

# Writing a grammar and Parser for Blazon

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## **Abstract**

Blazon is the semi-formal language of family crest and heraldry, dating back to the twelfth century. Using a well structured grammar to describe a coat of arms in a top down approach the language provides a robust yet flexible way to define a textual description of what is naturally a very graphical subject. Using a test-driven development model I have produced a project which is capable of parsing a large subset of Blazon. Encompassing several fields of Computer Science ranging from parsing to HTML5 graphics the application provides a platform that demonstrates how modern concepts and technologies can be used to represent a subject that pre-dates them by centuries.

Firstly giving a brief background and description of the language of Blazon, this report goes on to describe both how the Blazon parsing application works as well as and how the project was implemented and tested. From a simple shield of a single colour through partitioning into sections and sub partitioning as well as covering different line-types before heading onto geometric charges, honourable charges and the rule of tincture before finally discussing semi-formal charges.

After thoroughly describing the language I go on to discuss the implementation of the project using test driven development. Producing lots of iterations increasing the functionality of the project gradually and performing regression testing to ensure the soundness of my code base. Initially starting with a couple of Python script based prototypes I describe how the project was iteratively built into a fully fledged web application over the course of the academic year. Given more time I would attempt to expand the project further into parsing and drawing a larger subset of Blazon with features such as Counter Charging and combining shields with Quartering.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

My project was to *Write a Grammar and Parser for Blazon*. Another student project by *Luke Torjussen* done the year before my own had attempted, very successfully, to produce an application that both parsed and drew representations of Blazoned coats of arms. This prior project used a parse generator to handle the grammar, lexing and parsing of the language. It was my objective to see if performing the parsing by hand in my own application could realise a more complete representation of Blazon.

Initially then my project was entirely based in tokenising, lexing, parsing and validating Blazon sentences. However my project grew later-on to also attempt to encompass producing a graphical representation of a parsed Blazon sentence as well as providing a plain English translation.

### 1.1 Aims

The aim of my project was to produce an application which upon receiving a Blazon sentence would firstly validate the sentence according to the rules of the Blazon language and then produce an English translation.

### 1.2 Achievable

### 1.3 Limitations

## Chapter 2

# What is Blazon?

Blazon is the language of heraldry and family crests, it dates back to the twelfth century and provides a strict set of rules about how to produce a coat of arms. There are several different versions of Blazon found around Europe however all follow the same behavioural rules regarding tinctures and charges. Most versions differ only in the set of tinctures and honourable ordinaries either having a more generous or conservative view on what is and isn't acceptable for example, African Blazon allows for an Orange coloured Tincture whilst English Blazon does not. For this project I focused on exclusively on a strict English Blazon.

Blazon is a powerful language for allowing limitless combinations and configurations of patterns and shapes to be *Blazoned* onto a shield in and recorded in a concise textual description.

What is impressive about the language is that it achieves this flexibility whilst reaming fairly formal and well defined, restricting the set of tinctures to total seven and maintaining a fairly low number of pre-defined honourable ordinaries.

Blazon, like any other language, has some unique terminology used to address certain aspects of heraldry. Anyone attempting utilize the language will need to familiarise themselves with this terminology.

## 2.1 The Seven Tinctures

The most fundamental elements of Blazon are the Tinctures. Tinctures are the set of colours allowed in coats of arms. English Blazon defines a set of seven tinctures and places them into to groups Metals and Colours.

Although at first this may seem overly restrictive Blazon overcomes having a limited set of valid tinctures by leaving interpretation of the tone and

The Seven Tinctures		
Tincture	Colour	Metal/Colour
Azure	Blue	Colour
Argent	Silver	Metal
Gules	Red	Colour
Or	Gold	Metal
Purpure	Purple	Colour
Sable	Black	Colour
Vert	Green	Colour

Table 2.1: Table of Tinctures found in English Blazon, the corresponding colours and whether each tincture is or isn't a metal.

shade of each Tincture's corresponding colour to the artist producing the shield. An Azure, blue, shield could be a light sky blue or a dark navy shade of blue depending upon the artists preference, as long as it is recognisably blue.

The Freedom of Interpretation is a great strength of Blazon vastly increases the different graphical variations of Blazoned shields without radically increasing the size of the language by exhaustively listing a set of valid tones and shades.

With regard to the two metallic Tinctures Or, gold, and Argent, silver, having freedom of interpretation allows for matt, non-metallic, colours to be placed onto a shield, although they will still behave as metal Tinctures. It is not uncommon to see yellow instead of gold and white instead of silver on many coats of arms.

## 2.2 Furs

Blazon incorporates several furs commonly used in coats of arms into the language. These behave in much the same way as tinctures but don't have the same metal or Colour property.

There are several pre-defined patterns for furs that are used directly instead of actual fur on a shield. These patterns generally consist of a repeating pattern on-top of a background colour. Each fur has a unique pattern although several are very similar, some simply being the inverse of another.

The colours of Furs are pre-defined but can be explicitly stated as differing from the normal colours by stating the Tinctures to be used instead. For example for example Ermine coloured silver and black would be defined as "*Ermine Argent and Sable*"

## 2.3 Fields

A Field is simply an area on a shield. Initially a shield has one implicit Field, which is the entire area of that shield. Blazon allows for two operations on fields, a field can be Tinctured, with a Tincture or a Fur, or a field can be Partitioned. Tincturing a Field dictates that the whole area incorporated in that Field be filled in the colour of that Tincture. Partitioning I will cover in much more detail later on.

## 2.4 How to Blazon a Coat of Arms: Part One

I have now defined a large enough subset of Blazon for a couple of basic examples.

In each example we are implicitly provided with a single Field which encompasses the entire body of the shield. Then we Tincture that Field by providing a Tincture and we have successfully Blazoned a shield.



