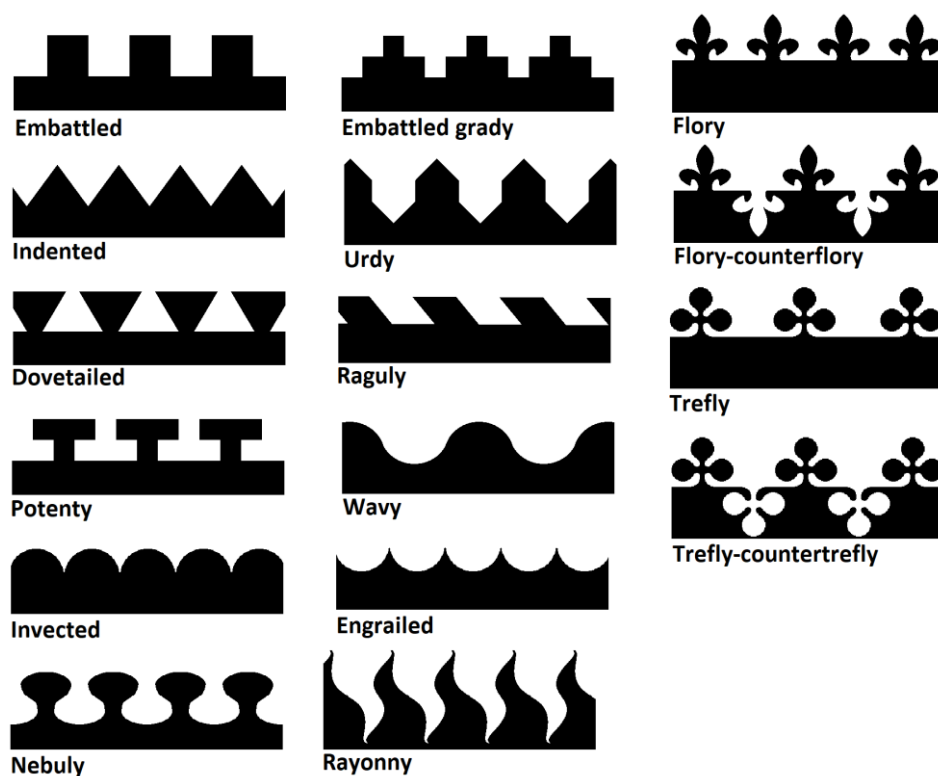
Or, a saltire cotised purple



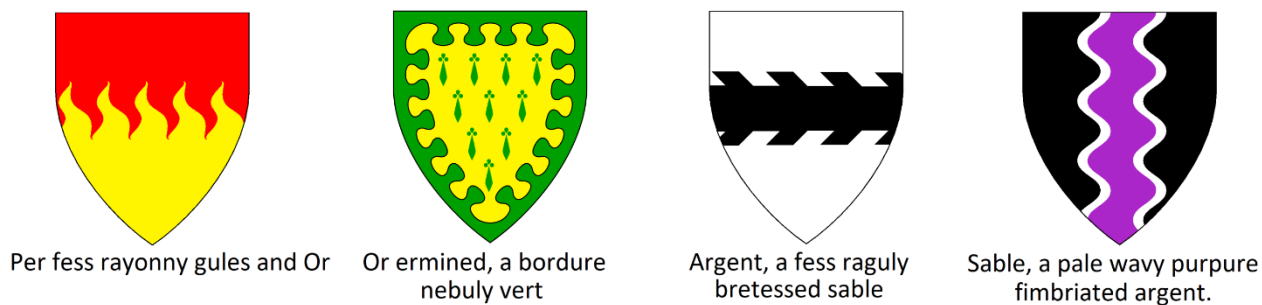
Argent, a pale azure ermined argent  
doubly cotised gules

