

NATIONAL DANISH-NORWEGIAN FLAGS 1600–1800

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Denmark-Norway was in union from 1380 to 1814, first in a personal union, and from 1536 in a legislative union. During the last period the two countries to a large extent used common national flags. The Dannebrog, the red Danish flag with a white Latin cross lying on red background, was dominant on Danish-Norwegian ships, in the countries' harbours and at military establishments. In the period from 1600 to 1800 the flag had two main forms, one swallow-tailed, the other not. In addition, the red/white cross symbol was used on various types of pennants. In Denmark-Norway, almost all flying of flags was at the time connected with military or maritime environment, and ships in particular carried ensigns to mark their identity. In the 17th century the practice slowly developed that the king's ships, or more precisely, the state's warships, flew swallow-tailed flags, while the merchant ships to a great extent hoisted flags with a straight cut edge. The swallow-tailed flag was regarded as the noblest one, and many merchant ships continued to carry it. Frequently both swallow-tailed flags and regular flags were displayed on the same ship. The Dannebrog in one form or another was without doubt Denmark-Norway's main symbol, and in surveys on the history of flags, it is described as the only one.

It is therefore quite surprising to see a copperplate depicting in all probability the ship of Christians IV, the «Trekroner» [Fig. 1], on an official trip to England in 1606, without one single Dannebrog. A lot of flags and pennants fly from all masts, from yards, bowsprit and stem, but the familiar Dannebrog is not represented. Quite different flag symbols are hoisted on the king's ship, each representing one or two of the king's land areas, areas where he was supreme head as king, duke, earl or prince. The coats of arms of the different areas figure on the flags and the pennants. The bunting is decorated with stripes, zigzag borders, checks, rhombi or similar geometric pattern. The print from the copperplate is in black and white. The colours of the coats of arms are known from other sources. However, there are two possibilities as to the colouring of the design of the flags themselves. One alternative is that the colours of the various coats of arms are reflected on the bunting. Another possibility is that the red and white colours of the Dannebrog have been transferred to all the single pattern.

At the top of the main mast, above all the other flags on the ship, flies a banner with Denmark's coat of arms and crown [Fig. 2]. Along the middle of the flag is a wide, horizontal stripe, while the upper and lower edges have zigzag borders. Consequently, there is a possibility that the stripes and borders here may be yellow and blue like the Danish national coat of arms, or red and white like the Dannebrog [Fig. 3]. Below the top main mast flag flies a long swallow-tailed pennant with the Norwegian national coat of arms. There is therefore reason to believe that the checked rhombus pattern on this pennant is either yellow and red like the Norwegian national coat of arms, or red and white like

the Dannebrog. A third banner flutters from the foremast, a broad pennant with drawings of three crowns and a sun in the upper hoist area. The crowns represent Sweden or the Union. The sun, which is also depicted on several of the other pennants, symbolises the king and his royal power, a well-known image of how the European kings saw themselves, as equals of God on earth, long before Louis XIV became the «Sun King». If the above mentioned assumptions are correct, the colour scheme of this pennant is yellow and blue or red and white [Fig. 4]. The other flags and pennants hoisted on the ship are in the same way symbols of King Christian's other domains, corresponding to Holstein, Schleswig, Iceland, Stormarn, Oldenburg, Delmenhorst and Dithmarchen, and furthermore indicating the Gothic and Wending peoples.

The copperplate depicts, as mentioned, King Christian IV's visit to King James of England and his queen Anne, who, by the way, was Christian's sister. The hoisting of flags on the ship, lots of flying banners and strong colours, was intended to impress the English hosts and the general public with grandeur and magnificence. Consequently, it is natural to imagine that the flags have the same colours as the coats of arms, because this would give the greatest variety of colours on the ship when arriving in England.

However, in our context it is important to ascertain that at the beginning of the 17th century, the King of Denmark-Norway could go on official visit to England without hoisting the Dannebrog on the boat. Obviously the king saw it as more important to show all his personal land areas by giving them each an invented flag and pennant, than carrying the countries' well-known common national symbol. The reason why there is a certain doubt as to whether the flags and the pennants had the same colourful design as the coats of arms, is that it was not uncommon in Denmark to sail with ships which carried other types of red and white flags. On a painting from 1660 depicting the hailing of King Frederick III in Copenhagen, we see in the background several ships flying red and white horizontally striped flags. Several other contemporary illustrations show ships with the same flags on the open sea, from both the sternpost and the main mast.

