

A history of Ottoman naval flags

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes the development of the Ottoman navy and its flags. Drawing on Ottoman flag charts and other publications of the Empire the author describes the first Ottoman naval ensign (14th century), personal rank flags since 1518 and flags hoisted at sea since 1793.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 67-75.

1 The first Turkish naval flag

Information about the early usage of flags at sea is usually available from old maps used in navigation. For Turkish flags the earliest reliable source is the Catalan Atlas by Andalusian cartographer Hami, dated 1375. The Atlas depicts the flags of rulers of two harbours in Asia Minor. Unfortunately, none of them were Ottoman flags because the Ottoman Turks did not possess any important harbours at that time and had just established their own navy.

Very important changes took place in the Ottoman military forces during the reign of Sultan Murad I Hüdavendigâr (1362-1389), when the Janissaries were established as the first regular and professional infantry corps. Murad's father, Sultan Orhan, passed Dardanelles in 1354 and occupied Thrace. To achieve this he required a more sophisticated navy than previously, when Ottoman rule had been confined to the Anatolian interior.

According to the historian Fevzi Kurtoğlu, the first flag hoisted on Ottoman vessels was red with a horizontal crescent. The record of such a flag dates from the period of Sultan Murad I. When mentioning the capture of the Byzantine city of Philadelphia in 1379, the chronicler Aşık Paşazade in his book *Tarih* (History) described the streets of the town after its conquest by the Ottomans as being full of dark red flags. The present-day name of former Philadelphia is Alaşehir, which means "vermillion city."

The use of the crescent on Ottoman flags was documented again in the 15th century. Leaving aside the legendary role of the crescent in the foundation of the

Ottoman State, this emblem was already popular among the Turks a very long time ago. It featured on flags of Moslem and Turkish cities in the Catalan Atlas and in a map of the Mediterranean Sea now on display in the Istanbul Naval Museum. This map was drawn on parchment by Ibrahim of Tripoli in 1462. The map depicts flags charged with crescents above some Anatolian harbours not in Ottoman hands at the time.

An engraving by Frenchman Guillaume Caursin in 1496 shows the vessels of Ottoman admiral Kemal Reis attacking the galleons of the Knights of Saint John of Rhodes. The Ottoman vessels bore flags charged with a crescent (Fig. 1). It is reasonable to assume that the same flag was used since Murad's reform.

2 Reform in 1518 and the flags of the Ottoman navy

The Ottoman Empire developed into a large state during the 14th and 15th centuries and a new, larger and modern navy became essential. When in 1518 the famous corsair Hayrettin Barbarossa accepted the sovereignty of the Ottoman Sultan, he became an admiral and established a powerful navy. At the same time he introduced several changes in the Ottoman naval flags.

Two rank flags were introduced for the first time. The naval flag for the sultan was a red field charged with a green oval bearing three crescents. A similar flag with only two crescents was assigned to the commander of a squadron. These flags are depicted at the stern of two Ottoman galleys in Istanbul harbour in an engraving dated 1520 in the National Library in Paris.

In his book *Histoire de la Marine Française*, Claude Ferrère states that after the adoption of a special rank flag for sultan analogous symbols started to be hoisted on all Turkish ships (Fig. 2). Flags with three crescents dominated, but combinations of crescents and stars were also popular. Since these flags were hoisted on the mainmast of Turkish galleys over the captain's bridge, Ferrère speculated that they were the personal rank flags of the captains. From the *Kitabülbahriye* (Book of Navigation) dated 1524 by well-known admiral Piri Reis we know that the colour of those flags was generally red.

Andrea Vicento's painting of the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 shows what these flags could have looked like. Flags charged with one, two or three crescents are hoisted on every Turkish ship, while the flag with a zülfikâr (sword) at the mast-head signifies the presence of a high-ranking official or commander on board. The most important commanders reached the position of *reis* (Admiral), but their flags was the same as a Pasha's.

Around the time of the Ottoman expedition against Crete in 1656, Katip Çelebi referred in his book *Esfarülbihar* to the adoption of a new symbol for commanders - a pennant with a swallow-tailed fly or single-pointed streamer. From an illustration of one of Çelebi's ships we know that the pennant was

red with an embroidered crescent in gold. This new symbol acquired great significance in the Ottoman navy, as evidenced by the fact that it was the only symbol, other than the sultan's flag, whose colour was not changed to green during the so-called 'Islamic era' of Turkish vexillology (1730–1793).