## Complex lines

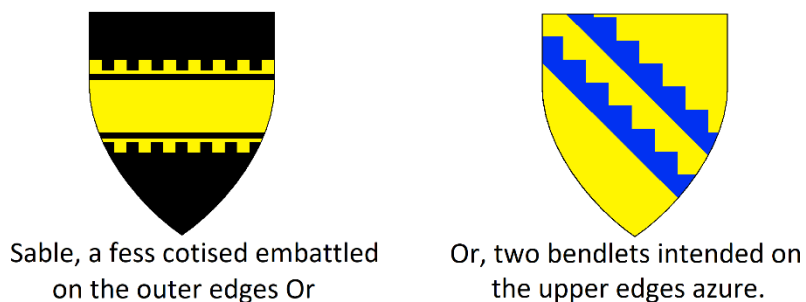
The lines of field divisions and the edges of ordinaries may be plain or complex. These are the main complex line styles in heraldry:



On a central ordinary, the shapes of the complex line can be offset or mirrored (bretessed).



Ordinaries that have an upper and lower edge can have a complex line on both edges or just one. Cotises can have a different line style to their ordinary.



This is not a complete list. There are many other line styles that can only be applied to certain ordinaries or lines of division.

## Contrast

Charges must have good contrast with whatever is underneath them. This means they cannot be entirely colour on colour or metal on metal. Charges that are “proper” must still follow the rules of contrast, and are considered colours or metals depending on how dark or light they are.

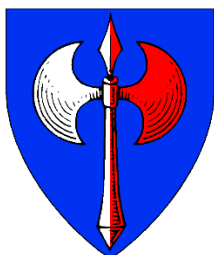
A charge which is “overall”, sitting partly on another charge and partly on the field, should have good contrast with the field.



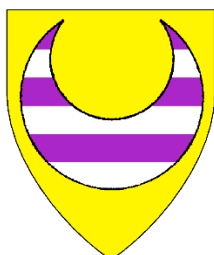
Or, a fess vert and overall an anchor azure

Simple field divisions may have low contrast (two metals or two colours). Anything more complex than quarterly or per saltire (which divide the field into four sections) must have good contrast. Per pall and per pall inverted must have one odd tincture out - two colours and a metal or two metals and a colour. A field division with a complex line is usually allowed to have low contrast, but certain combinations (such as sable with azure or purple) may make the line style too hard to identify.

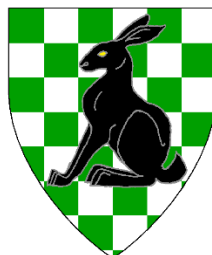
When a field or charge is equally divided into metal and colour, it is neutral. These may be combined with either metals or colours, as long as the field and charge don't share a tincture.



Azure, a double-bitted axe per pale argent and gules



Or, a crescent barry purple and argent



Chequy vert and argent, a hare sable



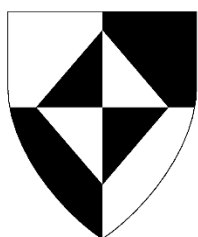
Per bend Or and sable, a dragon's wing vert

It is also possible to put a neutral charge on a neutral field, although this may lead to problems with identifiability.

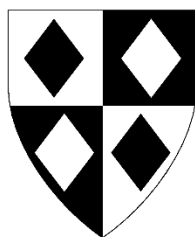
## **Counterchanging**

Counterchanging involves a divided field with charges changing tincture across the dividing line. This can be one or a few charges split in half over the dividing line, or multiple charges each sitting entirely on one segment of the field. If charges are split by the dividing line, it must be a simple field division.

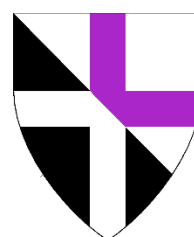
Counterchanging typically uses the field tinctures, but can also use tinctures that aren't part of the field.



