

3-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Olsson, Nils William (1987) "The Coat of Arms--A Symbol of the Family," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol7/iss1/2>

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The Coat of Arms - A Symbol of the Family

Nils William Olsson*

Heraldic pictures had their origin in the Western World during the 12th century, as a result, among other factors, of the Crusades. Thus the origins can in fact be traced to a military necessity. The main purpose was to decorate the shield with figures, which easily could be identified at a distance. This type of shield decoration gradually progressed into an obvious system of pictorialization, which, as time went on, became useful in many different ways. It became a system which spurred individual expression, while at the same time it could be used for keeping a group such as a clan or community together, setting it apart and thus preserving a certain continuity over a long span of time.

This type of pictorial representation is in itself unique. It is constructed on the contrasting action of four colors: *gules* = red; *azure* = blue; *vert* = green and *sable* = black, as well as two metals: *or* = gold and *argent* = silver. The metal against a color, a shiny surface as against a dull finish, creates a contrast, which is further strengthened by the sign striving to fill out the area in question, i.e. the area of the shield. The illustrations thus metamorphose into a peculiar stylized simplification, which brings out its characteristic nature, thus resulting in a silhouetted action which builds into a visual concept. The knowledge of the interaction of these heraldic illustrations with their trappings and how they are given form and design not only demands a thorough knowledge of history but also a feeling for an appreciation of art, since heraldry not only is a science, but to a considerable degree a decorative art.

We view the heraldic picture as a symbol for countries, states and cities but also as a mark of distinction for an individual, a family or clan. Usually one associates a coat of arms with a family of the nobility. This assumption is totally false. The heraldic coat of arms possesses no rank in itself. The rank or status is vested in the so called augmentations which surround the shield, such as a crown, an open helmet, the mound or pedestal, known as compartment, as well as the supporters on each side of the shield. These tells us if the possessor of the coat of arms is a noble, baron or earl. Non-nobility arms with closed helmets have existed alongside the noble coats of arms since the Middle Ages.

As a *genealogical symbol* the coat of arms can be found in ancestor tables or pedigree charts, in rolls of arms as well as on seals, which in olden times were

*The author is deeply indebted to Dr. Jan Raneke of Vallgatan 3, 234 00 Lomma, Sweden for having supplied most of the pertinent information in this article. Dr. Raneke has designed hundreds of coats of arms for clients around the world. Six of his designs are included at the end of this article.

appended to official documents in order to affirm or acknowledge a contract or treaty, in which case the seal with the coat of arms was the only "signature" used in a time when the ability to read and write was restricted to a privileged few. The coats of arms are also to be found on memorials, such as gravestones, funerary tablets and escutcheons as well as funeral flags and standards in many Swedish churches. We also find these symbols as *donors' marks* on certain ecclesiastical fixtures, such as altar pieces, church textiles and inventories of communion silver, brass chandeliers, etc. The coats of arms were also used as *owners' marks* in the formation of *ex libris* or book plates, on porcelain and silver as well as all types of decorative pieces, household goods and other items.

In Sweden all official heraldic matters are handled by the heraldic section of the National Archives (*Riksarkivet*) with a State Herald as its chief. This section of the Archives deals, however, only with questions having to do with the coats of arms of the State and for various cities and communities as well as all official bodies. So far as coats of arms of the nobility is concerned this is handled by the House of Nobles (*Riddarhuset*).

Swedish nobility today is represented by a total of 621 families comprising approximately 20,000 individuals. These families and their respective shields are to be found in *Adelskalendern*, the triennial yearbook of the House of Nobles. For more explicit information concerning the arms of these families one should consult *Den svenska adelns vapenbok* (The Heraldic Arms of the Swedish Nobility) by Frithiof Dahlby and Jan Raneke, published in Stockholm in 1967. The grand total of the number of Swedish families granted a patent of nobility and introduced into the House of Nobles since its inception by Gustavus Adolphus in 1626 is 2,983 and if one is interested in studying the arms of all of these families one should consult *Sveriges ridderskap och adels vapenbok* (The Coats of Arms of the Swedish Nobility) by Carl Adolph Klingspor, published in Stockholm in 1890. For a comprehensive biographical dictionary of all Swedish families of nobility, both those which are still extant and those that are extinct, one should consult Gustaf Elgenstierna's *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor* (The Complete Pedigrees of the Swedish Nobility Introduced into The House of Nobility), I-IX (Stockholm 1925-1936). If one is on the hunt for information regarding the coats of arms of older Swedish families, extinct before the establishment of the House of Nobles in 1626, one can find those in *Svenska medeltidsvapen* (Swedish Coats of Arms from the Middle Ages), I-III (Lund 1982-1985) by Jan Raneke. These volumes contain the coats of arms of no less than 1,332 families, dating back to the earliest years of Swedish recorded history. In this connection it should be emphasized that the genealogical section of the House of Nobles in Stockholm spends a great deal of time and energy finding families in the United States who belong to the Swedish nobility but for some reason or other have been forgotten or who have lost contact with the country of their forefathers. Many of these families have now been included in the *Adelskalendern*.

