

# Heraldic Display of Banners and Flags

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*Web Minister's Note: This article was written prior to 2004. The article has been slightly edited for publication on the web.*

In this talk I plan to focus on one area of heraldic display using banners and flags and I will assume that everyone at least has a basic idea of what a Heraldic device or coat of arms is. I will cover first the history of flags and where they come from. Then I will cover briefly the kinds of flags common to the SCA time period and culture and then I will briefly look at how we can use these flags and banners to fit into our own chosen persona or culture within the SCA. Before we get going too far though, I will touch briefly on the terminology used in this article. Generally I will use the term flag unless speaking specifically of a certain kind or type of flag with its own name or terminology. Hopefully once these terms are all covered things will become clearer.

## History

First off on our journey let's look at a brief history of flags and how they came into being.

**Pre Historic:** While no one can ever be 100% sure of things in this time period we can use our imagination and educated guesswork to speculate on what things may have been like. It can be assumed based on modern archaeological evidence and some study of so-called Stone Age tribes discovered in the early part of the 20th century that these people did indeed use symbolism of one sort or another. This may have been the decoration of spears or other weapons with animal furs or other parts, the painting and decorating of their own bodies or the use of a totem of some sort or other.

**3000 to 3500 BCE:** This period of time gives us our first hard evidence of the history of flags. From Egypt and Babylon we have carvings, paintings and pictographs that show people carrying objects believed to be the precursors of modern flags. These items are poles or spears decorated with various items. Called Vexeloids these items give rise to the word Vexiology meaning the study of flags. The objects shown on these poles appear to be either wood, metal or pottery depictions of things like animals, plants or even astronomical bodies such as stars moons and the sun.

From this same general time period we have some examples of actual vexeloids found in Persia (modern day Iran) dating at least 5000 years ago or more. These consist of metal staffs or poles topped by metal eagles and showing embossed metal plates that may have been painted to show pictures of some sort. Several Hittite vexeloids have been found in Turkey from about 2000 to 2500 BCE, and these show symbols of Stags, Bulls and the sun. There is also a Biblical reference made to the tribes of Israel gathered about their Flags or Banners. This is believed now to be a misinterpretation

by very early Biblical interpreters and probably actually refers to Vexeloids of some sort or other.

**1500 BCE:** Chinese vexeloids including the first use of small coloured strips of silk give us our first look at things to come as cloth is used for the first time to add colour to a vexeloid.

**300 BCE:** From 1500 with the advent of cloth of various types we see many changes in the size and basic make up of vexeloids. Coming into the Roman and Greek eras we find that most vexeloids show at least some cloth of one type or another with the most common being a small square or rectangular banner of some sort. In a Naples museum are displayed some actual examples of these early cloth flags on several vexeloids of Samnite origin. This same museum also has a mosaic displayed showing Alexander the Great defeating the Persians and on the mosaic is a Persian Banner carried on a simple cross bar that shows a red field and gold rooster.

Perhaps the most well known examples of Vexeloids from this time period and something most of us have probably seen at least Hollywood versions of are vexeloids carried by the Roman Legions. Called Labrums by the Romans these were poles with some sort of fancy tip on top and a cross-bar carrying either an embossed metal plate or a cloth banner of some sort. These usually showed such things as the Legion's identifying number, its battle honours and possibly a picture of the Emperor, a God or some other totemic symbol to act as a focus for the troops to help instil bravery and skill in coming battles. It is believed that Napoleon's love of Roman history was responsible for the resurrection of these styles of Labrums in the French army. Topped with stylized metal eagles these showed the identification numbers and battle honours of the unit they represented.

**300 to 500 CE:** As we come to the fall of Roman influence over most of Europe we see the spread of cloth and the knowledge of its manufacture to all parts of the civilized world. This in turn leads to the actually devolution of the Vexeloid. From its height of glory as a wonderfully carved and decorated pole showing the symbols of the might of the Roman legions it becomes a somewhat simple straight pole topped by a spear point or simple single item and displaying a cloth flag. Fixed to this pole either as a free-flying flag or hanging from a cross-bar as a banner are the cloth flags we have come to know.

**SCA era:** This then brings us firmly into the period of time covered within the SCA and flags of some sort or another have spread the length and breadth of Europe, the mid and far East and Northern Africa and Asia. Flags of this time period also start to show the beginnings of heraldic influences. However they are still a far way from the modern flags we all are used to as the symbol of a country or nation. In fact the first claim to a national Flag goes to Denmark in the 14th century. King Valdemere II united the entire nation under the now familiar white cross on a blood red field when they marched off on a crusade against then Pagan Estonia. This flag was originally square in shape and has evolved into the rectangular shape common today but in its same colour

and configuration. This flag also forms the basis for all other Scandinavian flags showing an elongated cross on a coloured field.

