

ST GEORGE'S CROSS AND ST JOHN'S CROSS**Paul Dechaix****Introduction**

A vexillologist even before the word was coined, I am only an amateur if a dedicated one. Coming from Savoy, and welcomed by my friendly neighbours in Switzerland, I think proper to honour our two countries by means of flags. As a matter of fact, I will have the opportunity to state that their emblems proceed from the same source and are identical in many respects. They belong to the group of flags with a white cross upon red ground which I purpose to examine. In the same way, I will try to list the flags with inverted colours, that is a red cross on white ground, called St George's Cross.

In fact, the first two banners in existence bearing a cross showed these two colours only. The cross is the Christian cross. White is symbolic of Christ's purity and red of his blood. Starting from the origins, I will examine that duality in two individualities and then consider their development and extension.

Origins: Dual character and individuality

Both banners came into being at the time of the Crusades and developed during the Hundred Year's War.

A) Crusaders and Hospitallers

All heraldists, the German Neubecker, whose memory I am pleased to honour, the French Pastoureau, the Belgian de Crayencour and the Swiss Galbreath and Jecquier, agreed that in the beginning banners preceded armorial bearings. However, after some confusion concerning their shape, armorial bearings were not introduced before the beginning of the Crusades. At that time the whole of Europe was Christian.

Apart from the king's and lord's emblems, the Crusaders hoisted white banners bearing a red cross. The standard model, as described by Whitney Smith, was composed of a shortened Greek-shaped cross in the centre of a three-pointed white cloth. Those who left for the Holy Land wore that red cross on their cloths. The cross symbolised a real person about whom a legend was built, that is St George. He was a Roman officer born in Cappadocia of a noble family, he lived in the 3rd century and ranked as a tribune, that is a colonel. Just as St Maurice, Savoy's patron saint, who died for his faith at Lydda (now Lod in Israel) under Diocletian. St George is said to have helped a young girl out of ruffians' hands. According to the legendary tale, she was possessed of the devil and St George delivered her. Since that time, the saint is represented as a horseman fighting the devil disguised as a dragon. Pope John XXII struck him off the Church Calenda but he remained the patron saint of several nations and cities, so much so as to obliterate the fact the archangel St Michael hurled Lucifer and the fallen angels down into Hell.

Anyhow, the red cross on white ground is called St George's Cross. When the Crusaders reached Jerusalem, they found Christian communities organised to

care for pilgrims. First came the Order of the Hospitallers named after St John the Baptist, Christ's cousin. The founders are said to be Italian merchants from Amalfi, south of Naples, one of the four great maritime cities along with Venice, Genoa and Pisa. The armorial bearings of Amalfi consist of a blue field bearing a white eight-pointed cross known nowadays as Maltese Cross. Aldo Ziggrotto has written an article about the Amalfi republic said to date from 838. Ziggrotto thinks he can state that the original Hospitallers were really Amalfi merchants, their Order dating from 1048. On the other hand, a blue national banner bearing a typical white eight-pointed cross was in existence. The Italian republic has created, for the Navy, a flag bearing a blazon composed of four others, those of Venice, Genoa, Amalfi and Pisa, the whole being encompassed with ropes and topped by a mural crown.

In the past, there was in existence a red Maltese flag with a typical eight-pointed cross above mentioned. Yet, the oldest known flag of the Hospitallers in the eyes of specialists such as Whitney Smith is a red emblem with five rounded pennants, the centre bearing a white cross widening in curved lines from the middle to the edges. It may be considered as the first outline of the Maltese cross. In fact, the real emblem of the Hospitallers who became first the knights of Rhodes in 1309, and then, after they were driven out of the island by the Turks, the knights of Malta in 1530, is a red flag with a straight white cross in the centre. It is said to date from 1120 and it was consecrated by Pope Innocent II in 1130. The blazon is identical. The eight-pointed cross is used for medals, it can be seen on the cloak and it is placed under the blazon.

B) France and England

Experts report that a first «Entente Cordiale» was achieved during the Crusades by king Philippe II, king Auguste of France and king Henry II of England. It was agreed that, apart from the royal emblems, the French national banner would be white with a red cross, while the English national banner would be red with a white cross, both banners being square. After the Crusades, England inverted the colours as soon as 1277 and a red cross on white ground was definitively chosen and has remained so ever since. By the 8th century, St George had been chosen as the patron saint of the English knights before he became the patron of the country as a whole, as a consequence of the association between the saint and the banner.