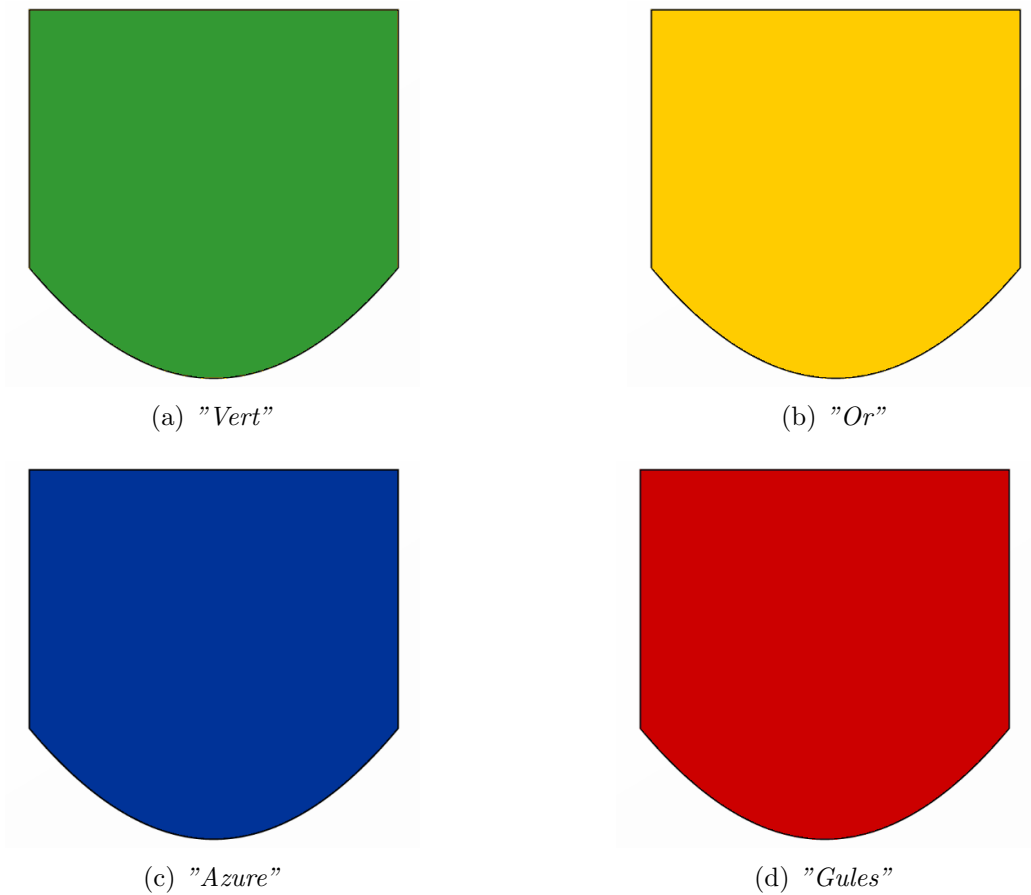


Figure 2.1: Basic Blazon examples.

Although the examples in Figure 2.1 are very basic each is a complete instance of a valid Blazoning of a shield.

## 2.5 Partitioning a Field

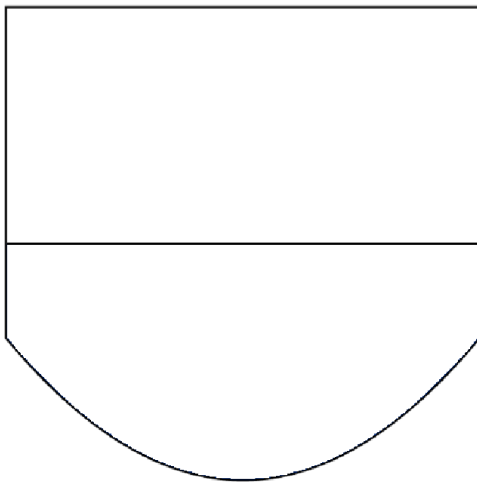
The Blazon I have defined so far is very limited, only allowing for single Tincture shields. The next natural area of the language to define is the operation of Partitioning a Field.

As stated previously a Field can be either Tinctured or Partitioned. To Partition a Field the key-word "*Per*" is used. It is obligatory that the word immediately after "*Per*" is a type of partition. Blazon has several pre-defined partitions ranging from the very simple "*Fess*" which divides a Field horizontally in half.

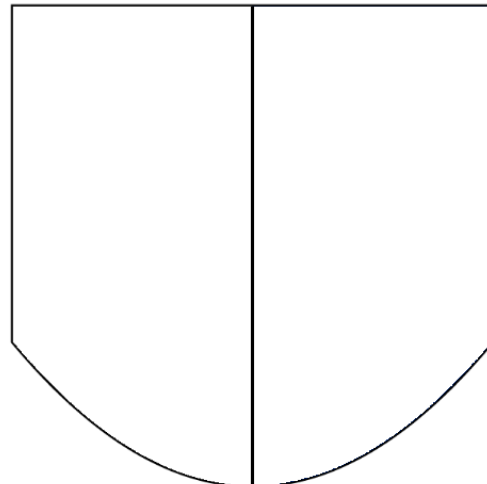
Partitioning a Field divides it up into several smaller fields the number and shape of which depend on the type of Partition used. After the Partition has been stated the Blazon sentence must go on to address the resulting new Fields.

A shield is Implicitly Blazoned from top left to bottom right with the top most Field taking priority firstly and if two or more Fields are adjacent at the same height the left most takes priority.

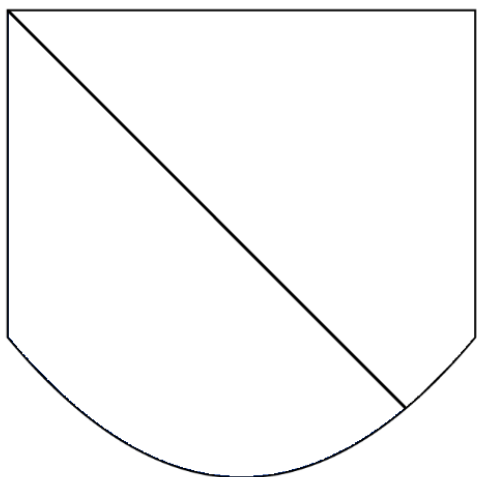
The Blazon sentence is only complete when all the Fields have been Tinctured. If a Blazon sentence Partitions a shield into two Fields and then provides only one Tincture that sentence is Invalid.



