

FLAGPOLES

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Flagpoles including flagstaves, flagmasts, and pikes have existed for thousands of years. Usage of the flagpole preceded use of the flag itself and the traditions, design, symbolism, and variety of flagpoles have a great if little appreciated cultural significance. It is remarkable that this topic, relating to one of the most important aspects of flags, has been almost totally ignored in both popular and scholarly literature.

The origin of flagpoles cannot be analyzed on the basis of written records because their usage began in the prehistoric era before writing was invented. Some poles have survived but their usages and symbolism are lost. Modern documentation of primate behavior and of the social characteristics of early hominids nevertheless allow us to develop a conjectural outline of the antecedents, characteristics, and early developmental stages of flagpoles, many of which are still reflected in the roles they play today.

Wooden poles have been a significant and inextricable part of human life from the earliest stages of its evolution. They were important not only in the ur-home of humankind, Africa, but in all areas where those migrations characterizing the spread of humanity encountered trees. Providing much of the matériel necessary for human life, poles and sticks have always been indispensable tools for human survival and advancement. Other primates have also utilized them in ways parallel to human usage. Based on what is known today about the abilities of such primates, it is clear that the invention of wooden tools was not exclusively a human achievement.

Without any training by humans, chimpanzees are known to employ poles to serve a number of functions that enhance their lives. Choosing wood suitable for a specific task, a chimpanzee can climb with the aid of a pole and is also able to combine sticks to create a long tool. Sticks are used for digging up roots, obtaining honey from hives, extracting termites from their nests, and similar tasks. A stick is broken off from a bush or tree, its leaves are plucked, and the tool is dexterously inserted in the hive or nest. The general process involves not just finding and preparing a proper stick to work with, but of gathering several in anticipation of possible breakage.

Similar usage of poles by early human primates gradually expanded to more complex ones. A fallen tree was made into a bridge for crossing a swift river; a pointed rod allowed preparation of the soil for planting seeds, a collection of interwoven leafy branches afforded shelter from storms. The danger of attack by other species was reduced when a sharpened staff became the first spear. The hunted became hunters when that same weapon was turned to offensive purposes against other humans.

Communication within social groupings larger than the family made possible by utilizing sounds elicited from wood provided one of the earliest non-verbal forms of human expression. Community solidarity, differentiation from others, and spiritual communion came to rely on wood for early wind instruments and drums. Their usage continues to serve the same function today. As with the development of many similar artifacts, wood utilized as a tool in early societies may have begun with an opportunistic reliance on nature, but the staff or stick in its natural state was eventually enhanced and refined to meet a greater range of applications.

The changing lunar periods and the seasons were tallied by rods; sticks became markers allowing the wanderer to trace his path in reverse. Communication with a distant companion might rely on a mutually agreed upon display of a raised pole.

Practical applications of wooden poles (sometimes later replaced by more permanent stone pillars) were often accompanied by symbolic meanings. The mystery of death was acknowledged through the marking of grave sites by poles. Even in the face of more modern inventions such pole usages have never been abandoned.

As technology advanced civilization, then as now symbolic usages and interpretations were quickly applied to material objects to serve perceived social needs. The staff in its natural state, as adapted by human refinement, and ultimately as replaced by artificial substitutes early became an important element in a wide range of human activities. The wand, mace, pike, umbrella, baton, club, spear, fan, ladder, and other versions of the pole may have begun as practical tools, but with the attribution of symbolism to those objects rulers learned how to make the supposed divine nature of their own authority manifest. The rod justified the authority of the pater familias and later the scepter glorified the king, society's father figure. Likewise priests and commanders of soldiers assumed the right to display a staff as an emblem of authority over subordinates.

It is impossible to reconstruct the order of invention of various symbolic uses of poles. One early version may have been associated with the belief that there was an axis mundi -- a connection between the underground, home of death and the unknown, the heavens where the power of the universe dwelt, and the Earth between them. North American Indians, Norsemen, and the ancient Greeks were among the many traditional societies which held that conception of the world. A pole or tree, invisible yet puissant, was believed to connect the three realms. In Greek mythology that pole passed through the *omphalus* (navel) of the earth drawing men toward the heavens. The erection of a wooden pole expressed that same concept in other societies. Such a pole could be seen by all and from afar; it overawed men while promising ascent to a higher state.

