

The Chevron

The chevron, a symbol used in the field of corrections and other military or para/quasi-military organizations, is indicative of rank, dedication to the institution or length of service. Those bestowed with this insignia wear it with pride and the knowledge that she or he has earned the right to bear this symbol of honor and authority.

But, what is a chevron and when did it emerge in the history of symbols representing rank and service?

It has been suggested that the design of the chevron, generally an inverted triangle, was the imitation by human beings of flocks of birds as they flew in formation toward their destination.

Chevrons have been found as early as 1800 BC in the designs carved in rocks and incised in pottery. But the chevron, shaped like a “V” was also a symbol of goddesses as early as 15,000 BCE. In Scandinavia, the chevron, known as a “spar”, has been used on Coats of Arms as far back as the Crusades.

The chevron was used often in Coats of Arms because it is one of the *ordinaries* of heraldry. The *ordinaries* are the geometrical figures that comprise the primary images in heraldry. Heraldry is the study of a system of symbols, and the practice of designing, displaying, describing, and recording coats of arms and badges. It encompasses all matters relating to the duties and responsibilities of officers of arms.

Traditionally, the idea of heraldry was associated with aristocracy because during feudalism only the landowning nobles had Coats of Arms. These landowners gave other nobles possession but not ownership of their land in exchange for military and other services. The common people did not have Coats of Arms. However, all social strata of cultures use heraldry (signs, emblems, and seals) to symbolize their customs and values.

Today, nobles do not use Coats of Arms as much as their feudalist ancestors, but the use of emblems still exist in what is called civil heraldry. This use of symbols is a way to communicate honor and bestow authority.

Just as the landowners lent possession of their land to other nobles in exchange for services, so it follows today that commissioned officers bestow authority to non-commissioned officers. And with that earned privilege the chevron is often the insignia of rank that symbolizes the endowed authority.

The correct terminology for rank chevrons includes the number of stripes, called "bars". In American usage, chevrons typically point up, towards the neck. Accordingly, in our facility the chevrons point up, toward the collar. Both Corporals and Sergeants wear chevrons at Anne Arundel County Department of Detention Facilities. The following signifies this Department's use of the chevron:

Corporals, who are also part of the Special Operations Response Team (SORT), wear two-bar metal pin chevrons at ½ inch from each edge on both sides of the collar of their Battle Dress Uniforms (BDU).

Sergeants, who are also members of SORT, display three-bar metal pin chevrons placed on both corners of the collar of their uniform, at ½ inch from each edge of their BDUs.

However, if the Sergeant is donning her or his Dress Whites, she or he boasts those three-bar patch chevrons on both sleeves and the metal pin chevrons on both corners of her/his collar with the same measure of distance between the collar and pin required.

The chevron's etymology began in France. From Old French (1395) it means rafter, as it resembles the rafters of a roof. It is also from the Latin "caper" meaning goat, representing the angular form of a goat's hind legs.

Its modern day meaning is **a badge or insignia consisting of stripes [bars] meeting at an angle, worn on the sleeve of a military uniform to indicate rank.**¹

So, how did the contemporary use of chevrons emerge to designate rank and service?

In Napoleonic times, [military] units formed large, uniform blocks. Lance Corporals (and equivalents) marked the corner of a fire team; Corporals marked the corner of a squad, and Sergeants marked the corner of a Platoon. This led to the stylized drawing of different numbers of right angles on the sleeves, to denote corners. Over time, these turned into the stylized chevrons worn today.²

So, it makes sense that the image of birds' formations as they take flight, now known as the chevron, is what is pinned to the collar or placed on the sleeves of an officer as she or he rises higher in rank.

More Chevron History

A chevron's diminutive, a smaller version of a chevron, is called a chevronel.

Chevrons as punctuation are used as quotation marks in French and Spanish languages. In the German language, they are used but are inverted. Chevrons are also used in Chinese punctuation to signify the title of a book and for traditional vertical writing.

A chevron as a landform is a wedge-shaped deposit of sediment found on coastlines. These formations are believed to be created from erosion, glaciers, tsunamis and other natural phenomena, and sometimes contain tiny fossils from the ocean.

Challenge yourself – Where else are chevrons used or found? < ^ v >

Footnotes: ¹American Heritage Dictionary

²Wikipedia.org

References: Institute of Heraldry

Worldbook Encyclopedia 2005 Ed.

American Heritage Dictionary

Wikipedia.org