Quarterly argent and sable, a lozenge counterchanged



Quarterly argent and sable, four lozenges counterchanged



Per bend argent and sable, a cross counterchanged purpure and argent

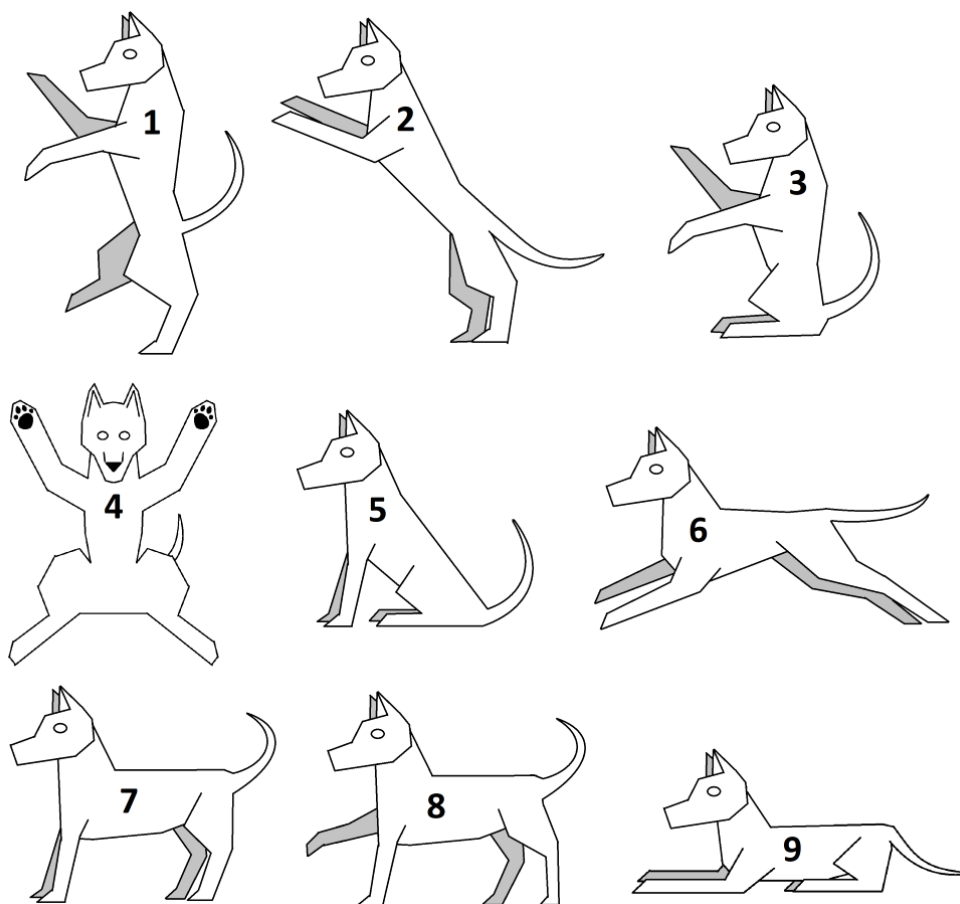
## Postures

Animate charges in heraldry must be in one of the recognised postures. These vary depending on what type of creature it is.

All birds and beasts shown in profile may also have their heads turned to face the viewer (guardant) or to look behind them (reguardant). The whole animal can also be turned around to face "to sinister", although this was quite rare in period heraldry.