The pole came to be associated with ceremonies and decorations, stories and songs, holidays and sacrifices. In India, for example, *dhvajaropana* (pole-planting) rituals dated back to the Vedic era. On the first new moon of the vernal equinox a massive pole was set up, "decorated with a garland of leaves and flowers and surmounted with a flag". The *Indra-dhvaja-puja* (worship of the banner of Indra) was also celebrated. It supposedly began when great offense was taken by some at the way a dramatization of a historical event had been presented:

Indra, taking up the staff of his banner beat [the protestors] off. In commemoration of that event the sage Bharata prescribed the decoration and worship of Indra's flagstaff as a preliminary to the performance of any play.... The festival may have been of Aryan origin... [or] it may have been an Aryan adaptation of a rite connected with the worship of the linga [penis], observed by the indigenous pre-Aryans of ancient India."

The Pentateuch records in Numbers 21: 8-9 that "the Lord said unto Moses, make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole: and it came to pass, that everyone that was bitten, when he looked upon it, shall live." When that serpent on the staff came to be worshipped as an idol King Zachariah (II Kings:18, 3-4) "broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for in those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it." A similar serpent, entwined around a branch, was recognized a symbol of health even before its association with medicine and the great physician of the classical era, Æsculapius.

The power of the pole survives in the 21st century. The Nasa Indian nation in Colombia has protected itself by "building a self-sustaining community held together by an overarching philosophy of self-determination and the right to be left alone... They confront rebel and soldier alike with ceremonial three-foot batons decorated with tassels in the colors of the Nasa flag, green and red, and persuade the outsiders to leave." The batons wielded by the 7000-man Nasa army are their only material weapons, but they succeed in protecting people because those staffs incarnate national solidarity and their determination to maintain peace and autonomy. The baton is an outward manifestation of Nasa unity, both expressing and guaranteeing their strength in the face of outside threats.

The symbolic nature of the traditional pole derived much of its efficacy from being closely associated with two of the most powerful aspects of human life, familiar to the earliest hominids -- the growth of trees and the generation of children. Since each implicitly guaranteed the perseverance of society over time, the tree and the erect penis in nature and in symbolic forms -- were both potent manifestations of life and strength. Each deserves its own careful and detailed analysis, but some comments on these symbols as they relate to flagpoles are appropriate here.

Regarding the sexual import of flagpoles, it is significant that an ithyphallic man (with a bird's head) and a bird at the top of a staff appear in proximity to each other in the "Well Scene," one of the ancient cave paintings of Lascaux. These were not casual sketches: located five meters (16.4') below ground in the most secluded grotto of the cave, the bird staff and the bird-headed man suggest an attempt to understand and control nature, perhaps in order to guarantee the virility of the clan. The bird is not in a shrub or tree but clearly perched at the top of a pole in the artwork, which has been dated to 18,600 BCE (± 190 years). To identify this figure as a standard or vexilloid similar to those known to have been used in later civilizations such as Iran and Egypt would be unjustified based on available evidence, yet the visual parallels are remarkable.

The association of trees with flagpoles is also thousands of years old. Surviving records do not provide clear information on symbolism and usage, but some traditions current today clearly began in earliest times. For example, the Germanic peoples of northern Europe looked at trees as the mystical embodiment of eternal life because they maintained their green foliage through the harshest winters. When Christianity penetrated those regions, evergreen trees and boughs continued to be honored but were attributed with a new religious significance as symbols of the Christian promise of everlasting life. Houses and other buildings were also frequently decorated with evergreen branches and saplings. Special occasions were celebrated with trees or poles such as the four days corresponding to the changing seasons: Midsummer's Night and the Winter Solstice, the beginning of spring, and the autumn harvest.

Those ancient folkways have persisted. From at least the 19th century the display of evergreen trees has been combined with flags raised in a "topping-off" ceremony. Houses and buildings of all sizes are still often given ceremonial recognition as the last beam is installed. Decorated either before or immediately after being hoisted, that beam typically bears an evergreen tree combined with one or more flags. Workers often add slogans and their own names to the beam. Individuals involved with the construction work and leading citizens often participate in the topping-off and a photographic record is frequently made of the event.

Two major-topping off ceremonies in the 19th century -- those for the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and ones for the Eiffel Tower in 1889 -- may well have influenced the subsequent proliferation of flags as part of the completion ceremonies for buildings. While today the national flag is overwhelmingly the preferred choice, other flags have also been utilized.

