Željko Heimer:  
The Flags of Zagreb

Abstract: Zagreb was formed in 1850 by unification of Gradec, Kaptol and two rural neighbouring communities, all tracing their establishment to the early Middle Ages. Their seals are preserved since the 15th century, while a flag is mentioned already in the 14th century. These were basis for the coats-of-arms. The oldest preserved flags of Gradec and Kaptol are from the 18th century. The rural communities used coats-of-arms but no flags. All four coats-of-arms were predominantly red, as was the municipal colour.

The unified city was granted a coat-of-arms in 1896, changing the colour of the shield to blue that from now on becomes the municipal colour. A banner of arms was adopted in 1902 and produced in 1916. After 1945 the civic crown from the coat-of-arms was replaced with the red five-pointed star, the flag being prescribed only in 1964 with few changes in the design. In 1975 the red star was added to the flag. Some municipal subdivisions adopted coats-of-arms but no flags.

After independence the city was united again with temporary symbols. In 1999 a new design of the symbols was introduced, following the state regulations. Unofficially, previous flags are still often used and even produced in several variations.

1. Introduction
The oldest settlements in the region of the city of Zagreb predate the Roman era, but they are located mainly along the Sava River. The first settlements on the southern slopes of the Medvednica Mountain were made on the hill of Gradec (also named Grić) with the arrival of Croats in the 7th century. At least since the 9th century, there are traces of the first settlements on the nearby hill later known as Kaptol (the Capitol of Zagreb). There the Croato-Hungarian king Ladislaus (Ladislav) I established a diocese in around 1094, as is known from a document of 1134 named Felitian's charter.
(Fehcijanova porefja), in which the Esztregon (Ostrogoti) bishop Felitian recounts on the first Zagreb bishop Dub. This is also the oldest preserved mention of the name Zagreb. [ZL1, p. 216] Beneath Kaptol, south of it, a settlement of foreign (initially Italian) merchants was created in the 12th century under the name Vicus Latinorum (Latin Street, in Croatian Vlaska ulica, still bearing the same name) under the auspices of the bishops of the Zagreb's Kaptol. The merchants city of Zagreb on the hill of Gradded was granted the privileges of the Royal and Free City by the Golden Bull issued by the Croato-Hungarian king Bela IV in 1242, for the services rendered in his retreat from the Tatar hordes. [ZL2, p. 576] Also on the north side of Kaptol, a settlement was granted free community status in 1344 under the name Nova Ves (i.e. New Village), under the diocesan auspices. [ZL2, p. 124] These four communities were united in 1850 into the Free and Royal Capital City of Zagreb. It began growing into a modern capital including more and more surrounding villages in the plains towards the Sava River and beyond. The oldest parts of the city built on the hills are today referred to as the Upper Town (Gornji Grad).

2. The Symbols of Gradedc

Although it is certain that both Gradedc and Kaptol must have used seals earlier – especially Kaptol that was locus credibilis – place where the documents were notarized – the oldest seal of Gradedc is preserved attached on a document from the 14th century. That seal pictures a heraldic depiction (not a coat of arms!) showing three embattled towers raising from fortification walls with a Gothic doorway between in sinister a crescent between three roses above and two below and on the dexter an eight-pointed star between two roses, one above and one below it. It bears the inscription S: COMVMN: DE MONTE GRACI – Sigillum Communitatis de Monte Graci – Seal of the Community on the Hill of Graced.

With the seal the civic magistrate would seal all the municipal charters, in the 14th century using either green or pure beeswax and since the 15th century using red wax. From the sources it is known that before this seal, at least since 1322, a slightly different one was used, and yet one differing in few other tiny details since 1384 – however, the one from 1397 remained in use since. This greater seal was used exclusively for the certification of ceremonial charters once a year, on the St. Blasius Day, the patron of Zagreb, celebrated on 3rd February, while for the other documents a lesser seal of similar design was used. According to the greater seal of 1397, a municipal seal was faithfully produced in the 19th century, preserved today in the collection of the City Museum of Zagreb (MGZ). [Laszowski, 1895] A mention of the city flag is preserved from the 14th century. The Zagreb bishop Alhen [Ivan) mentions in a document of 1422 that from a belfry of the Church of St. Marcus a bloody flag (vesillum cruentum) was hoisted, so it must have been red, but regarding to its details we may only speculate. [ZL2, p. 559], [Laszowski, 1896] The oldest preserved depiction of the coat of arms of Gradedc is dated 1499, carved on a relief that was embedded above the entrance to the Chapel of St. Fabian and Sebastian, built that year in the north-western part of the Church of St. Marcus. The relief is today preserved in the MGZ, as the Chapel was torn down during the renovation of the Church in the 19th century, and a facsimile was set in the north-western wall of the Church. [Premerl, 2002], [Laszowski, 1895] The relief depicts the city coat of arms in a shield pointed in the base and notched in the dexter chief, with basically the same heraldic contents as in the seal. A double-tailed lion rampant is a supporter of the shield. It may be noted that the star there is five-pointed, only
illustrating that the exact number of points was heraldically irrelevant at the period. The roses are not present—in the seal they serve for space filling—a result of medieval horror vacuii—or explained more practically—a seal would not leave good impression in the wax if it would have large empty areas, so it would be filled with various hatchings, floral ornaments etc.

