

Bearing Arms in Albion

(*Shaun Hately*)

My own Dragon Warriors games have long been enhanced by the use of heraldry. Describing how this occurs, and especially outlining all the laws and traditions of heraldry in my (or any version) of Albion and Legend goes beyond the possible scope of this article – I have literally written a [book on heraldry in roleplaying games](#) – but here I will outline the process involved in gaining the right to own and bear a Coat of Arms – a heraldic achievement – in Albion. Similar processes occur in most of the nations north of the Coradian Sea and in the Lands of the Crusades – in many, formal rules on these matters are more developed than in Albion.

Warriors have long worn personal symbols on their shields and clothing for entirely practical reasons – to allow for identification in battle. Likewise, leaders have often required those fighting under their command to wear their badge for the same reason. But it is only in the last three decades that a more formal and regulated approach to such matters has taken hold in Albion. The King's Heralds, based from the College of Arms in Ongus, have the legal authority to decide who is allowed to have a Coat of Arms, and precisely what that Coat of Arms should be. At the same time, bearing a Coat of Arms authorised by the College has become a considerable symbol of prestige that goes beyond those who regularly wear armour and fight in battles or tourneys – wealthy merchants, in particular, seek this distinction as a mark and recognition of the fact that they are considered gentleman and ladies of quality, to be respected. The Guilds seek the distinction. So do 'Free Cities', which acknowledge no lord but the King. Even the Church, its orders, and its leaders have found value in such recognition as a symbol and acknowledgement that they have civil and secular authority that goes beyond their religious powers. And the College of Arms is prepared to assist in all of this – for a price.

For the traditional Knight, this is a reasonably simple process – all knights have both the right and duty to have a Coat of Arms, and the College of Heraldry will assist in this for a fee based on the knight's wealth – the truly impoverished will pay nothing. The knight simply sits down with a herald – as well as being found at the College, King's Heralds travel around the country to provide this service – and negotiates their chosen coat of arms with that Herald. While a Herald will insist that a coat of arms follows the rules of heraldry, they will pay very real attention to the desires of a knight, and wherever possible will incorporate any badges that the knight or their ancestors have used in the past – the knight whose personal badge is a bear, will likely find a bear on his new coat of arms, it will just now be rendered in appropriate heraldic style.

The process is similar for others such as merchants but, in these cases, the Heralds will require a substantial fee to be paid based on their assessment of both wealth and character. A pious man, known for his works of charity and respected for his honesty, will pay a much lower fee, than somebody who is known to be specifically trying to buy respectability – but if somebody is willing to pay any price, almost anybody can buy an achievement – and the recognition that goes with it. This is not considered corrupt – but a means by which the College assures it has the funding it needs, and especially allow generosity to those who have earned its support but may not be able to pay.

The achievement that is granted by the College is actually rendered in a written form – heraldic language is precise enough that a succinctly written description of a coat of arms is definitive – a skilled and informed artist can render a painting or drawing from such a description. The College itself has artists who can paint or draw a Coat of Arms for a patron, either on parchment or on a shield itself, as well as weavers who can create heraldic banners – again, they charge for these services, but nobody is obliged to use them.

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