## Types of Flags

Now that we see flags coming into being I will move on to look at the flags as they came to be known and used in the Heraldic era of Europe and the names and types of flags used. The flags and banners we use in the SCA are in fact an extension of the Heraldry we use and as such follow the practices of the areas mostly contained in continental Europe and Britain. We will talk more on this later as it relates to those of us that follow cultures outside of this realm. While we will talk about the following flags in a somewhat chronological order it must be remembered that the dates are approximate and a great deal of overlap and variation occurred in different parts of the world. In other words don't assume because a certain people started to use a certain type of flag on a given date it meant that all other flags from before this time stopped being used. Often several hundred years would pass with various styles used side by side.

**Oriflamme:** The first period flag we see is called an Oriflamme and the name comes from Latin and means Flame of Gold. This style of flag came into use in about the 7th to 9th century C.E. and was based on a square flag with several tails off what is called the FLY end or the part furthest away from the pole or rope. Many of these early examples consisted of a red silk background embroidered with gold or yellow symbols and seeing these fly in the breeze is probably how the name came to be. Examples of the Oriflamme appear in a mosaic in Rome showing Constantine and Charlemagne each holding an Oriflamme. William the Conqueror was said to use an Oriflamme of pure red silk with no decoration and an Oriflamme was supposedly carried by the French at Agincourt and was lost or captured in the battle.

**Pennon:** Next we come to a flag called a Pennon. This was a small flag most often of a long tapered triangle or swallow tailed shape although many other shapes are known. It was used to place on the end of a spear or lance tip to identify the knight or soldier carrying it. These would show the primary heraldic colours and charge items of the holder. From these developed the Cavalry Pennant or Guidon used by the armies of many nations. Examples of these can still be seen today flying from the antenna masts of tanks and armoured vehicles of modern military units that trace their origin back to Cavalry and Dragoon units of days gone by. During the height of chivalric and heraldic times a specific type of pennon that was square and had several tails flying from its end came to be the symbol of a knight on the battlefield. This pennon showed a pretty much full depiction of the knight's heraldic device on the square area. This Pennon also came to be a badge of rank when a higher class of knight came into being. The Knight Banneret came to be accepted as a sort of elite or higher ranking Knight and it became a custom for a lesser Knight now called Knight Bachelor when ready to be elevated to a Knight Banneret to present his pennon to his King or Duke. The King or Duke would then cut the tails off the knight's pennon thus turning it into a Banner symbolic of this new rank.

**Banner:** This then leads of course to the next flag called the Banner. This is probably the most widely known and also widely diversified type of flag. It can be square or rectangular and almost of any size imaginable. Coming into being in the 12th to 13th century as mentioned above the banner was originally almost twice as tall as it was long. It was usually displayed on a spear or lance and showed the holder's complete heraldic device. These banners showed the troops both friend and foe not only who was on the field but were they were in the swirling melee of massed combat. From these came the practice of using an actual banner bearer to carry the banner usually mounted on a long pole or spear with a cross-bar or some sort of stiffening to allow the flag to look like it was always blowing in the breeze. This made it easy to see the full flag and thus avoid any possible confusion when flags of similar colours were sagging down along the pole in shapeless lumps of cloth if there was no wind. During this time it also became a common practice to make a flag's size indicative of the rank of the person it represented. The King or leader of an army had the largest flag with his dukes having smaller ones and the knights under them even smaller on down to the lowest ranking noble. This of course led to an uncontrolled degree of one-upmanship as a king seeing his enemy with a large banner would return to the next battle with one larger than his. The first King would return next time with an even larger one and so on back and forth. This continued unchecked until at one battle it was reported that the King's banner was rolled on to the field upon a huge specially built cart supporting a mast-like gantry structure to support the massive weight of the banner.