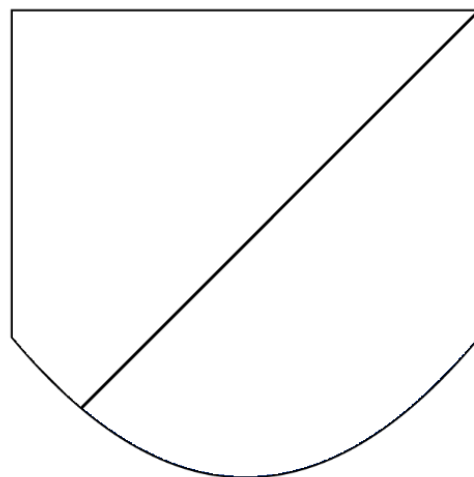
(a) "*Fess*"



(b) "*Pale*"



(c) "*Bend*"



(d) "*Bend Sinister*"

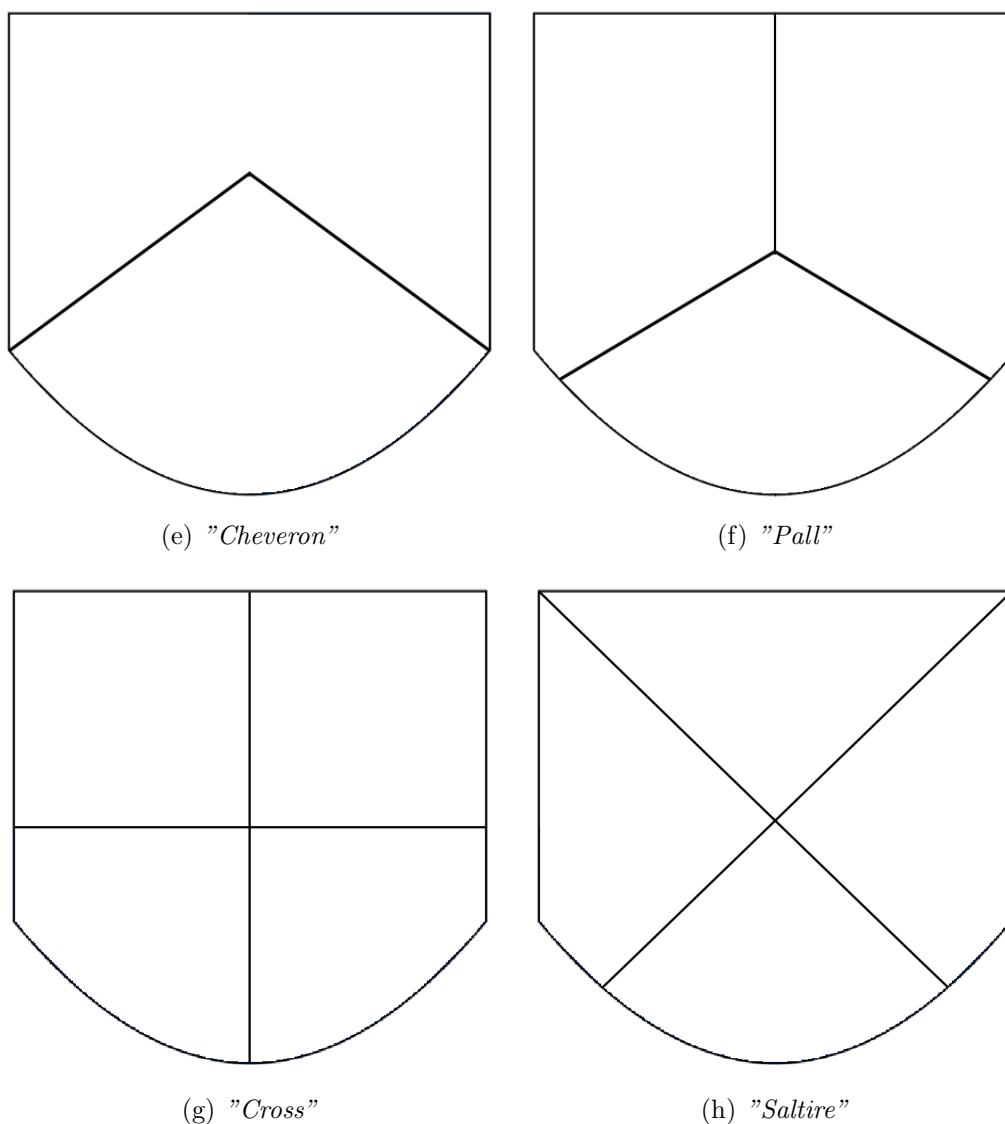


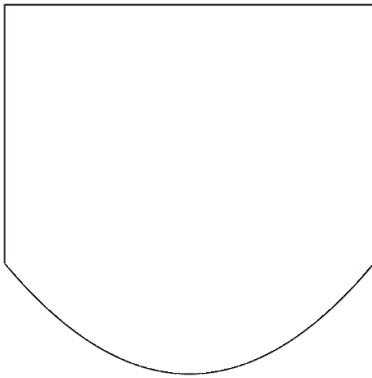
Figure 2.1: "*Valid Partitions of a Field*"

## 2.6 How to Blazon a Coat of Arms: Part Two

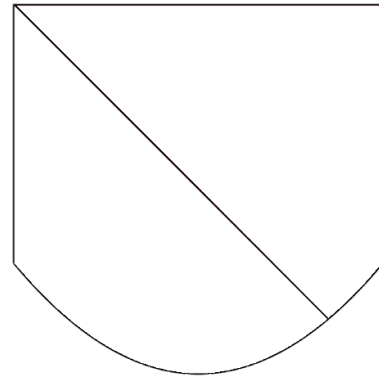
Partitioning is a very powerful aspect of Blazon and increases the number of possible shield designs immensely. A lot of very striking designs can be Blazoned onto a shield with very short Blazon sentences making use of Partitioning.