In the course of the Hundred Year's War, the English soldiers used to wear a red cross on their coats of mail, while the French chose a white cross to avoid confusion. However, a red emblem with a white cross was not accepted for the French nation before 1375 and that apparently for a short period only. Later, in 1569, when the 1st French regiment, called «of Picardy», was established, a red square emblem with a white cross reaching to the edges was selected for it. Military historians declare that, as the instructors of that regiment were Swiss officers, the colours of Switzerland had been chosen. From that time, all French army flags, with few exceptions (Burgundy, Franche-Comté, some foreign regiments) bore a white cross, the various colours of those flags depending on the regiments. The white

cross was placed on the colours of Swiss regiments in French service too, but these regimental flags showed a distinctive pattern: each quarter divided by the white cross showed «flames» in various colours.

Evolution and development

Initially limited to the Crusaders and Hospitallers, then to France and England, this two emblems with a cross on a single colour ground, white or red, with or without any variant, were to be adopted by others in the course of centuries.

A) St George's Cross

As it has been before, the emblem with a red cross on a white ground has been the emblem of England, whose patron saint is St George, ever since.

As for Scotland, it is the white saltire (St Andrew's Cross on a blue ground), Ireland's emblem is St Patrick's Cross with a red saltire on a white ground. The Scottish and the English cross were merged into the first Union Jack, with a widened central cross after the English-Scottish Union, in 1707. In 1801, when Ireland was admitted as a third partner and the country became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a second Union Jack was created, the latter partner being represented by four small parallelograms shifted anticlockwise and set in the white saltire. While the merchant Navy has a red ensign with the Union Jack in the upper corner, the Royal Navy has a white ensign bearing the cross of St George and the Union Jack in the upper hoist quarter. Imitating the United Kingdom, some former British colonies, now independent, have chosen white navy ensigns bearing the red cross with their own national flag in the upper hoist corner. Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago are such ones. We may remark also the emblems of Guernsey and present Northern Ireland, which are white with a cross of St George along with other elements

England founded the «Company of the Indies» for trade with its American colonies. The company flag showed horizontal red and white stripes (the first pattern had 9 stripes) and a cross of St George in the upper hoist canton. At the time the colonies revolted, the stripes of the company flag numbered 13. After independence, the USA replaced the Union Jack by the same number of stars in a blue canton (1777). We must not forget our Australian friends who, besides the cross of the South, have on their emblems, in a canton, the Union Jack with the cross of St George (like New Zealand and the Fiji Islands). Recently, Anguilla re-established the Union Jack.

Likewise other countries chose the St George's Cross as their emblem in the course of time. Such is the case with the maritime republic of Genoa and the island of Sardinia. Originally, Genoa had a red flag stamped with a golden horseman overcoming a dragon, that is St George. Yet, as early as 1138, Genoa began to use the white ensign with a red cross it has kept ever since, the symbol of St George its patron saint. In 1797, Bonaparte created the Ligurian republic but did not tamper with the flag. That republic disappeared in 1815, but its emblem was to be found in the new flag of the kingdom of Savoy-Piedmont-Sardinia with which Genoa was united. Ziggio tells us that the Sardinian emblem is

the old Aragonese flag dating from the reign of Peter I. While the battle of Alcaraz was being fought on the heights between Murcia and Valencia against the Moors in 1096, St George appeared to Peter. According to our author, John II of Aragon did not extend that emblem to Sardinia before 1297. Sardinia has been allotted to him but he had to conquer it first. Here too, the cross of St George symbolizes the struggle of the Christians against the infidels represented by four Moorish heads. Likewise the Corsican flag shows one Moorish head on white ground. It may be observed that this head represents the Barbaresque pirates from the North African coast rather than Spanish Moors. It may be added that several Italian cities have a red cross on white ground in their blazon, a reminder of the emblem with the cross of St George (argent on gules).

Likewise St George is Russian's patron saint, its red blazon showing a golden horseman fighting a dragon (or on gules). Also, the Caucasian Georgia whose name is «Gruzia» in Russian and «Kartvelia» in Georgian, has St George for patron, who gave the name to the country.

B) The Cross of St John (the Baptist)

Likewise, the cross of St John – white on red ground – has developed. I mention as a reminder that, as early as 1130, the established emblem of the Hospitallers was a red rectangular flag with a white straight cross in the centre. Now this emblem is exactly the same as that of the Savoy people who just speak of the «Savoy cross», but it has been emphasised that the Order of Malta will always claim priority. As a matter of fact, evidence of that emblem in Savoy can be found in two seals only: That of count Humbert III in 1151 and an older one, that of count Amadeus III in 1143. It must be stated that the latter is severely damaged but the date is asserted by experts, according to Guichenon the historiographer of the House of Savoy, in 1660. Savoy, a county in 1032, then a duchy in 1416 and later a kingdom called «of Sicily» in 1713, and «of Sardinia» in 1718, first had a yellow banner with a black eagle, just as the Holy Roman Empire. Amadeus III, who took part in a Crusade, is said to be the first to use the red banner with a white cross derived from the Hospitallers' along with the first mentioned. Amadeus IV and Amadeus V, both of whom took the cross as well, might have done the same thing.