It was also during this time that these banners began to change shape first becoming nearly square and then lengthening out until they become the longer than higher rectangular shape we all associate with modern day flags. A few interesting facts about modern flags are that, Switzerland is the only modern national flag that is still square in shape. Nepal's odd semi swallowtail double triangle is the only national flag with other than 4 sides and Libya has the only single coloured national flag with no charge items or multiple colours on its green field. Also an interesting bit of SCA historic trivia concerns the Trumpets used as symbols of the office of Heraldry. It was the use of banners hung from trumpets in early Hollywood films showing the same heraldic symbolism as that worn by the herald these trumpets announced that led to the mistaken belief the trumpeter was a part of the herald's office rather than a separate entity. The trumpeter used in these cases was a hired musician of the King or ruling noble and would sound a fanfare for any important person entering the hall and not just the Herald we assumed they represented. It is unfortunate this has become a carved-in-stone symbol within the SCA because of its historic basis in the Society. It is probably too late now to make a Society-wide change in this so we are stuck with it. It is however this hanging form of the banner that we in the SCA are most familiar with. Termed a gonfallon it is in effect a banner hung from a pole or on a wall with its charge items or designs configured so as to be read when looking at it as it hangs.

**Standard:** The final type of flag or banner we have to cover that existed in SCA times is the Standard. The long semi-tapered flags called standards came along fairly late in SCA times being used primarily in the British Isles from about 1300 through the

Renaissance period and even into the late 1700s. The standard came to be perhaps the ultimate statement of heraldic art we know of in SCA times. Once more fulfilling a role on the field of battle the standard not only showed who the holder of the flag was but for the first time made definite connection to what side of a battle the holder may have been on. It was pretty much standard procedure on standards of this period to indicate the country or faction you were fighting for in the first section of the flag closest to the pole. From there outwards the items shown normally represented the person whose banner it was. Once again these standards were of various sizes to represent the rank of the person whose flag it was. This time however the size limits were dictated and controlled by the Heraldic colleges and thus were kept to a reasonable size. These sizes ranged from a maximum of eight yards long for a king down to less than four yards for the lowest ranking knights.

Finally, all of this leads us back to our SCA times and chosen persona. The question now arises of how we can use one or more of all these types of flags to represent ourselves. Anyone who has been to an event will know that a simple quick look around shows many varied and colourful banners and flags of all sorts used to represent different people or positions within the society. These flags add greatly to the colour and atmosphere of our events and even help to hide or disguise a great many mundane or modern items that intrude upon our enjoyment of the day. At face value these items provide a great display of our heraldic arts to all who see them. Now however another question comes to mind when thinking of the SCA and our persona within it. How accurate are the items we use to represent ourselves based on the time and location of our assumed personas? Let's take a look at what various people from the varied eras and cultures in the SCA can possibly do to make some sort of item that can display their persona and heraldry in an SCA atmosphere.

First of all we must accept the fact that Heraldry and heraldic display forms a large and visible part of the SCA and our events. However much of the time period we now incorporate into the SCA and many of the cultures covered never encountered heraldry in their real histories. Right off the bat then, we are faced with a major anachronism for anyone playing one of these roles that wants to display heraldic items. Let's take a look at this and see if we can come up with ideas that would allow a persona in this situation to more accurately make use of heraldry.

Based on the previous time line of history for flags and their forerunners take a look at your persona and think of where it fits in this picture. What sort of display did the people of the real time period use and how can you make it work for you? Did they have a flag of some sort? If not what did they have? Probably a vexeloid or some similar variation of a totem or other item showing off symbols they felt were special or represented them. Take for instance our own canton, we have a large number of Norse, Saxon and Celtic based peoples from before the 10th century CE. It is known that the Vikings did have flags but for the most part these seem to have been one of one type and design showing a raven of one sort or other on a semi triangular shaped flag. Not very suitable to the fact that several people would all have the same flag in that case. However history and archaeological evidence shows us that these people did

use designs of some sort or another on things like shields and ships sails etc. These were usually geometric shapes and may have been applied on purpose or simply to copy or highlight the elements of the construction of the shield or other item. A center boss may have been a different colour than the shield or even surrounded by several circles to accent it. A cross brace holding the slabs of a shield together might be of a different material than the rest of the shield and thus show up as a bar of another colour on the shield's face. Whether on purpose or accidentally these are all examples of what can be used not only to make a period looking banner or flag but even to register as a heraldic device. Though out of period for the persona, at least the holder of the device could register it within the SCA. Another option if you are not keen on a flag if it doesn't fit your persona is to track back in history and use what the real people of your era may have used. Make yourself a vexeloid out of a staff and add symbols to it either of real material or manufactured to represent what you want to show. Just make sure you use a made-up item if you intend to mount the head of a fallen enemy on your staff. Wouldn't want to tick off his relatives would we. Basically the ideas and items that can be used are limitless. Use your imagination and study of what your persona would have used to get some ideas and go for it.