The Blazon sentence, "*Per Bend Gules and Azure*" Implicitly starts with

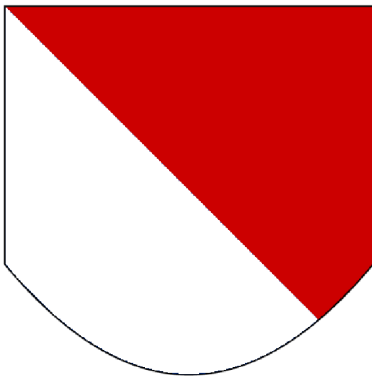
a single Field which encompasses the entire body of the shield before partitioning that Field into two smaller Fields with the keyword *"Per"* declaring a partition followed by the word *"Bend"* which is a diagonal division of a field from top left to bottom right. The Blazon goes onto Tincture the two new fields with the two Tinctures *"Gules"* and *"Azure"* respectively, following Blazon's rule about evaluating the topmost and then leftmost field first the upper section of the shield is Tinctured *"Gules"* and then the lower half is Tinctured *"Azure"*. There is no more Blazon reaming in the sentence and there are also no empty fields upon the shield, therefore this is a valid Blazon sentence and a striking red and blue shield has been produced.



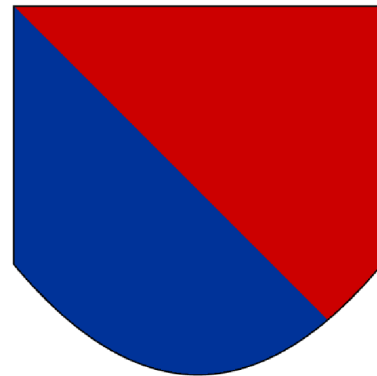
(a) *"A single empty Field."*



(b) *"The Field has been partitioned Per Bend"*



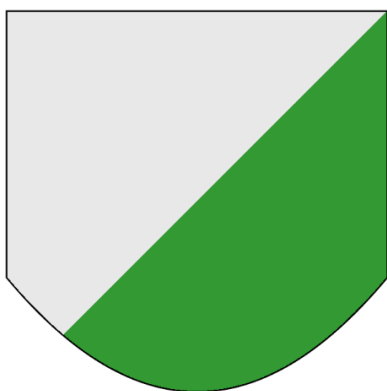
(c) *"The Topmost Field is Tinctured Gules"*



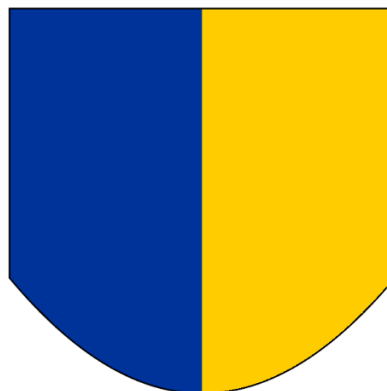
(d) *"The final Field is Tinctured Azure"*

Figure 2.2: *"Per Bend Gules and Azure"*.

Applying the same method as show above it is possible to validate the following Blazon sentences of similar complexity.



(a) *"Per Bend Sinister Argent and Vert."*



(b) *"Per Pale Azure and Or"*

Figure 2.3: *"Two more examples of valid Blazon sentences".*

## 2.7 Sub-Partitioning

The process of Partitioning a field produces two or more smaller Fields. This allows for some very striking, though simple, designs. Blazon allows however for fields to be Sub-Partitioned. The new Fields produced after a Partitioning can themselves be Partitioned.

Considerably more advanced patterns can be achieved buy using Sub-Partitioning. The complexity is potentially infinite as there is no limit enforced by the language as to how many Partitions are allowed. It is rare to see a historical shield Sub-Partitioned more than three times. Sub-Partitioning makes use of exactly the same set of Partition types as regular Partitioning.

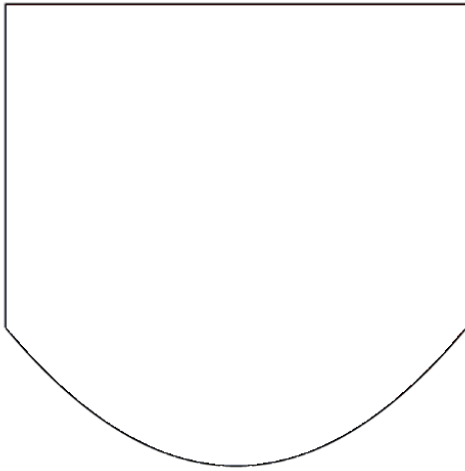
Sub-Partitioning is expressed in exactly the same way as partitioning. Once the initial field has been partitioned instead of providing a Tincture for one of the new fields the keyword *"Per"* is used to define a partition and then the type of partition is stated for example *"Fess"*. Then each of the new Fields need to be addressed either by being Tinctured or further partitioned.

The new Fields created by the Partition fully evaluated before any other Fields on the shield are addressed. The new sub-fields are addressed according to the same rules present in regular Partitioning, namely the top most Fields take Priority then the left most, once they have all been evaluated the next field according to partitioning rules is addressed.

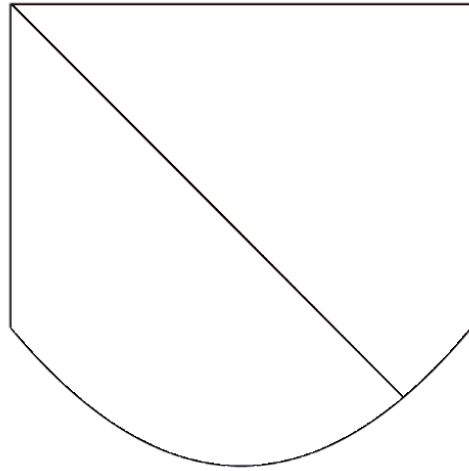
## 2.8 How to Blazon a Coat of Arms: Part Three

With Sub-Partitioning the set of valid Blazon sentences ceases to be finite, it is possible to repeatedly Partition a Field then Sub-Partition the new Sub-Fields and endlessly repeating this process. Very complex patterns can now be created with precisely defined Sub-Fields.

