

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

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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 or families (or groups, institutions, or other collectivities which I will leave out of account here). They were ubiquitous in medieval societies and could communicate a wide variety of information, ideas, or messages.

Given the focus of the POLIMA project on texts, regarding armorials as lists might be problematic at first sight, since armorials are mainly visual sources. However, I will argue that many armorials can also be considered parataxic sequences of nouns and that they can deal with the same content as textual lists. The most striking difference is the presentation form: the coats of arms. This observation leads to the main question of the paper: What are the distinctive qualities of armorials as lists of persons and families?

To explore this issue, I will first deal with the second part of this question, armorials as textual lists. I will try to touch on some important aspects of the phenomenon of armorials perceived as lists: what sort of groups can armorials represent? How were they structured? And how were they produced?

### Groups of persons or families

Different groups of persons or families can be discerned in armorials. In this paper I will deal with some of the most frequent: nobility as a distinct social group (illustrated by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Grünenberg armorial), persons in a certain geographical or vassalistic space (illustrated by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century armorial by Guillaume Revel and an early 16<sup>th</sup>-century armorial in the Schichtbuch manuscript), members of institutions (mainly chivalric orders), participants of events (mainly of tournaments and military expeditions), members of a dynasty or other lines of succession, members of a certain family, and lists of fictional persons (such as the Knights of the Round Table).

These groups of persons and families can communicate a variety of things for various purposes. Many of the intentions that are central themes in this workshop can be discerned in the armorials: distinction, subjection, totalization and glorification. Lists of coats of arms of persons and families in armorials can convey for example views on social distinction, family relations, and communities, or they can commemorate groups and events. This shows that they are more than just visual enumerations of nouns.

### Structures

Another important aspect of armorials is how the listed persons and families are structured. In many armorials, the persons and families are not placed entirely randomly, but in greater or lesser extent according to a certain structure. There are three methods of structuring that frequently appear in armorials: 1) marches d'armes/feudally/regionally; 2) hierarchically; 3) chronological/successional. It is hard to make general statements about the structure, but it seems that at least in some cases structure

and content correspond or structuring is used to emphasize what is communicated in the armorial. However, more research is needed to determine the relations between content and structure.

## Production

Next, I will shortly discuss the production of these lists of arms. What were the sources of the makers of armorials? That is a relevant question, since the way an armorial was produced influences how we should understand its content and function.

Traditional research focuses on heralds as the makers of armorials, and states that heralds collected the coats of arms at tournaments, on battlefields, through exchanges with other heralds, or during visitations. Although this might be true to some extent, these methods probably do not apply to the larger part of the armorials, among others because not all armorials were made by heralds.

Recent research by the heraldist Steen Clemmensen has shown that there are remarkable similarities between a large number of armorials in France, the Netherlands and Germany. He suggests that many makers of armorials copied from other manuscripts with large collections of coats of arms. This is confirmed by some forewords to armorials. This means that lists of persons and families presented through coats of arms should not be seen in isolation, but could be part of a tradition, determining both content and presentation.

Further, collections of coats of arms could be found on more supports than just manuscripts. In the Middle Ages coats of arms were everywhere: on buildings, in windows, on beams, on tapestries. Texts indicate that makers of armorials also got the persons, families and their coats of arms from such sources. This suggests that armorials were an intermedial phenomenon, and that the productions and functions of the lists of arms should also be perceived from this perspective.

## Distinctive qualities of armorials as lists of persons and families

Then we turn to the distinctive qualities of armorials as lists of persons and families: why did the makers choose to present these persons and families with their coats of arms? I will explore this issue by means of a couple of examples, where I will connect the intention of the maker or purpose of the armorial to the presentation form: the coats of arms.

Conrad Grünenberg calls in the foreword to his armorial the coats of arms «*dy klaynet der eren*», the gems of honor. This suggests that according to Grünenberg through the coats of arms shines the honor of their bearers. From this point of view a coat of arms is not a just a sign of identification, but it represents a person, with his deeds, virtue, and status, and therefore it is a perfect means to achieve his main aim: to commemorate the virtuous deeds of the nobility, which is the foundation of their distinct status. We see something similar in another source: the French Berry armorial, which was made in the 1450s by the herald Gilles de Bouvier. Here, knowing and presenting coats of arms was a means to perform his duty as a herald: communicating the honor of nobles.

In some heraldic treatises, lists of arms seem to have an educational purpose for heralds and others that were interested in heraldry. So these lists are not really about the persons and families that are represented by the coat of arms, but about the heraldic theory behind the coats of arms. That complicates the study of coats of arms in the framework of research on lists of persons and families.

In the early 16th-century Schichtbuch-chronicle, the added value of the armorial in the chronicle lies in its intermedial character. The author explicitly refers to a similar heraldic presentation in the local church, probably to evoke and emphasize the praxis of commemorating the represented persons. Perhaps such connections are easier established through visual signs. In this case one could discuss

whether the distinctive quality of armorials as lists of persons is not the result of an inherent quality of coats of arms, but only of the fact that they are visual signs.

In the last example, a late 15<sup>th</sup>-century series of portraits of Bavarian dukes, I will argue that coats of arms are a powerful means to convey dynastic continuity through lists, because of the characteristic of coats of arms that they are passed on from father to son.

## **Conclusion**

In the conclusion I will touch on the variety and multivalence of armorials as lists of persons and families, and their similarities and differences with textual lists. This paper is just an exploration of the topic, but 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.