

TIME TO CUT THE UMBILICUS BETWEEN HERALDRY AND VEXILLOLOGY

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and read to ICV XIII
before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

There is no denying that vexillology developed in the womb of heraldry. Although flags and banners - and indeed vexilloids themselves - are centuries older than coats of arms, the study of flag history and symbolism has emerged in our own time as an independent and scientific discipline.

From the heraldist point of view flags and especially banners and royal standards are and always have been nothing more than peripheral objects of investigation. That conclusion is inevitable when comparison is made between the slender volumes about flags entitled, for example, I/6, with the total bulk of Siebmacher's monumental work or when consulting *Wappenfibel* by Hildebrandt, where we find far more space given to helmets and mantlings than to flags.

On the other hand, a mere dip into vexillological literature shows how much the text is sprinkled with terms proper to heraldry, how much it conforms to heraldic modes of expression.

In sum, the interaction between the two disciplines is so obvious that no one is seriously going to question it. The interdependence is sufficiently illustrated by the coats of arms and banners of the Swiss cantons, by national flags charged with either the full State arms or at least their principal elements (eg GDR, Albania) or conversely, State arms inspired by the national flag (eg USA, Somalia). Every vexillologist has to come to terms with the rudiments of heraldry, but heraldists seem not to pay too much attention to vexillology...

Indeed, the objects of heraldist investigation are quite different from those that concern the vexillologist, even when the subjects under mutual investigation are in substance and form similar or identical. Specific objects of investigation call for a specific approach and each approach has its own mode of expression and terminology.

So how do the objects of vexillological research differ from those pursued by heraldry?

- [] A coat of arms has one side only to consider, whereas a flag has two sides - obverse and the reverse;
- [] a coat of arms is made of concrete materials; flags generally use bunting;
- [] a full coats of arms has external components, including crest, torse and mantling, supporters and other elements not found in flags.

Flags and banners on the other hand, have their peculiar accessories and requisites - masts or flagpoles, decorative finials, cords, tassels, fringes and so on.

Over the centuries of its existence, heraldry has evolved rules that have assumed some familiarity and which heraldists have sought to foist upon vexillology.

These include the rules regarding colours, the rule of dexter and sinister sides, and the rule of the schematic representation of figures. (The other heraldic rule - location of helmet and crest, depiction of heraldic figures and so forth - need not detain us here). It is important however to know how these rules developed in order to judge whether their application to vexillology is inevitable, possible or irrelevant.

COLOURS AND METALS

The rule forbidding colours and metals touching each other is essentially a technological one. I am talking about medieval technology, of course. Enamels to be laid on the metallic background of shields could not be painted close, side by side, for this would lead to their fusion or bleeding and produce perhaps a secondary colour along the borderline (eg blue and red yield violet). The obvious and necessary solution was to leave a narrow stripe of metal between the two colours.

As it happens, black (*sable*) is neither a colour nor a metal, from the heraldic point of view. The term *sable* as applied in French blazonry has nothing to do with the same word in common speech meaning "sand". It is an heraldic corruption of the Polish *sobol*, an animal (*martre zibeline*) hunted or reared for its precious black pelt. As a "fur", *sable* can be laid on either colour or metal. Thus the sequence of colours in the flags of the two German states is correct, for black as a fur, red as a colour and gold as a metal can occur next to each other. Paradoxically, heraldists themselves, forgetting the real meaning of *sable*, have added it to the list of colours; and have tried more than once to change the precedence to black over yellow over red, and thus destroy the flag's symbolism. As a rule, flags are sewn together from strips of bunting of different colours according to the

design - all this is technologically feasible: Unlike heraldry, vexillology does not use metals, enamels or "furs", but works only with bunting of various colours. The range of colours is much more extensive than that found in (European) heraldry. So, for example, heraldry acknowledges only azure, whereas in the vexillological description of flags, blue has to be specified as to shade - eg B--, B-, B, B+, B++, not to mention further specifications as to hue, such as violet blue, dull greenish-blue and so on.

On the other hand, the term "gold" preferred to "yellow" by lawmakers when defining the German national colours or the colour of the hammer and sickle or stars in the flags of the Soviet Union, China, Viet Nam creates confusion for both flagmakers and writers of vexillological literature.

It can lead to the manufacture or reproduction of unique flags, where the yellow is rendered by real metallic gold, as recently the case in **Wappen und Flaggen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und ihrer Lander** (Bonn 1987), or by orange in **Rennau's Haack Flaggenkarte** (Gotha 1987) and so on.

This manner of proceeding defies logic, for the same legislators have never felt it necessary to define the Prussian flag as black-silver, or its Bavarian counterpart as silver-blue. They speak simply of black-white or white-blue flags.