The oldest preserved flag of Gradec is made in the first half of the 18th century, between 1711 and 1740. It was made of dark red damask silk textile in shape of a rectangular flag with split tongues. On its obverse is painted the city coat of arms in a cartouche: gules on a hill vert three towers argent between a crescent and a star (here sixpointed—this being the most frequent heraldic depiction of a star). The reverse pictures the black Habsburg double-headed eagle displayed, topped with a crown and holding a sword and a sceptre, bearing an escutcheon azure with a cipher C or—for Carolus V, the Croato-Hungarian king Charles III (Emperor Charles V). The worn-out tails of the flag were renewed with red damask in the 18th century. [Premerl, 2002], [ZL2, p. 559]

This flag was kept in the City Hall on St. Marcus Square, although it seems not always with the best care. Namely, in 1896, when it was discovered in some odd corner of the Hall, it made quite a sensation in the local journals. [Laszowski, 1896] It was then again given a place of honour in the City Hall, where it stood until 1907 [Premerl, 2002]. This flag was hoisted on ceremonial occasions. In processions it was carried in front of the representatives of the City Council. It is noted that in some ceremonial circumstances it was hoisted from the belfry of the Church of St. Marcus—where from it was also displayed from when the city was to be defended against enemies [ZL2, p. 559].

It is not clear whether it is the same flag that is mentioned in a receipt from 1740 where the city tax officer Frano Fabijavec notes on expenditures: “I have ceded—with the knowledge of the lord captain—10 pennies to the silversmith who repaired the finial of the town’s flag.” [Horvat, 1942, p. 411]

As other feudal subjects granted certain privileges, the city of Gradec was obligated to maintain troops for its own defence. These units used flags, of course. The oldest preserved is the one of 1790, kept in the MGZ. The flag is rectangular of brown and white 4 horizontal stripes with silk sewn heraldic devices—the double headed Habsburg eagle with painted rectangular cartouche. On the obverse the cartouche contains a semi-heraldic picture of Gradec—three towers with opened doors in front of which is standing a guardsman, while on the reverse the cartouche contains the iconographic picture of St. Marcus, the patron of Gradec, with a lion. The flag was painted on October 13th, 1790 by Frano Postl as is stated on a
signature on the flag. [Premrl, 2002]
These national guard units were again reinforced during the
einsurrection against Napoleon, when Gradec fitted its guard unit with a
new flag, now preserved in the HPM. It was made in 1813, sewn of
several vertical stripes of yellow silk with triangular serrations along the
three edges. On both sides are painted devices remarkably similar to
those on the 1790 flag, with addition of the year 1813. [Borošak
Marijanović, 1996, p. 101]

3. The Symbols of Kaptol
Kaptol used seals to attest its documents and manuscripts
well; however these seals are, as a rule, with nonheraldic
contents, pointed in shape, typical for ecclesiastrical
authorities. An example from 1189 depicts a king on a
throne with inscription Sigillum CAPITVLIS

(Z)AGRABIENSIS (Seal of the Zagreb’s Capitol), those from 1297 and
1371 bear similar inscriptions and picture St. Stephen showing a model
of his cathedral to Madonna holding Baby Jesus. [Gulin, 1980]
In the 15th century, in 1478 the Zagreb’s Capitol established a
“civil”

from thereon it uses seals with heraldic emblems. Emili laszowski dates
a preserved seal to the early 16th century [Laszowski, 1895], showing the
same coat of arms as is painted in the Upper Town Hall (these painted
coats of arms see further): Gules a chevron argent, in chief two mullets or and a
tower argent with doorway and two windows issuant from the base.

Kaptol prepared two new flags expecting a visit of the imperial couple
Maria Theresa and Francis I to Zagreb in 1753. These flags, meant to
represent the Kaptol clergy, rather then the community; are almost
rectangular, blue, bordered on three edges with red and white
flammulets. In the centre of one is on both sides the iconographic
depiction of the Madonna Immaculata, while on the other flag is the
iconographic depiction of St. Ladislaus, the founder of the diocese,
surrounded with ornaments. As it happened, the imperial visit did not occur then, but the flags were used afterwards in celebrations during the visit of Francis II (Francis I of Austria) in 1818. [Borosak Marijanović, 1996, p. 97-99]

These two flags were probably kept in the old Kaptol Town Hall (that was placed in front of the Cathedral in the middle of the square where a monument is today) until 1876 when the Hall was torn down. Probably since that time they are in the Croatian History Museum (HPM).