Since ancient times the pole and tree have been manifestations of the same human urge to acknowledge with pride significant achievements in reaching toward the heavens. Not all endeavors, of course, meet with success. Whether through human frailty or an intervention of the gods against human hubris, buildings may be destroyed as in the ancient Babylonian and Hebrew creation myths concerning the Tower of Babel. A modern example is found in the death of *The Master Builder* (in the play of that name by Henrik Ibsen), who falls to his death while raising an evergreen over his new building.

The modern flagpole is frequently self-colored, i.e. it reflects the natural wood, metal, or fiberglass of its manufacture. Thus modern metal poles are often burnished steel or aluminum in color, while various shades of brown characterize wooden poles. However, for the sake of protection against the elements wooden flagpoles for maritime and general outdoor use are frequently painted, white being the preferred color in the United States. Fiberglass poles are available in white and other colors. Toothpicks, plastic straws, and paper tube "flag sticks" have been used for desk flags and "hand-wavers." Ersatz poles such as the ice-axe used by the first man to reach the top of Mount Everest are not infrequent.

The neutral coloration of these poles implicitly reflects the modern view that a flagstaff is no more than a piece of hardware. However important it may be functionally for the display of flags, the staff today is rarely seen as being a symbol itself. While there are exceptions, unobtrusiveness is implicitly a virtue of the 21st century standard flagmast. Typically any embellishments focus on the base and top of the pole, rather than on the shaft, as if the pole were simply one of the classical orders of columns set between capital and pedestal.

If the basic modern pole is unobtrusive in appearance and is generally decorated (if at all) only by the addition of a finial, poles nevertheless still exist that are characterized by the spirit of those earlier traditions that enhanced and reinforced the symbolism of the flag by giving coloration to the pole bearing it. The handsome staff with elaborate gold decorations of traditional significance, designed in 1960 to bear the first presidential standard of Ghana, was a striking exception. In 19th century Hungary an old tradition called for a respected local woman to serve as the "flag mother" whenever a local military unit received a banner. She drove the first nail into the pike and the cloth covering it.

Perhaps the most prominent modern form of decoration has been a spiral painting of a pole in the hues of its flag. This is usually associated with military colors permanently affixed to a pike, but even freestanding poles on which flags are hoisted and lowered are sometimes colored. Use of such a pole is generally restricted to a single flag design, to avoid conflict in the messages given by the pole and by the flag. While no inventory of such flags exist, the national flags presented here are typical.

In Japan natural bamboo alternating with black lacquer is considered the proper staff for the national flag. Military colors mounted on staffs painted blue and white have been utilized in Israel. Turkey alternates bands of red and white for poles bearing its national flag; Greece follows the identical pattern in its own blue and white. San Marino has the same staff design as Greece, except that the blue is considerably lighter. The national flags of the Republic of China in use from 1912 to 1928 and since 1928 often have staffs colored blue and white spirally.

European countries that have utilized striped staffs, at least on occasion, include Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria-Hungary. In the Dual Monarchy the pikes of military colors were traditionally painted spirally in both the imperial gold and black and the national red and white. The same four colors alternated in the traditional flame-shaped borders of the banners attached to those staffs. The Nazi "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" (1939-1945) officially had its national flag displayed on a staff spirally painted white, red, and blue with the blue bands being half the width of the other two colors. When the Vatican City became a sovereign state in 1929 the official image of its new flag showed it mounted on a yellow staff spirally painted in gold. The military color and civil ensign of Elba (1814-1815), Napoleon's small and briefly held kingdom, were carried on staffs spirally of red and white.

In addition to its use in many ceremonies with deep emotional meaning significance of a religious character, the flagpole has been prominent in games, commerce, sports, folk activities, and even short-lived fads. In Western Europe, especially from the Netherlands through Switzerland to Italy, for centuries the highly developed practice of flag-tossing has flourished. Uniformed men throw flags high into the air and back and forth to one another, rapidly swinging them in ritualized patterns. Each staff, often barely longer than the width of the flag it bears, is generally a rod with a knob at either end which the standard-bearer grasps. Today this old military tradition is only a sport best known from the annual Palio of Siena but when it was developed in the 16th and 17th centuries by infantry troops, the prominent display of unit colors had a significant function in battle maneuvers.