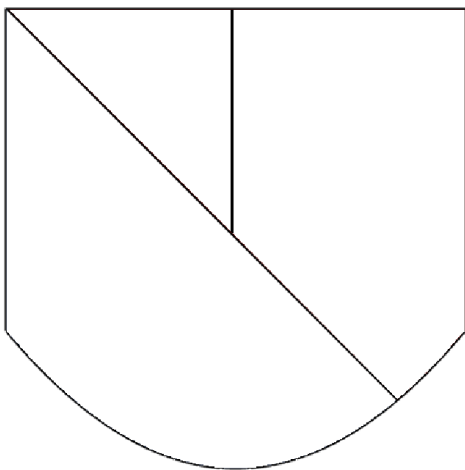
*"Per Bend Per Pale Sable and Argent Per Fess Or and Gules"* is an example a Blazon sentence which makes use of Sub-Partitioning. As before the the sentence is addressed from left to right and there is an implicit Field over the entire body of the shield. The sentence is valid if there are as many Fields defined as there are instances of Tinctures in the sentence.



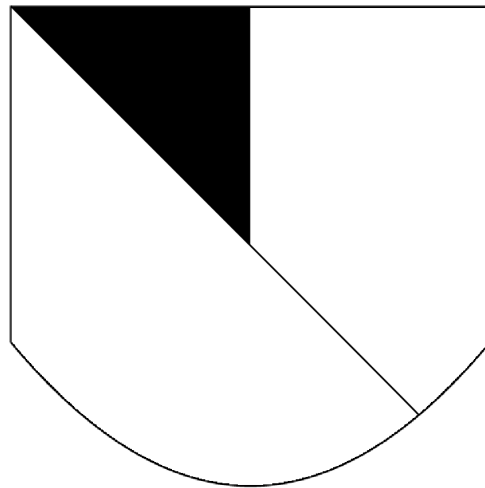
(a) *"A single empty Field."*



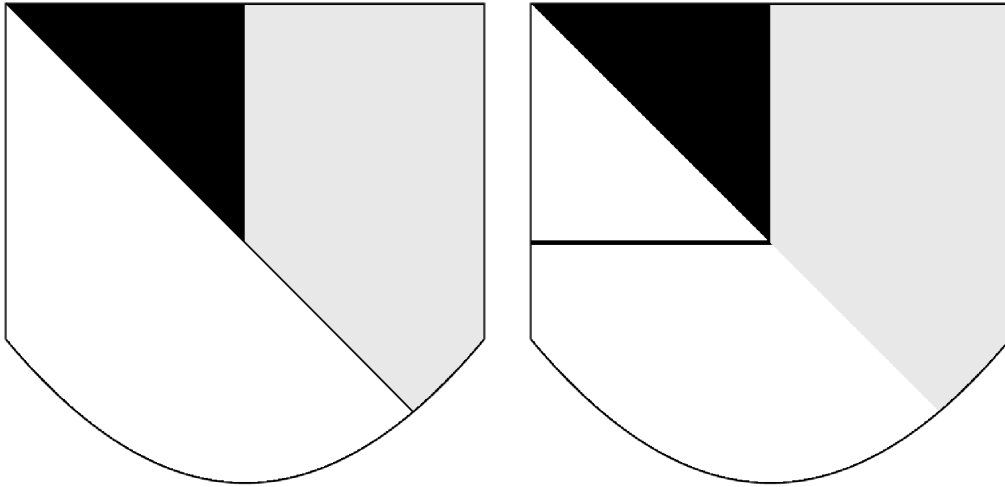
(b) *"The Field has been partitioned Per Bend"*



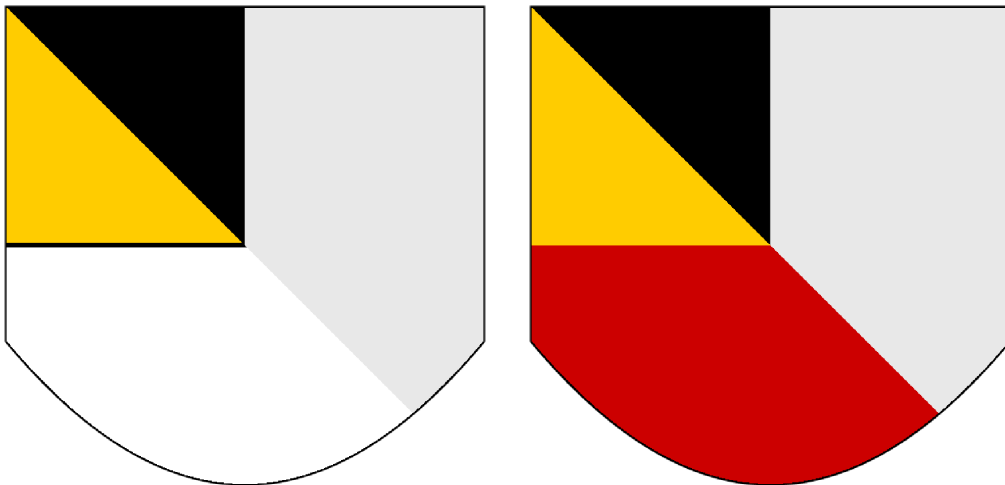
(c) *"The Topmost Field has then been Sub-partitioned Pale"*



(d) *"The Top Left most Sub-Field is Tinctured Sable"*



(e) *"The remaining Field is Sub-Partitioned Fess"* (f) *"The Top Left Most Sub-Field is Tinctured Or"*



(g) *"The remaining Sub-Field is Sub-Partitioned Fess"* (h) *"The final Field is Tinctured Gules"*

Figure 2.3: *"Per Bend Per Pale Sable and Argent Per Fess Or and Gules"*.

## 2.9 Line Types

Blazon allows for Partitions to be patterned with different Line Types. The line division through a Field when partitioning is implicitly a straight line however there are a set of pre-defined Line Types which can be used instead.

A Line Type is declared in Blazon simply by stating the name of the Line



Type desired immediately after a partition. For example *Per Fess Embattled Argent and Sable* is the Blazon sentence for a Silver and Black shield divided horizontally with an "Embattled" line, see figure 2.4.

Line Types can be applied to Sub-Partitions and its possible to have multiple Line Types in a single Blazon sentence.