Kaptol was obligated to maintain armed units as well, and in the funding of these participated also Nova Ves and Vlaska ulica. The flag of the Zagreb’s Kaptol Guard of 1839 is preserved in the HPM: yellow rectangular flag with red and white triangular border, with an oval cartouche bordered with laurel wreath painted on both sides. On the obverse the cartouche contains the coat of arms of the Habsburg Monarchy, inscribed year 1839 and a ribbon above it reading: Civium Capituli Zagrabiensis. The reverse pictures St. Stephen, the patron of the Zagreb cathedral, the year 1790 and the coat of arms of Kaptol – of the same design as described above, only with blue background of the shield [Borosak Marijanović, 1996, p. 97-99].

4. The symbols of Nova Ves and Vlaška Ulica

The two rural communities, Nova Ves and Vlaška ulica, as independent communities must have used some kind of seals for their documents, but this area is apparently yet quite unexplored. As far as it is known, neither of the communities was officially granted a coat of arms and they are not to be found in the armorys of the period. However, in the Upper Town Hall there are coats of arms attributed to them among the series of coats of arms of constituent communities of the Zagreb County painted along the balcony walls of the Assembly Hall. These coats of arms were painted in the last years of the 19th century, by painter Edmond Hasse [Peić Čaldarović, 2004], probably under the expert guidance by Dr. Ivan pl. Bojnič, the leading heraldic expert of the period and director of the Royal Land Archives in Zagreb.

The coat of arms of Vlaška ulica is: per pale, chequy gules and argent (3x5) and per fess gules a mullet or above a crescent argent and azure on a base vert a marten passant and a mullet or.

The coat of arms of Nova Ves is: Gules, on a mount vert a city wall argent with opened doors and windows and with tree tops within it.

There is no record of any flags used by the two communities.
5. The New Visual Identity of 1896

After the unification into the single city in 1850, considerations about the new symbols were raised. The city leadership contacted Bojničić to prepare proposals for the coat of arms and this was forwarded to the Croatian parliament and government at the time led by Ban (vicery) Khuen-Hedervár [3]. As noted in the city council proceedings [Zapisnik, 1896], on August 3rd, 1896, on the session of the City Assembly of the Free and Royal Capital City of Zagreb chaired by the City Mayor honourable Mr. Adolf Mosinski, a member of the City Council Hudovski read the response from His Excellency Ban of the Kingdoms of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia, informing the City Council that, based on the research carried out, in that issues the coat of arms of Zagreb is established thus:

“A shield painted blue depicting on a green mount a silver city with three towers, followed on the right with rising silver moon and on the left a six-pointed golden star. The shield is topped with a golden crown.” (i.e. Azure issuant from a mount vert a city wall argent with three towers embattled of the same and in chief to dexter a crescent increscent also argent and to sinister a mullet of six or. On top a crown masoned with five embattlements or.)

This response was duly noted and accepted, and based on it, the article 6 of the City Statutes was amended to include these specifications. Since then the official colour of Zagreb becomes blue (although this was not explicitly stated anywhere, of course).

Dr. Bojničić prepared a drawing of this coat of arms, today preserved in the MGZ and in spite of all formal changes to follow it still serves as the most frequent model for the depictions of the city coat of arms.

The mayor's chain including this new coat of arms was designed in 1899 by a famous architect Herman Bollé [4], and was manufactured by a goldsmith Slavoljub Bulvan from Zagreb in 1902 after models were first made in Cologne (MGZ 1767). In 1905 similarly made badges for members of Council were made by Bulvan also carrying the coat of arms as well. The chain was stored in the MGZ at an unknown time, probably after 1945 [Premerl, 2002].

For the flag one had to wait some more years. The City Council begun considering a new flag and in 1901 required from the Royal Land Government to establish the design of the city flag. Ban Khuen-Hedervár again soon answered it by forwarding a report prepared again by Dr. Bojničić containing two proposals for the flag. Bojničić obviously preferred one of them, as he names one of the two “heraldically better and based on the good old heraldic principles” and the other “newer and less good version”. The first proposal is a mono-coloured flag with elements of the coat of arms (i.e. without the outlining shield – the banner of arms!), or according to Bojničić description: “The flag is of the same blue colour as the shield of the city coat of arms.”
arms, and on both sides has the city coat of arms without the shield and the crown, followed to the right by a silver rising crescent and to the left by a six-pointed golden star. The second proposal was blue-white horizontal bicolour with the full coat of arms in the middle. [Horvat, 1942, pp. 411-412] The Council, on the session held on May 5th, 1902 [Horvat, 1942, p. 412], apparently readily followed Bojnić’s advice favouring the “old and better” version and it seems that the second proposal was not even discussed. However, a member of the Council Stjepan Timet proposed that red and white thin stripes be added vertically along the hoist to highlight the national element, but this was not accepted. After a proposal by a Council member Dr. Ljudevit Shwartz, Bojnić was granted with a formal appreciation and the city award. The Council allotted 1000 crowns for the manufacture of the flag. The city flag and the Shwartz’s proposals were adopted in the Council with 26 votes for and 8 against. [Zapisnik, 1902] A drawing of the flag was prepared by painter Branko Senoa in cooperation with Bojnić, the original drawing being preserved in the MGZ. [Premerl, 2002]