A completely different usage of flagpoles is found in the United States. In the "cultural wars" between those who advance a sectarian agenda for the United States and those who prefer to retain the secular culture that the country's founders enshrined in its political institutions, as delineated in the Constitution, challenges have constantly arisen involving the American public school system. In 1990 the Supreme Court upheld the right of students to organize prayer meetings on school grounds, so long as such gatherings were not held during class time nor run by adults.

That year a new program was developed by evangelist Christians determined to establish or maintain religious activities in public schools. "See You At The Pole" or SYATP involves Christian students who gather every morning before the official opening of classes to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, a tradition widespread as a characteristic of American schools. At these gatherings, often improperly sponsored by adult church leaders, prayers are said and religious activities organized. The procedure implicitly links the pole and its flag with the sectarian activities of the students, which would not be allowed if performed in the school building

A very different flagpole activity became popular. After World War I much of the general population of the United States was eager for what President Warren G. Harding referred to as "normalcy." Seeking escape from international problems and often jaded, many Americans welcomed such unusual activities as pie-eating competitions, dance marathons, and dare-devil stunts including wing-walking on biplanes. In that spirit the unique practice of "flagpole sitting" was born. One cynical contemporary commentator referred to it as "a peculiarly American aesthetic triumph... an athletic feat raised to an art."

Flagpole sitting consisted of installing a small wooden chair at the top of a flagpole in which the contestant remained for as long as possible. Bobby Mack, a 21-year-old woman, is said to have flagpole-sat for nearly three weeks. While Joe Powers remained aloft only 16 days, two and a half hours, his perch (on the Morrison Hotel in Chicago) was 637' (194 m) above street level

Flagpole sitters have disappeared from the American scene, but another group of individuals still sees after the professional responsibilities involved in providing maintenance and upgrading for flagpoles. (Such work is infrequently needed for any given pole because most are intentionally designed to resist all weather conditions.) These steeple jacks, with minimal equipment, ascend poles sanding them on the way up and painting them on the way down. Steeplejack Mary Ann Quinn was described in a news report as

dangling in the ninety-degree [32 C] heat far above the ninth floor of the building for 12 hours. Mrs. Quinn and a male assistant bolted an omni antenna to the top of the flagpole, hoisted a 100-pound [45.4 kg] coaxial cable and connected it to two microwave dish antenna on the side of the building.

Famous German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl installed an elevator and a camera at the top of a flagpole to aid her making of the film *Triumph of the Will*, the famous paean to the 1934 Nuremberg gathering of the Nazi Party

In its essence the modern flagpole is an extremely simple object: a long cylindrical piece of wood even a stick or rough-hewn branch suffices. While many flagpoles today -- even those mass-produced -- are little more than that, quite complex poles also exist. Numerous optional parts may be incorporated in a flagpole. Its top may bear a decorative finial or a truck, as well as hardware used for the raising of the halyards. The base may be as simple as a block of concrete into which the pole is set. The older method of erection, involving the insertion of the pole in a hole dug in the ground is still used by many individual flag-flyers.

The pole erected at the library of Columbia University in New York City reflects the imperial style of flagstaff favored by Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when buildings of Roman and Greek classical models were favored for schools, banks, and government buildings. The Lafayette Post No. 140 of the influential US Civil war veterans' organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, donated the flagpole. Its 75' (23 m) high staff bore a bronze eagle as a finial. While the quality of its construction and the attention paid to artistic detail in the pedestal are remarkable, it is the symbolism that predominates.

At the dedication ceremony on 2 May 1896, Admiral Richard W. Meade, commander of the Post, referred to the new pole as "resting upon a granite and bronze support [representing] the enduring nature of the principles symbolized by the banner of the nation." On the base there appeared in letters of bronze, the charge to the students of Columbia always to love, cherish, and defend the flag. Whether or not memory of the deeds of the men who donated the pole survives, the pole still proclaims their message.

In many other instances the base of a pole incorporates an inscription explaining to the visitor the events, principles, and individuals honored by the erection of the staff. Such a flagpole base can become a site of pilgrimage and a rallying point for partisans of a particular cause. Those who gather on the sacred ground around the pole reaffirm the values explicitly expressed on the flag base and, implicitly, in the flag flying above to which their eyes are drawn. The base of such a pole at Bowling Green in lower Manhattan combines an elaborate metal and granite guardrail with a sculptured and engraved monument set below shields, the whole asserting American sovereignty over the island and the rest of New York City. The same spot had previously seen tall wooden masts flying the flags of the Netherlands and later of Great Britain (over Fort Amsterdam and Fort George respectively), making similar claims to sovereignty.