### Four-footed beasts

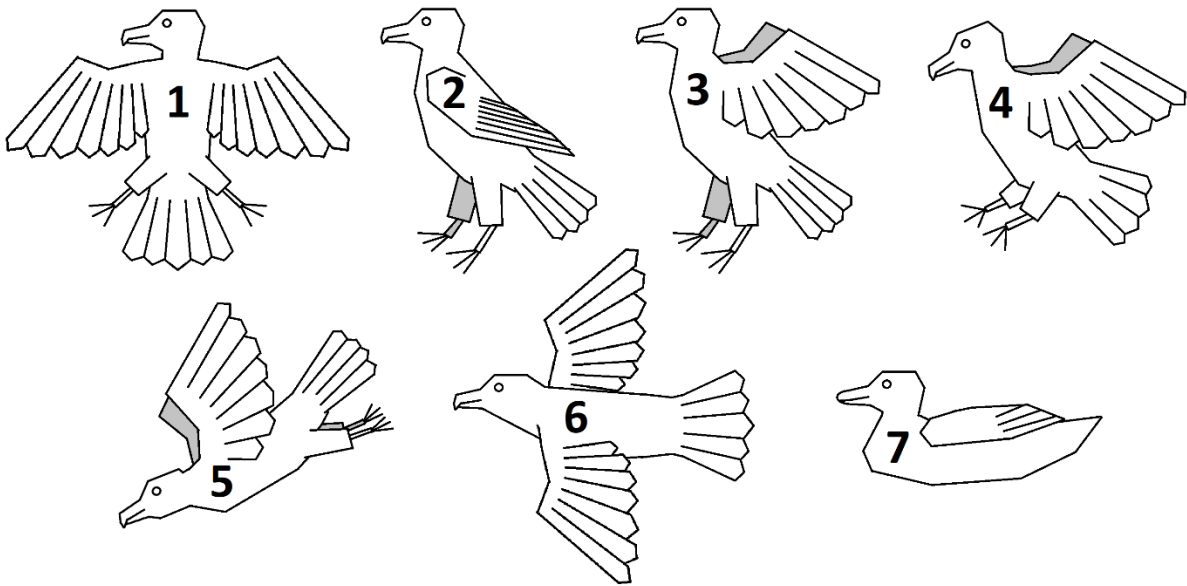
1. Rampant - Rearing, with three feet in the air.
2. Salient - Leaping, with hind feet on the ground and fore-feet in the air.
3. Sejant erect - Sitting on haunches with the fore-feet raised.
4. Sejant erect affronty - Viewed from the front, sitting on haunches with the fore-feet in the air. In period heraldry this was only used for lions.
5. Sejant - Sitting.
6. Courant - Running, with all feet off the ground.
7. Statant - Standing on all fours.
8. Passant - Walking, with one fore-foot raised.
9. Couchant - Lying down like a Sphinx.





## Birds

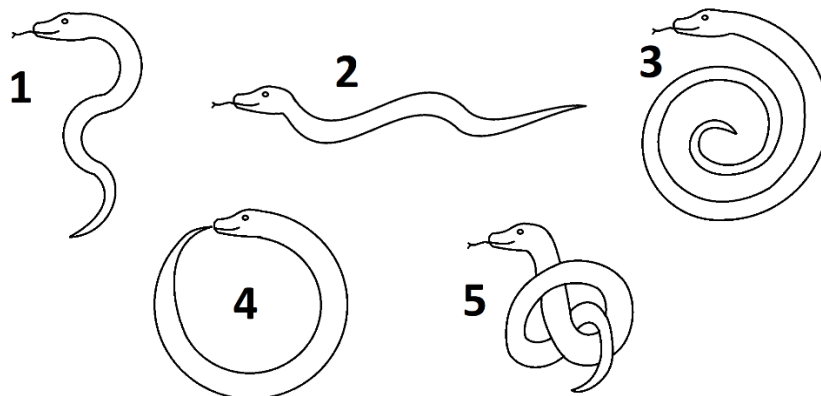
1. Displayed - Viewed from the front with wings and legs extended. In period, this posture was almost exclusively used for eagles.
2. Close - Standing with wings folded.
3. Rising - Standing on the ground with wings raised, as if about to take flight.
4. Striking - A variant of rising, with the feet raised as if to grab prey.
5. Stooping - Diving, with the head down and tail up.
6. Volant - Flying, with the feet hidden.
7. Naiant - A swimming posture used for water-birds. Similar to close but without the legs showing.