But Peter II is reputed to have taken up the banner with the cross once for all between 1263 and 1268 and to have abandoned the one with the eagle. All specialists from Gerbaix de Sonnaz to Ziggio agree on that point. After the battle of Lepanto in 1571, since confusion between Malta and Savoy ships could easily happen, the latter flag was supplemented with the four white letters «F.E.R.T.», each one letter in every quarter of the flag. The meaning of this motto of the House of Savoy has been debated at length. It is the Latin word «fert» (he bears) alluding to the weight of public office on the sovereign's shoulders. When the duchy became a kingdom in 1713, the white cross on red served as a canton to a blue flag. After 1815 the same flag showed a canton superimposing two St George's crosses to Savoy's cross of St John, one for Sardinia and one for the newly acquired Genoa.

Regarding the Holy Empire, apart from the yellow banner with a black eagle, there was in existence a red

gonfanon (old German «gundfano», a war flag), called «Blutbanner» (blood banner), with a white cross extended at the top with a tail or bend called «Schwenkel». It might date from the Crusades, as well as the next two emblems: Vienna, capital of the Habsburg, possesses a red blazon with a white cross. The Helvetic Confederation too possesses a square red flag with a Greek-shaped white cross.

Undisputedly, Switzerland derives its name from the canton of Schwyz. It cannot be questioned that its flag is not unlike the Schwyz flag with a white crosslet in the corner. Yet, two mistakes must be avoided. First, the federal flag does not directly derive from that of the canton of Schwyz. Secondly, it did not appear, for the first time, at the battle of Laupen in 1339. In fact, there never was a common banner at any time, as the soldiers of each canton fought under their own banner. At Laupen, the Confederates wore a simple white cross stuck on their cloths and painted on their armour, or, perhaps, in the middle of a red shield on their chests. Moreover, at Nancy in 1477, the banners of every canton were marked with a white cross. Louis Mühlemann states that, between the 14th and 16th century, a red triangular banner with a «traversing» white cross was used by the city of Berne as well as the canton of Schwyz and even by all the Confederates. According to Aldo Ziggio, Amadeus VIII, first duke of Savoy, had the very same emblem.

After a period without common symbols the Swiss troops were finally, in 1815, given a common identifying emblem, a red brassard with a long and narrow «shortened» white cross. By 1841 the cross became broader and shorter with equal branches. In 1889, each branch is 1/6 more in length than in width. In civilian use this emblem is the national flag. As for naval use,

on lakes, on the Rhine and overseas, the Swiss national flag was given a rectangular 2x3 shape in 1941. It must be asserted that the only origin of the Swiss flag is the confederal idea symbolised by the cross. As for the red colour it comes from the Holy Empire as well as from Berne and Schwyz.

Denmark too has a red flag with a white cross shifted towards the staff, of the Scandinavian type. In 1219 King Valdemar II is reputed to have seen this emblem, the «Danebrog» (meaning in the old Danish language «protection of the Danes») during the battle of Lyndanisse against the Estonians. It should be noted that the two or three pointed naval ensign recalling the Hanseatic League is found in the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic States, Poland and Germany.

My attainments in vexillology are far inferior to those of the reader. Nevertheless, I think I have brought out a few disregarded or even unknown elements. You are the first to read about them. This I consider an honour for me. I am a self taught vexillologist using various and unconnected documents and I came across the book that does credit to its author, the founder of the Flag Research Center, that is my first master Whitney Smith. My second master was William Crampton with his «Observer's Book of Flags» and «Complete Guidebook of the Flags». Yet, neither will resent my saying that, except for authors more concerned with military flags, such as Alessandro Ferrero, who read a brilliant paper at the 12th Vexillological Congress in San Francisco, my undisputed master for the Savoy emblems is the president of the «Centro Italiano di Studi Vessillologici», Aldo Ziggio.

I do not deserve any praise but my masters do.



Postcard with standard-bearers of the Swiss cantons, c. 1960.

The canton of Jura, having become a republic and canton only in 1978, is obviously missing. (Editions G. Jaeger, Genève, N° 410)

Bannerets des 22 Cantons suisses

Bannerträger der 22 Schweizer Kantone