An unusual late 20th century example of flags mounted on a distinctive base is marketed to veterans who have served in the US Armed Forces and to their families and supporters. The paired flags are of the common 4" x 6" (10 x 15 cm) type stapled to 10" (25.5 cm) plastic staffs, commonly sold as table flags in the United States. The base is not the usual black plastic inverted cup, however, but a bar of wood bearing an engraved plate with the names of the honoree's war and military branch, all below a campaign ribbon. What is most striking is the authentic M-1917 bayonet grip mounted on the base between the two flags.

One of the prime considerations in the construction of any flagpole is its strength specifically, its ability to resist high winds while displaying one or more large flags. Engineers and manufacturers have determined the optimal characteristics for poles of certain materials, heights, and thicknesses and based on the details of the specific uses intended. Their tests define how long a specific pole will resist distortion. The relation between wind velocity and the moment of bending that will result in the pole breaking is expressed by the formula

$$V^2 = \frac{1.85 g M C_d}{Dh^2}$$

where V = wind velocity (miles per hour), g = the acceleration of gravity (32.2), M = the bending moment (in foot-pounds), C_d = the drag coefficient (assumed to be 1.0), ρ = air density (0.75 pounds per cubic foot), D = the pole diameter (in feet), and h = the pole height (in feet).

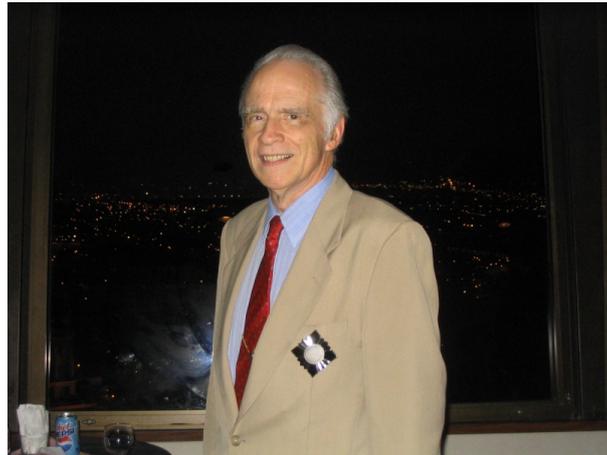
A related issue is the longevity of flags being flown outdoors from poles. It is an issue involving many variables the height of the poles, the size of the flags, the fabrics of which they are constructed, the strength of the halyards employed, and climatic conditions. Those who drafted the Flag Code used in the United States wisely specified only that the flag should not be flown in circumstances where it might be damaged, while making no concrete recommendations regarding how those conditions were to be defined. One suggestion, made by a person in the retail flag business in the United States, only semi-facetiously suggested that flag dealers give away poles for free since -- as he pointed out -- "flagpoles are flag eaters," submitting them to a constant stress that engenders the need for replacement flags.

In the modern world the flagpole rarely has the strong emotional significance that characterized it in the past. Nevertheless there are concrete examples of modern poles that express deeply felt emotions, even when there is no flag associated with them. The staff on which a battle flag once flew, surviving as the sole concrete reminder of that banner, is often displayed in a patriotic museum honoring soldiers of past wars. Several examples of emotional reaction to flagpoles were chronicled during the great earthquake and fire that destroyed San Francisco in 1906.

One commentator understood that "something dreadful had happened... [when] the steel shafts on which had for so long floated the country's flag [Embedded in a ton of steel block, the entire mast] had shifted many feet." Another witnessed the destruction of the Palace Hotel where "the last part of the building to burn was the flagpole, one huge tongue of flame incinerating the United States flag." One survivor recounted that he could "hear the flagpole on the Selby shot tower whipping back and forth with a snapping, popping sound as the earthquake threw buildings down." Only when the fire was stopped was "the American flag--raised... to signal that the great fire was controlled [an act that] brought a great cheer from the refugees." Then,

as new structures were built to replace those destroyed by the earthquake and fire flags were hoisted during the topping-out ceremonies. People cheered when a new flag was flown above a newly-completed building.

Today flagpoles are generally treated as utilitarian objects, almost always subordinated in significance and emotional impact to the flags they hold aloft. The infrequent emotional impact of a flagpole is a rare reminder of the deep feelings universally generated in the past by the use of poles as symbols.



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