

The distinctive qualities of medieval armorials as lists of persons and families

Medieval armorials come in many different forms and can be found in a wide variety of manuscripts. They are usually defined as collections of coats of arms. Coats of arms are signs, consisting of a set of particular forms and colors, which identify or represent persons, families, groups, institutions, or other collectivities. They were ubiquitous in medieval societies and could communicate a wide variety of information, ideas, or messages. Not all armorials resemble lists, but a large number could be perceived as lists of persons and families represented by their coats of arms. Some armorials are blazoned (i.e. described in text), but most are visual collections of coats of arms. The most striking difference between armorials and textual lists are these coats of arms, which is all the more obvious when the coats of arms are presented visually. This observation leads to the main question of the paper: What are the distinctive qualities of armorials as lists of persons and families?

In the attempt to gain more insights into the distinctive qualities of armorials I will first discuss the categories of persons and families that are presented in armorials. These appear to be diverse, ranging from participants of tournaments and military expeditions (e.g. Beyeren armorial) to Christian kings (e.g. armorial Le Breton) and from exclusively noble families (e.g. Grünenberg armorial) to members of particular institutions (e.g. Fraternity Book of the Order of St. Hubert). Next, the different structures (e.g. hierarchically, chronologically) will be elaborated on, followed by an examination of the various intentions and aims of the makers in creating these lists and presenting them in this manner. This will lead to a discussion on the added value of the coats of arms and their visual presentation: Are there certain aims that could only or better be achieved, or certain ideas, information, or views that could more effectively be conveyed by representing these persons and families with their coats of arms?

This discussion on the distinctive qualities of armorials will be enriched by placing these sources in the context of other medieval lists of persons and families, for which the POLIMA workshop provides the perfect occasion. With this paper I hope to contribute to the exploration of the significance and functions of the phenomenon of listing persons and families in the Middle Ages, both communicated through texts and through coats of arms.