<i>Per fess wavy or and sable</i>	<i>Per fess indented or and sable</i>	<i>Per fess dancetty or and sable</i>	<i>Per fess nebuly or and sable</i>
			
<i>Per fess embattled or and sable</i>	<i>Per fess dovetailed or and sable</i>	<i>Per fess raguly or and sable</i>	
			

Figure 2.4: Different line types valid in Blazon.(1)

## 2.10 Charges

Another powerful aspect of Blazon is the ability to place pictures, called Charges, onto a shield. Charges can be placed onto any Field that has been Tintured. There are three subsets of Charge, the Honourable Charges, the Geometric Charges and Semi-formal Charges.

The Geometric Charges are the most simple, they are the set of basic shapes such as a square and a circle. The Honourable Charges are a set of predefined simple shapes some of which take after Partitions, such as "Bend". The set of semi-formal charges contains everything that can be described textually, common examples are Lions and Eagles some royal Blazons have a crown as a Charge.

A Charge is declared in a Field by using a Quantifier immediately after the Field has been tintured. The Quantifier is a pre-fix to the charge and determines how many instances of this Charge are present on this Field. For example the Sentence "Vert a Crown Or" Takes the implicit Field then Tintures it Vert before Charging the Field with a Crown Tintured Or, this would produce a green shield with a gold crown on it. Semi-formal Charges can be Tintured "Proper" which is their natural colours. Even if a Charge

is or a fictional creature it will have a proper colouring. Dragons are for example green when Tinctured "*Proper*".

The size and position of a Charge is defined so that a Charge should take up as much space as possible without obscuring any other Charge or intersecting the perimeter of the Field it is being placed onto.

Its possible to have several instances of the same charge on a Field. There are common ways to position such groupings of Charges however there is freedom for the artist to arrange groups of Charges differently especially if the area doesn't lend itself to the traditional placement. A very wide but short Field would better suit its Charges being placed in a straight line rather than the usual grouping as long as each Charge is visible.

The prefix keyword can be a number or amount to define how many types of this Charge are present in this Field, *Argent three Delfs Sable* would produce a silver shield with three black squares on it in a triangular pattern, one each in the top corners and one centrally placed in toward the bottom.

It is even possible to have multiple groupings of different Charges on a Field each Charge in the grouping is treated individually so that it is allowed to obscure any other Charge.

Keywords do exist for more specific positioning of Charges such as "*Beneath*" and "*Above*" these make it possible to position Charges relative to other Charges.

Finally, it is possible to place Charges upon other Charges. This can be done with the keywords "*in*" or "*upon*". For example, "*Vert a Bend Azure upon a Chief Argent*" would produce a green shield with a silver bar along the top which has a blue diagonal bar on top of it.

## 2.11 Attitudes

Blazon allows semi-formal Charges to be given an *Attitude* to add further description to the Charge. This normally takes the form of an adjective applied as a suffix, one of the features inherited from French. For example a lion can be described as rampant or as passant both of which alter the pose the lion will be depicted in. A lion rampant is depicted as rearing up on its hind legs claws raised while a lion passant is standing horizontally with a single claw raised.

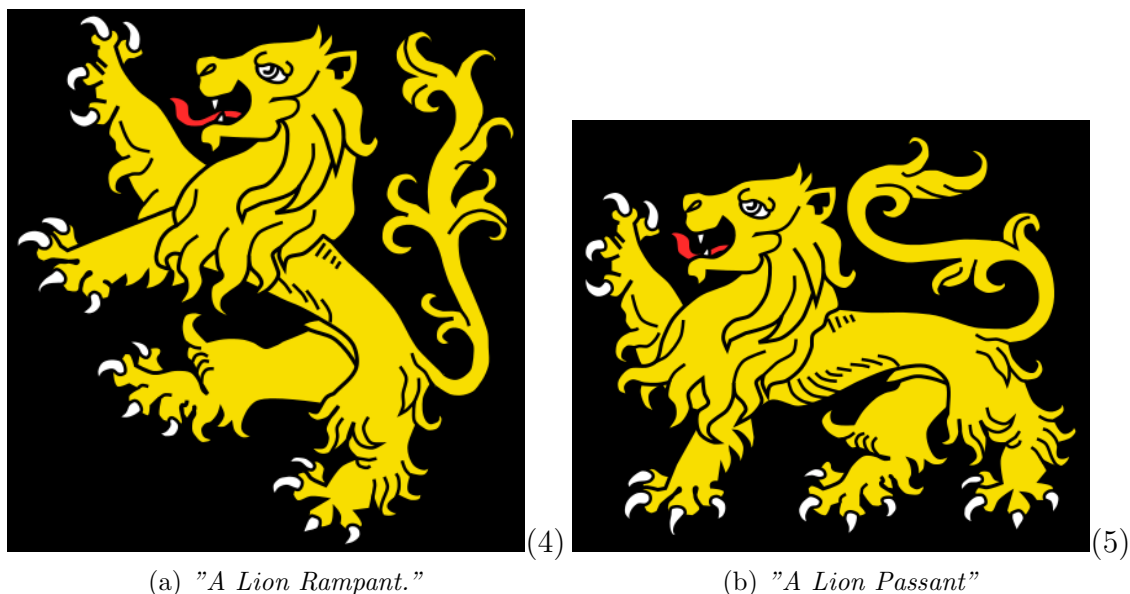


Figure 2.5: "An example of applying attitudes to a charge".

## 2.12 The Rule of Tincture

One of the most important and widely followed rules of Blazon is the Rule of Tincture which states that *a colour may not be placed upon a colour nor a metal be placed upon a metal*(2, p.46). This rule makes certain Tincture combinations of Charges and Fields invalid with each other. As stated above in Table 2.1, every tincture is either a Metal or a Colour in accordance with the Rule of Tincture, a Charge Tinctured with a Colour can only be placed upon a Field Tinctured with a Metal. Likewise, A Charge Tinctured with a Metal can only be placed upon a Fields Tinctured with a Colour.

Therefore, "*Azure a Cross Gules*" is an invalid Blazon sentence because both Azure and Gules are Colours and having a Colour Charged upon another Colour breaks the Rule of Tincture. The Rule also applies to Charges placed on Charges.