Wings may be depicted with the wing-tips up (elevated) or down (inverted). This is treated as artistic licence, and if you have a winged creature on your device you don't need to always draw the wings the same way.

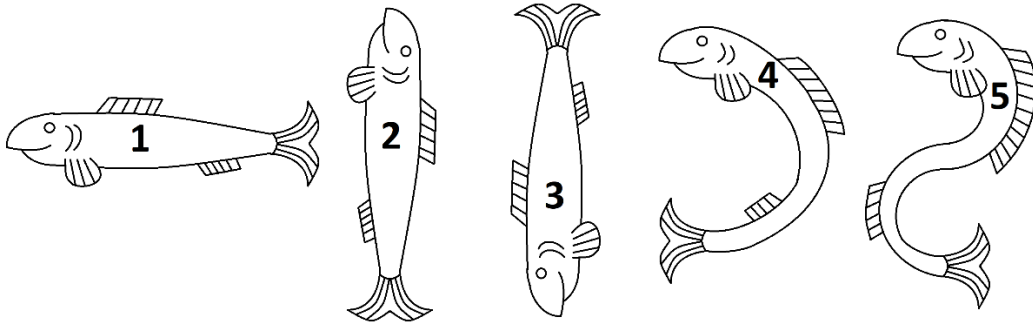
## Serpents

1. Erect - An upright pose, often with pronounced curves.
2. Glissant - Slithering along.
3. Involved - Coiled in a spiral.
4. In annulo - Coiled in a circle. May be biting its own tail.
5. Nowed - Tied in a loose knot. There are a variety of different knot shapes that can be used.



## Fish

1. Naiant - Horizontal swimming posture.
2. Haurient - As with naiant, but vertical with the head upwards.
3. Urinant - As with naiant, but vertical with the head downwards.
4. Embowed - Curved in a backwards C shape.
5. Embowed-counterembowed - Curved in a backwards S shape.

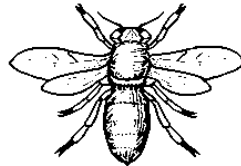


## Humanoids

Humans and human-shaped monsters have few postures. They are most often shown standing from the front, though they may also be viewed in profile. Other postures include kneeling or riding an animal.

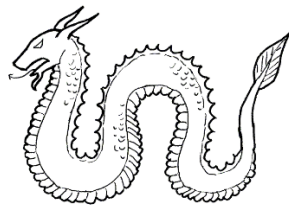
## Bugs, reptiles and amphibians

These are usually shown in a birds-eye view called "tergient". A few types, such as snails and crickets, are shown in profile instead. Reptiles and amphibians may also use the postures for four-footed beasts.

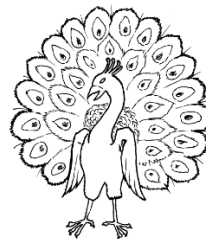


A bee tergient

Some animals have unique postures that aren't used by any other creature.



A sea serpent ondoyant



A peacock in his pride

When a head or limb is being used as a charge, the bottom edge may be couped (flat or slightly curved) or erased (torn, with long curving "jags"). If a head is shown from the front, it may also be "cabossed" with no neck showing.



A stag's head  
coupé



A raven's head  
erased



A ram's head  
cabossed

## Hybrid monsters

Hybrid monsters are common in heraldry. In addition to the named period examples, like griffins and centaurs, you can make up your own by combining bits of different creatures, e.g. a monster with the forequarters of a wolf, hindquarters of a horse and the horns of a goat. All of the component animals of your monster should be clearly identifiable.

You can also add wings to any creature and many inanimate objects, or create a "sea-beast" by replacing the hindquarters with a fish tail. Wings and fish tails can be a different tincture from the rest of the beast.



