

Heraldic Conflict Checking for Beginners

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The policy in the SCA is that any registered armory (devices and badges) must be different from any other armory already registered by the SCA as well as from selected real-world armory that is considered to be of sufficient importance for the SCA to protect. The result of this policy is that new armory submissions must always be checked for conflicts.

Conflict checking, like any other skill, requires both information about the process and practice in putting that information into action. Fortunately, the required information is becoming more and more available to both heralds and submitters, especially since the advent of the Internet. Practice, of course, takes time and dedication but is indispensable to becoming a good conflict-checker. If you want to improve your conflict-checking skills, there are several routes you can take. If there is a commentary group that meets in your area, join it. Working with more experienced heralds is the best way to learn the intricacies of the SCA's heraldic rules. If no such group is available to you, you can also get practice in conflict checking and help from experienced heralds by working at the many consultation tables held at wars and large kingdom events. Finally, if you have Internet access, there are several options for conflict-checking practice. One is to do some checking on your own, perhaps for submitters in your area, and then ask for confirmation of your results on one of the e-mail lists such as Atlantian Herald <AtlantianHeralds@yahoogroups.com> or SCA Herald <scahrlds@listserv.aol.com>. In addition, several kingdoms now have "virtual" internal commentary groups that look at name and armory submissions posted to the web and then discuss these submissions via e-mail. Checking these submissions for conflicts and confirming your results with the more experienced heralds in the group is excellent practice and also a valuable service to these kingdoms. To get information on conflict checking submissions for Atlantia, contact the Golden Dolphin Herald (contact information in *The Acorn*).

Essential Resources

The primary tool used in conflict checking is the SCA Ordinary (a listing of all the armory registered by the SCA arranged by type of charge and by field). This book and its various updates are available from the SCA Marketplace <<https://secure.sca.org/cgi-bin/stockclerk/ftpw.html>>. The Ordinary is also available online at a number of different sites, including:

- <<http://www.oanda.sca.org>>
- <<http://www.farreaches.org/heraldry/OandA>>
- <<http://www.newmarch.org/heraldry/OandA>>
- <<http://www.wgz.org/heraldry/OandA>>
- <<http://www.heraldsnet.org/heraldry/OandA>>
- <<http://heraldry.ansteorra.org/OandA>>

While many heralds prefer to use the online Ordinary, which is frequently updated and available at no cost to you, a paper Ordinary may be necessary if you do a lot of consulting at events where you do not have access to the Internet.

In addition to the Ordinary, conflict checking requires an understanding of the SCA's heraldic rules. The general rules are outlined in the Rules for Submission (RfS), available online at <<http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/rfs.html>>. A good conflict-checker must be familiar with these rules, particularly RfS section X, "Conflicting Armory." However, knowing the rules is not enough as they only provide general guidelines. Specific rulings about heraldic conflict have been made by the various Laurel Sovereigns of Arms and can be found in documents called "collected precedents." These precedents are available online at <<http://www.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/precedents.html>>.

Even the most experienced heralds sometime have to look up obscure blazon terms or defaults while conflict-checking. You will, therefore, need some basic heraldic reference books. Among the most readily available and useful resources are:

- "Glossary of Terms as Used by the College of Arms of the Society for Creative Anachronism." Available online at <<http://www.sca.org/heraldry/coagloss.html>>.
- Munday, Kevin, and Bruce Miller (Bruce Draconarius of Mistholme and Akagawa Yoshio). *A Pictorial Dictionary of Heraldry as Used in the Society for Creative Anachronism*. Second Edition. 1992. Available from the SCA Marketplace.
- Brooke-Little, J.P. *An Heraldic Alphabet*. New and Revised Edition. London: Robson Books, 1996. An inexpensive edition can often be found at used bookstores.
- Parker, James. *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry*. New Edition. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co, 1971. Available online at <<http://www.heraldsnet.org/saitou/parker/>>.

Finally, there have been several excellent articles on heraldic conflict checking written by SCA heralds. "De Bello Armorem," a multi-part conflict-checking tutorial by Rouland Carre, is online at <http://www.midrealm.org/heraldry/fenris/dba_part1.htm>. "Basic Conflict Checking" by Teceangl Bach is online at <http://www.antirheralds.org/education/basic_conflict_checking.html>. Another good article, "Conflict-Checking Strategies

under the Current Rules for Submission” by Owen ap Morgan, is not, as far as I know, online, but the author has given permission for the article to be freely distributed, and I would be happy to send you a copy if you are interested in it.