When it comes to the coats of arms of families not belonging to the Swedish nobility, these have since 1963 been registered in *Skandinavisk Vapenrulla* (The Roll of Arms for Scandinavia), where the arms not only of non-nobility, but also of the nobility and other coats of arms are published and presented. Up to the present moment approximately 400 coats of arms have been published together with the backgrounds of the symbols used, the blazonry all produced in color. Among these are several American families, who have thus succeeded in their desire to knit their families closer to their Scandinavian background. Often these coats of arms are new creations, as many of the other non-American heraldic arms are, and it may perhaps be of interest to the readers of *SAG* to know how to go about acquiring a genuine coat of arms. As a collective symbol for a family, this seems to be a good investment for the future. A word of caution should be said in this connection. There is much humbug and not a few “rackets” enticing the non-suspecting victim, unfortunately also in the United States. There are firms which produce coats of arms on “a conveyor belt” idea, which is based solely upon the family name. These are sold with a certificate, which in turn gives an aura of genuineness and official approval. In addition these “phony” coats of arms often represent the most banal art.

What is a Coat of Arms?

Without going into a complex description which might be a trifle boring it should be said that a coat of arms is *not* confined to a certain form, such as a trade mark. Within the framework of the blazonry of the coat of arms the heraldic artist has a great deal of freedom. A coat of arms can therefore appear in many different forms and in various styles. For the details on heraldic terminology it is recommended that the student consult any of a number of existing encyclopedias.

Who May Have a Coat of Arms?

As far back as we can trace heraldry we find that coats of arms have been used by both nobility and the common man. As to the provenance of a coat of arms for a titled person, it is usual that we look at its genesis, i.e. at the time a person was ennobled and given a patent. However, most of the very oldest families in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe assumed their coats of arms on their own initiative. The right to acquire one's own coat of arms was established by the very first of the heraldic theoreticians, a legal expert named Bartolus de Saxoferrato who during the 14th century said that “Whoever so wishes, may acquire a coat of arms or symbol and thereby mark his worldly possessions.” The only rule which applied was that one respect the rights of others and follow heraldic stipulations. The practice in Scandinavia to acquire a coat of arms goes back to the Middle Ages. The use of rank and its augmentations were given solely to the ennobled families and were regulated by a number of statutes. The

fact that one had a coat of arms had nothing to do with one's social status.

How is a Family Coat of Arms Protected?

The publication of a coat of arms, also called registration, is one method used today to guarantee the family the sole use of that symbol. Here, again, one must be knowledgeable as to which family carries which coat of arms—thus one must demonstrate mutual respect for each other's choice—a concept which must be accepted so long as we do not have specific laws governing the practice of acquiring coats of arms.

How Does One Acquire a Coat of Arms?

One is never alone in the use of a common surname and families with the same surname are easily confused. The name, however, used in conjunction with a coat of arms sets that family apart and grants that family or family group a congenial and decorative element, which in turn tends to strengthen the family bonds, something highly desirable in today's world. If a family is to consider a hereditary coat of arms, there are several means at one's disposal. If there already is a coat of arms in the family, the situation is greatly simplified. If this is not the case one can approach the problem from various angles, such as one's occupation, i.e. one's own or that of an antecedent; the area in Sweden from which the family came, i.e. the province, the hundred or the parish or an arms derived from one's surname or one's place name. There are myriads of combinations of symbols which can be used, as for instance elements in the coat of arms of one's home community, as well as its colors.