A bat-winged boar



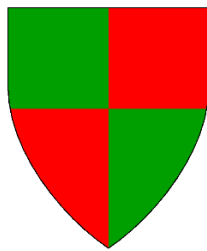
A sea-unicorn



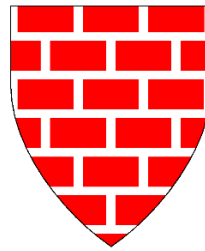
A winged sea-rabbit

## Field-primary devices

Although most devices have charges, it is possible to register a design without any. A device cannot consist of a single tincture or fur, but a design with only a field division or field treatment is possible.



Quarterly vert and gules



Gules masoned argent

## Not sure what to choose?

A good place to start is by looking at period rolls of arms from a time and place that interests you. Many period rolls of arms have been digitized and are accessible online. An extensive list can be found here: [http://www.yehudaheraldry.com/rolls/index.php/roll\\_c/rolls](http://www.yehudaheraldry.com/rolls/index.php/roll_c/rolls)

Other useful sites include the Pictorial Dictionary of Heraldry and the Book of Traceable Heraldic Art. These are resources specifically for SCA heraldry, and are the source of many of the images in this guide:

<http://mistholme.com/pictorial-dictionary-of-heraldry/>

<http://heraldicart.org/>

Some books or websites may contain lists of meanings applied to the various tinctures, charges and field divisions. These are post-period or modern, and aren't a good source of info for SCA-period heraldry.

Consider how complex you want your heraldry to be. The best design is something that will be used, so consider what you are prepared to paint, draw or sew. If you're not keen on sewing complex shapes like animals, there are some very nice designs that can be made with purely geometric shapes.

Lastly, make sure you are happy with your choice before sending it in to be registered. Registration takes at least 6 months, often longer, so it is worth taking some time to consider your design. It's a good idea to put it somewhere you will see it often, like printing it out and sticking it on the fridge or using it as your phone wallpaper. If you still like how it looks after a week or so, you're ready to register.

## **Conflict checking**

To be registered, a new device has to be checked that it doesn't conflict with any registered SCA device or certain important non-SCA uses of heraldry, like national flags or famous coats of arms. Get a herald to do this for you! It is a difficult skill to learn, and there is no need unless you are interested in becoming a herald yourself.

### **My preferred design has conflicts. What now?**

If the conflict is with another SCA device, it may be possible to get permission to conflict. You will need to find the owner of the conflicting device and ask if they would be willing to write a letter of permission to conflict. The SCA has been registering heraldry for 50 years, so getting in contact with the owner of a device may not be possible.

If the conflict is with a piece of non-SCA heraldry, getting permission to conflict is not possible.

Otherwise, consider the following changes you could make to your design:

- Changing a tincture or adding a division to the field or a charge.
- Changing the number of charges
- Changing the posture or orientation of charges
- Adding additional charges
- Changing from a regular beast to a winged, sea- or demi- beast, or a beast's head.

When registering your own heraldry, you can choose to write a letter of *blanket* permission to conflict. This means anyone wanting to register their own device only needs one point of difference from yours, rather than the usual two. Consider doing this, especially if you register a very simple design.

## **Individually Attested Patterns**

Want something that breaks the rules? It *may* be possible using an Individually Attested Pattern (IAP). This involves documenting your chosen design to a particular time and place. You will need to find at least three examples of period devices that display the same style as yours, and one example of each particular feature on your device. The more complex your design, the harder it will be to document it.

## **Badges**

As well as your main device, you can register badges. Badges follow all the same rules as devices, with the exception that they can be fieldless. If a badge has no field, it can't use peripheral ordinaries or voided charges and if more than one charge is used the charges must touch one another. A fieldless badge may be displayed on any kind of background.

Badges are usually simple designs used to mark your belongings. They can also be used as devices for alternate personas.

## **Author's note**

This guide covers the basics of heraldry, but there is much more out there and exceptions to many of the rules stated here. If you see something that isn't here, don't assume it can't be done! Always feel free to talk to a herald about your ideas.

- Sigrith parði