Obviously these 17th century flags with horizontal red and white stripes have to a certain degree been used as national symbols, alone or in addition to the Dannebrog. When a ship displayed this flag, it was probably synonymous with the Dannebrog, in any case in Scandinavian waters, where there are examples of Swedish ships carrying similar flags with yellow and blue stripes. So both the two Nordic great powers used flags with horizontal stripes to indicate nationality. The number of stripes has evidently been of secondary importance on Danish ships, the main thing being to show the red and white colours. On the basis of these examples it is natural to believe that several of the flags and pennants on Christian IV's ship «Trekroner» have the colours red and white around the coats of arms, indicating in addition to the king's personal interest a national one as well.

The fact that in the 17th century the colours might have been of greater importance than the form, is furthermore supported by another flag. In the painting

mentioned before from 1660 there are a couple of interesting flags on top of two masts. One is a plain-coloured red flag with a small Dannebrog in the upper canton. The colours, then, are recurring, while the form is somewhat different from earlier, even though a diminutive Dannebrog is retained. In 1653 the warship «Fredericus Tertius» displays the same flag from the stern. The flag is large and is the dominant one on the ship, but several varieties of a swallow-tailed Dannebrog are flying from all the ship's masts. Possibly these flags appeared at the end of the 1620s when the Danish army got on its standard a white cross on red ground in the upper hoist area as a common symbol.

Another warship, the «Amalie Sofie», flies a large red flag at the rear, which resembles the one hoisted on the «Fredericus Tertius». The difference is that an armed arm has been sewn on the cloth. In a painting from 1634 which today hangs at Skokloster castle in Sweden, a couple of similar flags are depicted. The motif is a Danish-Norwegian whaling station at Spitsbergen. In the background two merchant ships are clearly seen, wearing the same red flag without the Dannebrog from the stem. The armed arm was a frequently used motif on European flags in the 17th century. Why do we find this on Danish-Norwegian sea flags? In 1617 Christian IV instituted a new order of knighthood, the Order «of the armed Arm». Its sign was an armoured arm with a drawn sword, made in gold. It is natural to imagine that the holders of this prestigious order were keen to show their new rank by adding the sword arm in the red field on the flag. The time when this armed arm was used on the flag corresponds well with the institution of the order, and indicates that this flag was used by the members of this order of knighthood. Still, no written sources mention this connection between flag and order, so we cannot rule out the possibility that the sword arm may have had another meaning.

On certain warships a non-traditional and exciting flag can be seen from the stern. A painting of 1644 by Fehmarn depicts the battle between the Danish and a joint Dutch and Swedish fleet, where the Danish ship «Patientia» has a large red flag with a yellow lion aft, while the Dannebrog flies from all masts. By the way, the flag on the Swedish ship has three crowns in a red, and not a blue field, as would be expected. The lion flag on the Danish-Norwegian ship is without doubt a variant of the Norwegian national coat of arms. This motif also exists as an original flag at the Bergen Museum of History. The lion flag is particularly interesting because in certain connections it is characterised as a national Norwegian flag. Here we have more reason to believe that it represents Norway as one of the king's domains, in the same way as the flag on the «Trekroner».

Through the examples above we have seen that the Dannebrog was not the only flag in Denmark-Norway during the first half of the 17th century. Several different flags could represent Denmark-Norway or Danish-Norwegian persons. Some flags had horizontal red and white stripes, others had a plain-coloured red cloth with a small Dannebrog in the corner or a flag based on coats of arms and orders. Apparently all of these have been used as national symbols, on both merchant ships and

warships. There is a question, however, whether we can be sure that the above mentioned flags on the copperplate and the paintings are correct, so that we can draw our conclusions from them. From flag boards we know that flags often were incorrectly drawn, and that the same mistake recurred from one board to the next. Some paintings also have imaginative flags which may be incorrect, or at best difficult to verify. However, in our case it is the question of a copperplate depicting an official royal visit. Certain details may possibly be incorrect, but the artist has in all probability kept within the common principles for the flying of flags. The different coats of arms are carefully and correctly drawn. Consequently it is not very likely that the rest of the copperplate should be pure imagination. Several specimens of the remaining flags discussed here have been found quite independently of each other. There is, then, reason to believe that the flags come close to the use at the time.