Basic Blazon for Conflict Checking

When you run across unfamiliar terms while conflict checking, you can always look them up in one of the sources recommended above. However, in order to be an effective conflict checker, you also need to have a basic grasp of the grammar of blazon – the way all these terms work together to describe a piece of armory.

Blazons always begin with a description of the field, followed by a comma. This description can be as simple as a single tincture (e.g. “Azure,”) or far more complex (e.g. “Per chevron inverted azure and paly gules and argent,”). Regardless of the complexity, however, the field is treated as one unit when checking for conflicts.

The next portion of the armory described in the blazon (unless there are strewn charges – “semy” – on the field) is the primary charge or charge group. If there is an ordinary – fess, pale, bend, chevron, cross, etc. – that will be the primary. If there is no ordinary, the largest and most central charge or group of charges is the primary. Note that a charge group can be made up of different types of charges. For example, in the blazon, “Per bend gules and argent, a wolf and a heart counterchanged,” the wolf and the heart together make up the primary charge group.

After the primary group come any secondaries, charges that lie on the field surrounding the primary. In the blazon above, the wolf and the heart were primary. However, if we changed the blazon to read, “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged,” the bend is primary and the wolf and the heart become the secondary charge group. Peripheral ordinaries such as chiefs, bordures, bases, or flaunches are always considered secondaries. Strewn charges on the field are also secondaries unless they are the only charges on the field (in which case they are primaries). Keep in mind that a piece of armory can only have one primary charge group but can have several secondary groups. If we change the blazon of our example to “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged, a bordure azure,” the heart and wolf plus the bordure give the device two secondary charge groups.

The blazon will also describe any tertiary charges, charges that lie entirely on other charges. Both primary and secondary charge groups can have tertiaries. If we expand our sample blazon to read, “Per bend gules and argent, on a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged a sword sable, a bordure azure semy of hearts argent,” the sword and the strewn hearts are the tertiary charge groups.

Finally, the blazon will describe any overall charges, charges that lie on top of other charges but overlap them so that they also touch the field. An example of this type of charge in a blazon would be “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged, overall a sword sable.”

Charges can also be maintained or sustained (held by other charges). Maintained charges are small and do not count for difference. Sustained charges are of roughly equal visual weight as the charge that is holding them and thus count as a second charge in a charge group of primaries or secondaries. So, a lion sustaining an axe is really a mixed charge group containing a lion and an axe.

In conflict checking, the field and the primary charge group are the most important parts of the armory to check, followed by the secondaries and any charges overall. Tertiary charges should be checked last and least.

What Makes One Piece of Amory Different from Another?

The SCA rules for conflict are based on period practices of cadency, the ways that medieval people changed a coat of arms to distinguish close relatives from one another. Such changes, called cadency steps, are the basis for the SCA system of clear differences (CDs). Our rules require that, in most cases, submitted armory be at least two CDs away from registered armory. The idea is that, if your arms are two CDs from anyone else’s, you are not claiming to be their close relative.

There are two important exceptions to this rule of two CDs that make our lives as conflict checkers much easier because they reduce the number of places we have to look for conflicts. The first is RfS X.1, which states, “Armory does not conflict with any protected armory that adds or removes the primary charge group.” This rule is a crucial one for checking conflict because it allows you to eliminate many possible conflicts without too much thought. For example, it means that our two sample blazons, “Per bend gules and argent, a wolf and a heart counterchanged” and “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged,” do not conflict even though the only difference between them is the absence or presence of the bend.

The second exception to the rule of two CDs is RfS X.2, which says, “Simple armory does not conflict with other simple armory if the type of every primary charge is substantially changed... For purposes of this rule, simple armory is defined as armory that has no more than two types of charge directly on the field and has no overall charges.” There are a couple of key terms in this rule. First, of course, is the requirement that this rule can apply only to simple armory, which is then defined. This definition limits the armory to, at most, a mixed primary charge group or a single-type primary group with one single-

type secondary group. To use our examples from the previous paragraph, “Per bend gules and argent, a wolf and a heart counterchanged” would be simple under RfS X.2, but “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged” would not because there are three types of charges on the field. Note that tertiary charges play no part in determining what is simple armory since they do not lie on the field. Second, RfS X.2 requires that the type of every primary charge be substantially changed. The rules don’t define what constitutes a substantial change, but the precedents include many rulings about this issue. Generally, all of the ordinaries are substantially different from each other as are obviously unrelated charges such as a lion and a rose or a book and a tree. On the other hand, there is probably not substantial difference between related charges such as types of crosses or varieties of flower. The only way to be sure, though, is to look in the precedents for rulings on the specific charge you are checking.