## 2.13 How to Blazon a Coat of Arms: Part Four

Charges are equally as important in Blazon as Partitioning, they allow the language a freedom to have any object placed upon them. With this extra

functionality comes a slightly more complex terminology as described above with new keywords and the need to observe the Rule of Tincture.

Taking, "*Per Pale Azure a Cross Argent and Or a Saltire Gules*" as an example of a Blazon sentence which uses charges it is possible to demonstrate how Charges are used in Blazon.

Starting with the implicit initial Field the Blazon sentence starts "*Per Pale*" which Partitions the Field Per-wards, vertically. The left hand field is then addressed as it is the Top-Left most Field not yet Tintured, the next word in the Sentence is a Tincture "*Azure*" which indicates this Field is to be blue. The next word in the sentence is "*a*" which is a quantifier for a single charge which the Sentence states is a "*Cross*" because the Charge is on a Field which has been Tintured with a Colour, the Charge must be a Metal for the Blazon to be valid in this case the Tincture is "*Argent*" which is indeed a Metal.

As the next word of interest in the the Blazon sentence is "*Or*" which as a Tincture and there have been no more charges declared we address the next Field so the right half of the shield should be gold in colour. Then there is another qualifier again its "*a*" indicating a single Charge which is stated as being a "*Saltire*" Tintured "*Gules*" this produces a Colour Charge on a Metal Field and thus respects the Rule of Tincture.

There are no more words remaining in the Blazon sentence, all the Fields and Charges have been Tintured and the Rule of Tincture has not been broken, therefore, "*Per Pale Azure a Cross Argent and Or a Saltire Gules*" is a valid Blazon sentence which contains two Fields each with a single Charge.

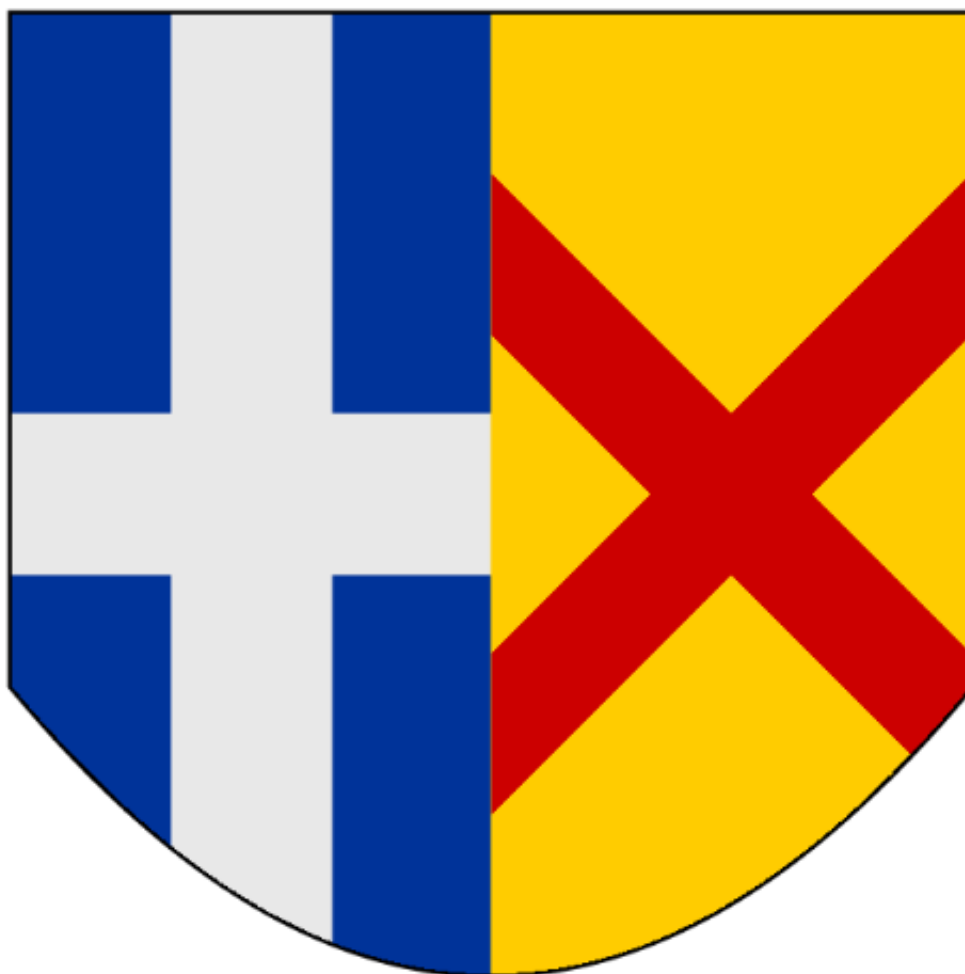


Figure 2.6: "*Per Pale Azure a Cross Argent and Or a Saltire Gules*".

## 2.14 Counter-Charging

Blazon also provides functionality for positioning Charges across Fields; this is achieved through *Counter-Charging*. If a Blazon sentence has two adjacent Fields, then a Charge can be Counter-Charged across the two fields, this would split the charge down the line of Partition between the Fields before Tincturing each half of the Charge inversely to the Field it lies in. Counter-Charging is performed using the keywords *Counter Charged* as a suffix operator to a charge and must have two tinctured fields defined before it.

In the example shown in figure 2.6, the Blazon sentence for the shield defines a Field Partitioned "*Per Pale*" then the two resulting Fields are Tinctured "*Argent*" and "*Gules*" then a Charge is defined "*a Bend*" which places a single diagonal bar upon the Field then the keywords *Counter Charged* are supplied instead of a Tincture which extends the bar across the two Fields and colours the section on the *Argent* Field in *Gules* and the section on the *Gules* Field in *Argent*.



Figure 2.7: "*Per Pale Argent and Gules a Bend Counter Charged.*"(3)

## 2.15 Directions and Sides

The Blazon language contains a set of words for describing positions and directions. These words are obviously useful for more accurately placing Charges on a Field. The top of the shield is refereed to as *Chief* and the bottom is refereed to as *Base*. The Left hand side of the shield, from the viewers perspective is called to as *Dexter* and the right hand side, again from the views perspective, is *Sinister*.