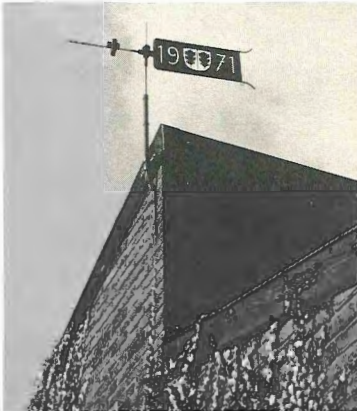
When one has come so far in his search that he or she knows what is to be included in the coat of arms, it is wise to consult an heraldic expert and charge him or her with the responsibility in the composition of the coat of arms as well as its art form. Here is where *Skandinavisk Vapenrulla*, (*SVR*), can step in with its heraldists and for an agreed fee aid in the process of the arms' formation, both so far as sketches are concerned and of the final product. Consultation with members of *SVR* is free. *SVR* can also advise and suggest competent artists who are specialists in certain types of symbolism, such as ecclesiastical problems, those dealing with the crafts, engineering and other specialty fields. A coat of arms is created to be used. It can serve, among other things, as a component part of a bookplate, a signet ring, as a weather vane on one's dwelling, as an imprint on stationery and visiting cards, thus giving its owner pleasure as well as conveying an aura of artistic distinction.

Skandinavisk Vapenrulla (SVR)

This foundation, which came about as a non-profit organization more than twenty years ago, sees as its mission the ongoing and the continuing publication

of its journal, with the same name, at the lowest possible cost to those who possess coats of arms and are generally interested in heraldic art. The publication appears from time to time in the form of fascicles, which are distributed to subscribers not only within Scandinavia, but also elsewhere. The foundation is administered by two internationally known heraldic experts, Christer Bökvall, LL.D., a juridical expert in southern Sweden as well as a *notarius publicus* and Jan Raneke, Ph. D., heraldist and heraldic artist. In *SVR* all newly acquired coats of arms as well as older heraldic arms are reproduced in striking colors together with data on the blazonry and a short sketch on the genealogy of the family. According to the statutes of the organization, the foundation seeks to spur the interest in heraldry and heraldic art and to stimulate interest in genealogy and to strengthen the ties which bind Scandinavia together. One should also stress the fact that the mutual cooperation which exists among the Scandinavian nations also extends to other countries where descendants of emigrants have settled. The editors of *SVR* are quite restrictive when it comes to the approval and publication of coats of arms. Persons who pride themselves of possessing phony titles of nobility and wear spurious decorations are not welcome.

Finally it should be stated that a coat of arms in order to be included in *SVR* must conform fully to the rules of heraldic science. The individual or a family who wishes to be included must originate in one of the Scandinavian countries or be able to trace his origin to one of the five Nordic countries. For further particulars concerning inclusion in *SVR* or subscription to its journal, please write to *Skandinavisk Vapenrulla*, Oxgränd 12, 230 11 Falsterbo, SWEDEN.



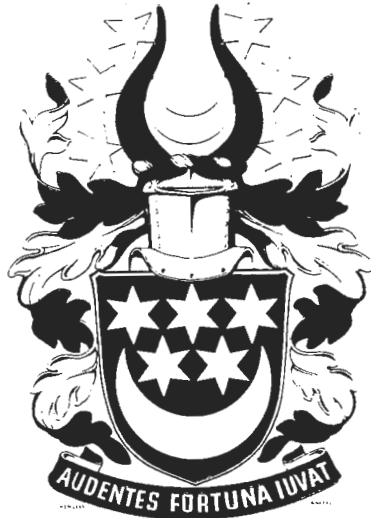
Coat of arms used on a weather vane.



Coat of arms used as an *ex libris*.



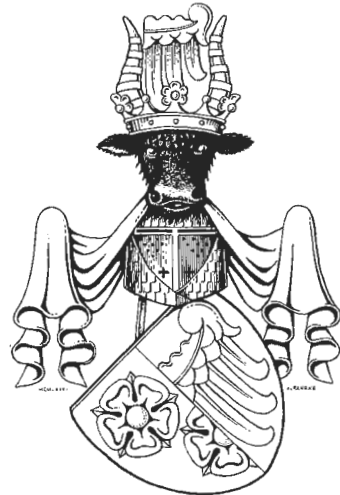
Coat of arms for an untitled person.



Coat of arms for an untitled person with a motto.



Coat of arms used as an *ex libris*.



POUL
GREVE HOLSTEIN

An old coat of arms used by nobility in the style of the Middle Ages.