If the armory you are checking is not clear by X.1 or X.2, you will have to look for two CDs. CDs can come from lots of different kinds of changes to the armory. If two pieces of armory have different field divisions or different tinctures on at least half the field, that constitutes a CD. Swapping the tinctures of a field divided into four parts or less is another way to get a CD for the field. The key thing to remember here is that changes to the field, no matter how many there are, can only count for one of the two CDs necessary to avoid conflict. The only exception to this rule is in the case of field primary armory, which will be discussed later.

So, even if there is one CD for the field, you still have to get a second CD for changes to the charges. You can get CDs for adding or removing charges that lie on the field (which includes primaries, secondaries, and overall charges). You can also get CDs for changing the type, number, tincture, arrangement (the way the charges are laid out on the field), posture (the position of an animal), and orientation (the direction a charge faces) of charges that lie on the field. Usually, making any of these changes to half the charge group is enough for a CD. Be sure to note that charge groups are treated separately in counting CDs. Therefore, changing the tincture of half the primary group and half the secondary group constitutes two CDs. Similarly, making separate changes to two different secondary groups would also yield two CDs. Thus, “Per bend gules and argent, a bend between a wolf and a heart counterchanged, a bordure azure” is two CDs from “Per bend gules and argent, a bend counterchanged between a wolf argent and a heart azure, a bordure sable” because the tincture of the bordure and half the wolf and heart group have changed.

Tertiaries are handled a little differently in conflict checking. As with the field, only one CD can be derived from changes made to the same group of tertiaries. In addition, while adding or removing tertiaries is a CD, because they are so small in relation to the rest of the armory, two changes to the type, number, tincture, arrangement, posture, or orientation of tertiaries are required to get a CD. The exception to this rule is explained in RfS X.4.j.ii, which says that, in suitable cases, substantially changing the type of a tertiary group yields a CD. While the definition of substantial change of type in this rule is the same as that in RfS X.2, the definition of suitable armory is more complicated. It’s best to read the detailed explanation in the Rules for Submission, which gives many examples, but basically, armory is suitable for the purpose of RfS X.4.j.ii if the tertiaries in question lie on an ordinary (including the peripheral ordinaries) or on a very simple charge in the middle of the field and if there is at most two types of charges on the field.

Putting All this Theory into Action

Now that you know how to read a blazon and how to count CDs, you are ready to turn to the Ordinary and actually look for conflicts. The place to begin looking in the Ordinary will depend on the nature of the armory you are checking. The Ordinary is arranged mostly by charge type – all the crosses are listed together as are all the chiefs. Sometimes, however, the Ordinary categories aren’t entirely obvious. For example, a variety of creatures, including insects, spiders, and lobsters, are grouped together under “Arthropods.” If you’re not sure of the right category, just look under the name of the charge you want. Most will have the categories cross-referenced. Very common charges may have the category broken down by tincture or posture (for animals). This allows you to reduce the number of categories in which you have to look for a conflict. Within each category, armory is arranged in alphabetical order by field. There are also listings (under “Field Division”) that show all the armory with various sorts of complex fields.

Some of the Ordinary categories are more straightforward for conflict checking than are others. Checking common animals like canines (dogs, wolves, foxes, etc, all of which conflict with one another) is easy. These animals are categorized by posture with conflicting postures (like rampant, salient, and sejant erect) grouped together. Thus, you know that any canine that’s not in the same posture category as the one you are checking is at least one CD away. If you need to check these additional categories, you will only have to look at armory that has the same field as the one you are checking (otherwise, you would be certain of two CDs – one for posture and one for the field). Unfortunately, the process is not always this simple. Some Ordinary categories contain items that do not conflict with each other. Many types of crosses, for example, are a CD away from each other, but because the cross category is broken up by tincture, you have to learn (from the precedents) which pairs have CDs and which do not. On the other hand, sometimes charges can conflict with charges that are listed in a different category. Suns and multi-pointed mullets (more than six points) are not a CD from each other but are in different Ordinary categories. The only way to learn these nuances is to practice conflict checking and to make frequent reference to the precedents when confronted with uncertainties about what conflicts with what.