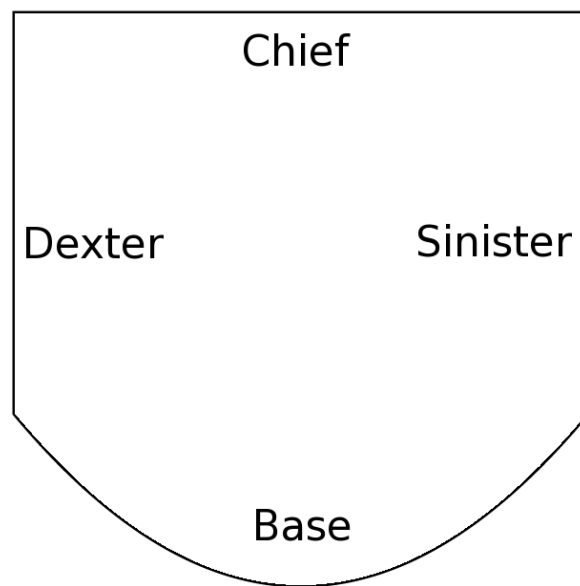


Figure 2.8: *The sides of the Field*

These keywords can be used to position Charges in a Field relative to each other. They can also be used to define direction, the most basic example of this is the Partition "*Bend Sinister*" which is a diagonal line from lower left to upper right. Semi-formal Charges can also be given a direction like so; "*A Purse Fesswise Argent Spilling Coins to Dexter Argent*" which would depict a purse lying horizontally with coins to the left hand side, from the viewers perspective.

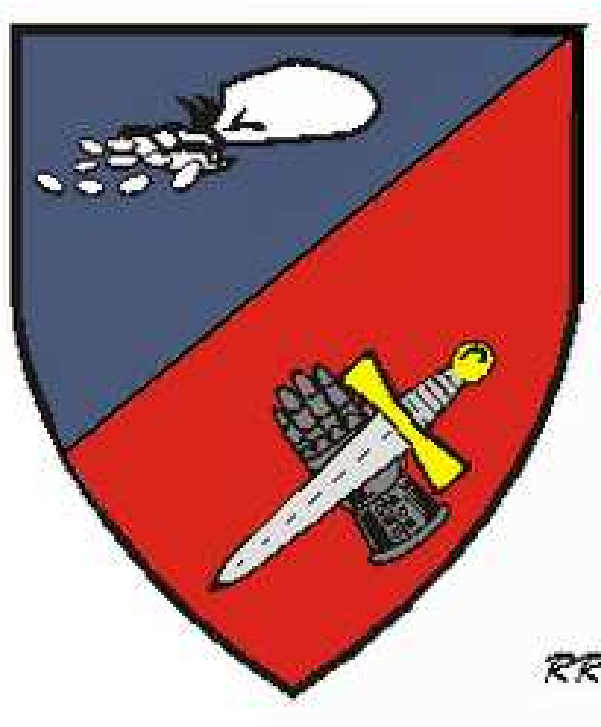


Figure 2.9: *Per Bend Sinister Azure A Purse Fesswise Argent Spilling Coins to Dexter Argent Gules a Gauntlet Bendwise appaumed (an attitude meaning open palmed) Argent Bendwise sinister inverted proper.*(6)

## 2.16 Overall

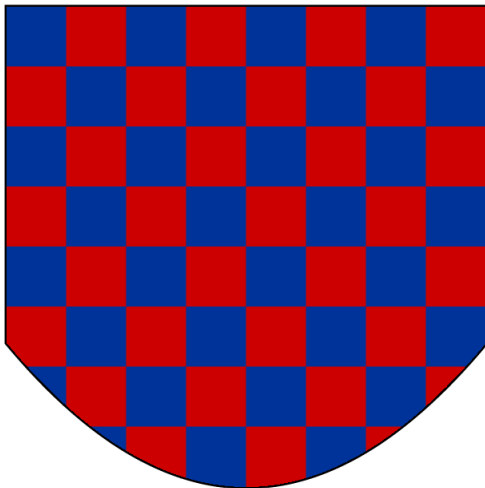
Blazon also encompasses a rudimentary system for layering. Charges can be placed on top of the entire shield as long as they don't break the Rule of Tincture or obscure another Charge. This is achieved with the keyword *Overall* which occurs at the end of a blazon sentence, when all the Fields have been Tinctured, and is then followed by a Charge.

## 2.17 Short Hand

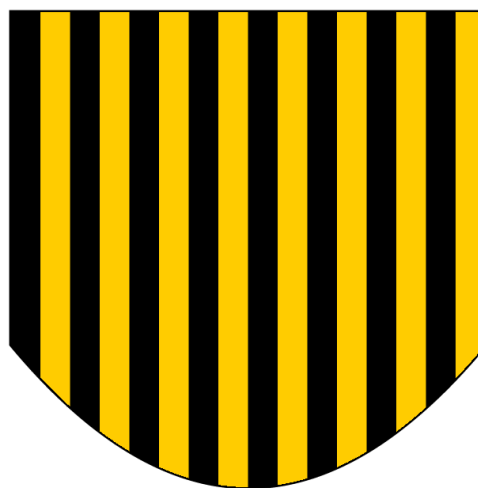
Finally Blazon has several pre-defined short hands for commonly used patterns. These patterns are all achievable through sub-partitioning but in a very verbose manner. "*Checky Argent and Gules*" produces a silver and red grid pattern which for all intents and purposes is the same as repeatedly dividing a Field "*Per Cross*" and tincturing each individual Field separately.



By default Blazon will produce the pattern in quantities of six. The number of repetitions can be stated by adding the suffix *"of"* and then providing a quantity.



(a) *"Checky of eight Azure and Gules".*



(b) *"Paly of sixteen Sable and Or"*

## Chapter 3

# Defining a Grammar for Blazon

- 3.1 What is a grammar?
- 3.2 Context Free Blazon
- 3.3 Formatting Input
- 3.4 Tokenizing Strings

# Chapter 4

## Parsing

## Chapter 5

# Graphical Representations

# Chapter 6

## Design

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