If it comes to that, "white" is not so strange a term even for heraldry. For instance, the Bohemian lion is described as white (not silver). The most distinguished honour awarded foreigners in Czechoslovakia is officially the Order of the White Lion. The official name of the Polish heraldic animal is **orzel biały** - The White Eagle. Gold and silver are justified as flag terms in sporadic instances only, and never when speaking about flags. Banners and regimental colours, on the other hand may be edged or fringed in gold, embroidered with gold or silver thread, or equipped with tassels woven in silver or gold.

If there are no technological limitations, flag design still calls for other criteria - those of aesthetics, high visibility, balance in composition and so on. Flag aesthetic depends on the interdependence of light and dark colours, but light means not only white or yellow, but may include pale green and buff as well - although it is not always possible to apply this principle due to the press of historical or other reasons. In any case, flags are classified by other criteria than merely the aesthetic. Everyone considers his own country's flag the best, and finds easy justification for it.

SUMMARY: Vexillology acknowledges not only the following colours (white, yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green, brown, black) but a variety of their shades (light and dark) and a variety of hues (eg, saffron-yellow, blue-violet). Separation of light and dark colours should be given preference to render the best possible optical effect. In this context the real gold and silver found in some banners should also be considered colours, and be specified as such.

DEXTER AND SINISTER

The rule of dexter and sinister side comes from the French medieval courtoisie towards the coats of arms and supporters. In Czech and German language vexillological publications frequent reference is found to expressions such as "to the heraldic left", "on the heraldic right," "the flag described from left to right shows..."

None of this make sense in vexillology which already has its own point of reference in the hoist or flagstaff. Directions such as left and right are easily dispensed with. The correct terms are "in the hoist area", "at the fly end". When a flag is displayed in vertical mode from a cross-bar, what we see is simply the upper edge of the flag moved to the left. Indicators left or right are of course essential when discrimination needs to be made among a group of flags displayed together, especially to indicate clearly their order of precedence. But whatever the circumstances, the point of reference is always the viewer's perspective.

SUMMARY: Vexillology always describes a flag from the vantage point of the flagstaff. "To hoist", "from hoist", "facing staff", "facing fly" - these are the parameters of vexillological orientation. When necessary, (eg Paraguay) reference can also be made to the obverse and reverse of the flag .

BLAZONRY

The third heraldic rule under consideration has evolved from the heraldic practice of blazonry (that is, description of the escutcheon). It has the great advantage of a very compendious mode of expression whereby all the elements that combine to form the coat of arms are specifically but comprehensively explained. Nevertheless blazonry must be considered a product of the snobbery of a previous aristocratic culture. In Czech or German, blazonry is not too far removed from the common speech. In French on the other hand, the terminology is at far remove from ordinary parlance (eg sable, above) and in English the heraldic argot is quite beyond the pale of ordinary English "as she is spoke" (consider: sinister, dexter, gules, mullet and so forth).

National flags on the other hand are in the main symbols and symptoms of peoples' struggles for national or social identity and independence. The relationship between people and their flag is very close, emotive, even when appearing so only on special occasions. Consequently, the language of vexillology should be simple, popular, easy for any one to understand even if some special terms cannot be avoided. In describing a flag we should not resort to such heraldic terms as pale or fess, - the flag consists simply of stripes or bars.

SUMMARY: Flags consist of rectangular stripes or other geometrical figures. They should be described in a simple intelligible way - from the hoist out to the fly, and from top to bottom. Coats of arms featured on flags should be described in vexillological terms - eg yellow, white, hoist, fly - not gold, silver, dexter, sinister.

CONCLUSION

Some would say, perhaps, that these musings are merely statements of the obvious. If this were the case, Hildebrand's book could not proclaim, as it does (on p207):

fur die Gestaltung des Flaggenbildes gelten im allgemeinem die heraldischen Regeln. Doch gibt es auch Ausnahmen: z.B. Schwarz-Rot-Gold... (Heraldic rules in general are to be applied in flag design. There are only a few exceptions - the sequence black-red-gold).

In fact, there are many vexillological books thoroughly imbued with the perspectives of heraldry. As an example, the otherwise excellent *Manual de Vexilologia* of Vicente de Cadens y Vicent states on p90: *Siniestra: la parte izquierda de la bandera en relacion a quien la lleva..* (The sinister side of the flag is the half of the flag on the flagbearer's left).

In *The Dictionary of Flag Terminology* (London 1969) we find (p23):

In describing a flag it is assumed that the flag is hoisted, or is described as being hoisted, on a vertical flagstaff on the observer's left and flying towards his right. But note that our terms assume that the hoist is the right hand part of the flag.

Even *The Flag Bulletin* is not totally immune to heraldic modes of expression. For instance, the emblems in Vol XXVII, #3/126 dealing with the flags of the Bielorrussian Soviet Socialist Republic, are shown as Au instead of Y, even when in practice the colour is yellow.

It is high time to discontinue the illogical application of heraldic rules to vexillology, for vexillology is an independent discipline of historical research, with its own special objects of investigation, and in consequence, with its own modes of expression.