However, the flag was not manufactured immediately, and we may only speculate why. It was on the occasion of the coronation of the Emperor and King Charles I (Karlo I) in Budapest in 1916 that a richly produced ceremonial city flag was made according to the 1902 decisions. [ZL2, p. 559] As was noted on a piece found sewn in the flag when the flag was being renovated in 1994, the flag was produced in the time when Janko Holjac was mayor, and it was manufactured by Sisters of Mercy Kvirina, Germaninka, Tonislava and Trojana after the design by Branko Senoa. The flag was carried during the coronation by City Council member Josip Radaković. [Premerl, 2002]

It should be noted that this, as well as those previously mentioned flags, was produced in a single example only, what we would call ceremonial flag. The “usual” flags that are mass produced and used in many places around the city for ornamentation and designation of city offices were not know at the time – this became common practice only in the second half of the 20th century – such practice being not typical for Zagreb only.

While considering the blue colour of Zagreb, it may be noted, that one of the more important elements that confirms this identity today are the blue painted trams of ZET (public transport company) – it may be interesting to note that these were initially yellow, while they began painting them in characteristic light blue shade only in 1923/1924. At that time, new domestically produced tramway wagons were introduced, that ZET’s chief engineer Mandl decided to paint blue. Mandl was not only the leading ZET inventor and engineer, but a well known numismatics and stamp collecting expert, through which he had become aware of heraldic concepts, so he was well aware how this colouring may be important for development of the inevitable city identity it makes up for today. [Šobota, 2001, pp. 20-21] These wagons always carried the coat of arms attached on the hull.

Of course, in heraldry there is no concept of determination of shades of colours, and the blazon simply states that the shield is blue. For quite a long time this was depicted as dark, ultramarine or cobalt blue, but it
may be that exactly the light blue shade of trams was in later years more often connected with the “Zagreb blue”.

6. The flag of Zagreb in the 20th century

Thus established symbols remained in use since and they were not changed even when Austria-Hungary collapsed and the new Kingdom later to be known as Yugoslavia was established. They were not changed in the period of the Independent State of Croatia that was formed during World War II. From that time one may note a commemorative postage stamp issued on March 21st, 1942 on the occasion of celebrating the 700th anniversary of the royal and free city status grant. The stamp was designed by Oto Antonini faithfully following the Bojović's pattern. [Ercegović, 1995]

Also in 1942, a flag of the Society of Zagreb Citizens (Državo Zagrebnika), a cultural and charitable organization, celebrating its 10th anniversary that year was manufactured. [ZL1, pp. 179-180] The flag, also preserved in the MGZ, includes prominently the city coat of arms only slightly shifting from the Bojović's pattern.

With the liberation of Zagreb and introduction of the new political system, someone sewed a red five-pointed star to the 1916 flag. This flag was apparently used as such for some time, to be soon stored in the MGZ. [Premerl, 2002] The star from the flag was removed in 1994 renovation, although the stitching in form of five-pointed star is still clearly visible.

The first mention of the city symbols after World War II in the official documents is to be found in 1947, when the Executive Council of the City People’s Committee in Zagreb (Gradski narodni odbor u Zagrebu) adopts the proposal of the chairman Vouk (Zapisnik 1947a, 1947b):

“The coat of arms of the City People’s Committee in Zagreb is composed of a blue field in which on a green curved ground is standing a silver city with three embattled towers with semicircular entrance with half-portcullis and with opened doors, each tower having a keyhole-like loophole; to its right a six-pointed golden star and to the left a half-moon rising. Above the shield is set a red five-pointed star.”

So, the previous crown atop the shield was replaced by a star. Although the blazon clearly states the colours, it is not known if the coat of arms was ever used in colours; the preserved examples are mono-coloured. A flag is not mentioned; although it may well be that this was the decision that led to the adding of the star in the old flag.


The Statutes to follow, from 1964, introduce a new description of the coat-of-arms and the flag in its Article 12 (Statut, 1964):

“The city of Zagreb has its coat-of-arms and its flag.

The coat of arms of Zagreb is its historical coat of arms: shield coloured blue, in which is depicted on a green mound a silver city with three towers, a rising silver crescent to its right and a six-pointed golden star to its left.”