From this it should be evident that in the 17th century there were not yet fixed rules for the flying of flags in Denmark-Norway. The Dannebrog had not yet become the sole national symbol. However, towards the end of the 17th century the Dannebrog dominated completely. At the same time the practice developed, as mentioned, that national warships carried swallow-tailed flags. This arrangement was established by law in 1696, and at the same time the proportions of the flag were fixed for the first time. The width of the cross was to be 1/7 of the flag's height. The innermost fields were to be squares, while the outermost fields were to be rectangles with a length of 1 1/2 of the sides of the squares. The tails were to be as long as the other flag. The ordinary flag with a straight edge became the symbol for the private merchant ships, and this was finally and unmistakably decided by a decree in 1748, with the same proportions as the swallow-tailed flag (but without tails). The pure Dannebrog with or without tails, had become Denmark-Norway's single common flag. Thus in Denmark-Norway the national flag had the same historical development as in other European seafaring nations.

So, from the first half of the 18th century the Dannebrog was Denmark-Norway's indisputable national flag. During the 18th century, however, many special flags appeared in Denmark-Norway. They were all based on the Dannebrog, but were formed in three ways. One type was created by adding a large, square area in the white crossing point. In this spot different weapons and signs could be added. The other type was formed by placing symbols in the red upper hoist area, and the third and last type was a canton flag with a diminutive Dannebrog in the upper hoist area on a plain coloured blue or white cloth. In this way it was possible for the Danish-Norwegian state to compose many different ensigns, from a royal standard and admiral's flag to packet and company flags. However, one thing was common to them all; they were based on the Dannebrog. When Norway went out of the union in 1814, it was natural for the Norwegians to keep the Dannebrog as their national flag, while placing a yellow lion holding an axe in the upper hoist area to differentiate from the Danish flag. Consequently, we can ascertain that:

- The national flying of flags at sea in Denmark-Norway was changeful and of great variety in the 17th century, but with the Dannebrog as the definitely most important flag.
- In the first part of the 18th century the Dannebrog became completely dominant on Danish-Norwegian ships.
- In the course of the 18th century a lot of national and private special flags appeared, all based on the Dannebrog.



Fig. 2
A detail of the copperplate.



Fig. 1
Copperplate showing the fully dressed King's ship «Trekroner», early 17th century.

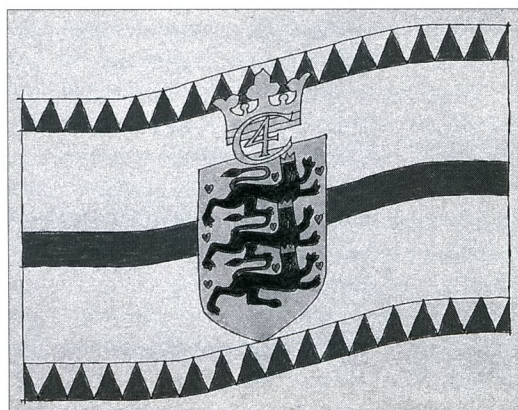


Fig. 3
Author's reconstruction of the flag with Denmark's coat-of-arms.

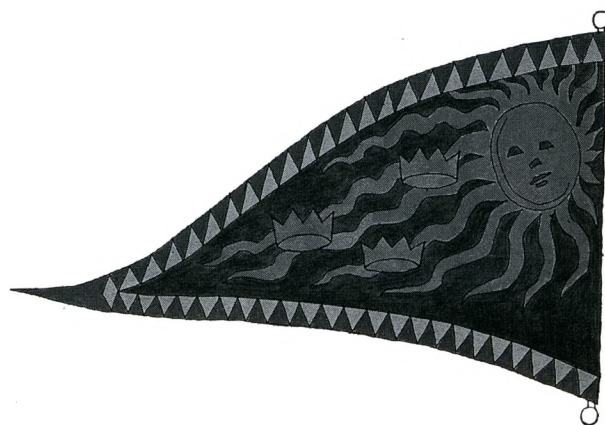


Fig. 4
Author's reconstruction of the broad pennant with a sun and three crowns.