For most armory, the best place to begin is the category for the primary charge group. Within that category, check first for armory with the same field. If you do not find a conflict among the armory with the same field, you know that you have one CD. That means you only have to scan the rest of the blazons, looking at each one just long enough to spot that second CD. If one seems especially close (or relies on the tertiaries for difference), you will have to spend a few minutes more carefully assessing possible CDs. In most cases, if you do not find a conflict in the primary charge category, the device will be clear of other problems. However, as noted above, in some cases you still may have to check more than one category to be certain. This situation holds true especially in cases of armory that is simple under RfS X.2 because you will need to check categories, such as the same animal in a different posture, that are a CD away but not substantially different.

One of the banes of conflict checking in the SCA is primary charge groups made up of two types of charges. These mixed groups are hard to check because you may need to check both charge categories, which can be a lot of work if both charges are common ones. One way to make your life easier, if there is a complex field, is to check the field itself (under "Field Division") to see if you can catch a conflict that way. If not, you know you have one CD for the field and can turn to the less common of the two primaries to see if there are any conflicts there. If there are no conflicts in this category, you are clear, because you have a CD for the field and one for the removal of or change to half the primary group.

There are two types of armory that are treated somewhat differently in conflict checking: fieldless badges and field primary armory. Fieldless badges are actually quite easy to check because they get an automatic CD from any other armory (fielded or fieldless). That means you only have to look for exact conflicts. Under the current rules, moreover, fieldless armory must consist of a single charge or a set of conjoined charges. As a result, new fieldless badges will rarely conflict with any armory that has multiple primaries or any secondaries. Only armory with a single primary and no secondaries or other fieldless badges are likely to be a problem.

Field primary armory is a somewhat different situation. This type of armory either has no charges or has only peripheral ordinaries, which are always secondaries. Any piece of field primary armory is automatically clear of any armory that has a primary charge because of RfS X.1. For this reason, field primary armory only has to be checked against other field primary armory. However, under normal circumstances, many pieces of field primary armory would conflict because they would only get one CD for changes to the field. In order to make it easier to register field primary armory, a type of armory found often in period, the Rules of Submission were changed to allow such armory to derive more difference from the field. RfS X.4.a.ii says that two pieces of field primary armory that (1) do not share any tinctures or (2) have substantially different field divisions will be clear of one another regardless of the number of CDs. In this case, substantial difference means the difference between any field division except for the two-part divisions and their multi-part diminutives. Thus, per bend is substantially difference from per pale but not from bendy. If neither of these rules apply, field primary armory can also avoid conflict if there are two clear differences to the field. Such differences include changing the field division, changing style of the line of division (from plain to embattled, for example), and changing at least half the tinctures.

At this point, you should be ready to conflict check just about any piece of armory that comes your way. However, there is always the problem of knowing when to stop checking. A very thorough conflict check can be extremely time-consuming, and you may not have the time to spare, especially at a consultation table. In general, you only need to do the following checks:

- 1) Check the primary charge category or categories, starting with identical fields. If the field is complex and you have a mixed primary group, you may find it easier to go to the "Field Division" category first and then one of the primary categories.
- 2) Check any other categories that are not a CD away from the primary category (like mullets and suns). Many times, this check will not be needed.
- 3) If the armory is simple under RfS X.2, check any categories that might carry a CD but not a substantial difference (like animals in different postures or different types of flower).

Keep in mind that you will rarely, if ever, check the categories for secondary, tertiary, and overall charges. In conflict checking, the field and the primary charge group reign supreme.

At first, you will probably have to do all of these checks carefully, and your conflict checking will go slowly. As you get more practice, however, you will learn to identify charges and arrangements that are much more likely to conflict than others. You will also be able to spot armory that is less likely to conflict because it uses uncommon charges and arrangements. When you reach that point, you will be able to make better judgments about which pieces of armory to check carefully and which to give a more cursory check. You will also know where to look for the most likely conflicts and when it's a reasonable gamble to skip a category in your checking.

As you start doing some conflict checking, don't worry if you make some mistakes at first. In fact, don't worry if you make mistakes later on. Even the most experienced heralds sometimes miss conflicts. That's why we have multiple people doing the checking. So relax and feel confident that you now know the basics of conflict checking and get down to the business of practice, practice, practice.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or comments about conflict checking or other heraldic concerns. My email address is at the beginning of this handout.