While infantry banners in the 16th and 17th centuries followed the Turkish-Moslem military tradition with local variations, maritime symbols conformed with international customs, both for ships and their commanders, and Turkish naval flags were described in foreign literature. The *Atlas Novus*, published in Nürnberg in 1712, illustrated ten Turkish flags (Fig. 3). The Padisha's or Sultan's flag is depicted as a red field with a white disk bearing three embroidered crescents in gold (the colour of this disk must be a mistake). The flag of a Pasha consists of a white sword on a blue field and over the sword a white disk charged with crescents. There are more errors in this case - the field should be green, not blue, the shape of the sword (*zülfikar*) is not correct, and the white disk should be omitted. The third flag, that of galleons, is plain red. In spite of the mistakes, this work is important for the dating of other sources.

Contemporary Turkish sources are more reliable, even in the case of paintings. A painting of the battle at Cap Lori in 1738 during the Turkish-Russian War supports the existence of the so-called *hümayun* flag on the mainmast of a ship whose commander held the rank of Pasha. The *hümayun* consisted of a red field divided unequally by a slightly rounded vertical stripe. Various numbers of crescents were situated at the hoist, the same number with a *zülfikar* in the fly. Commanders of lower rank used a horizontal bicolour of green over red (Fig. 4).

When Sultan Mahmoud I (1730–1754) succeeded to the throne, the so-called 'Islamic era' of Turkish vexillology began. This was characterized by the eradication of red from flags and banners. A painting of the Kilburnu sea-battle in 1787 shows that just before the succession of Selim III rank flags and flags flown at the stern were green. The two exceptions were the flag of the Ruler and the first recorded mention of a streamer. According to the painting a green flag with a white crescent was flown at the mainmast of the ship of the commanding captain. We know from other sources that a green flag with a white *zülfikar* was hoisted on the mast-head of the ship of the Ottoman admiral Bekir Pasha at the same time. A painting of galleys in Istanbul harbour dated 1790 confirms this usage and shows that a flag with a white anchor on a green field was hoisted on the majority of ships, while the ship of the Captain-Pasha (former admiral) is indicated by a green flag charged with a white *zülfikar* and a red streamer.

3 The Nizami-I Cedid reform

Following his defeat in the Russian-Turkish War of 1787–1792, Sultan Selim III restructured his armed forces. He disbanded the obsolete Janissaries in the reform known as Nizami-i Cedid in the year 1793. The Janissaries resisted the

reforms and eventually overthrew the Sultan in 1807. However, while the pace of reform in the land forces was retarded, the Sultan successfully implemented his reforms in the navy. Modern warships were constructed in Ottoman shipyards and a form of naval conscription was introduced in the Aegean provinces of the Empire.

The symbols of the Ottoman fleet were changed by admiral Küçük Hüseyin Pasha, who commanded the navy for 12 years. The use of the traditional red colour was renewed and a new symbol, the eight-pointed star, was introduced. This star was to express the unity of all the regions of the Ottoman state.

Under the command of Hüseyin Pasha an excellent Ottoman vexillological work was produced, Halis Effendi's Album. It is reasonable to assume this manually painted album of flags, dated between 1800 and 1807, was inspired by Hüseyin Pasha, who presented the book to the sultan. Besides the new flags introduced by Nizam-i Cedid, the book contains information about the previous flags of the Ottoman navy, and can be confronted with other sources in this respect; four of the charts show war ensigns and personal rank flags.

The flags hoisted on Turkish galleons during the so-called *first period* (Fig. 5) are generally identical with those published in *Atlas Novus*, and can therefore be dated to the beginning of the 18th century. In this period the commanding captain's flag was a cherry-red field with three crescents embroidered in gold in the upper hoist.

Although all flags of the *second period* (Fig. 6) appear to be blue, the general consensus among Turkish historians is that the original colour on the chart was green, but has changed with time. In that case, these flags would belong to the Islamic era shortly before Hüseyin Pasha's reform. In addition to the flag of admiral (or newly created captain-pasha) and commanding captain, two new flags are displayed. The already mentioned flag with the anchor is described as an 'owner's flag' (i.e. the State in the case of warships). A new flag with white scissors on a green field is ascribed to auxiliary vessels.

The chart depicting the flags of galleons of the *third period* (Fig. 7) reflects the situation after the introduction of Nizam-i Cedid in 1793. The flag of captain-pasha changed from green to red. On the commanding captain's flag the crescents were replaced by a white bow and arrows. Instead of a white anchor, a cannon of the same colour was used on the 'owner's flag.' The auxiliary vessels' flag changed too: the white scissors were replaced by three white earthen coffers.

The last chart in Halis Effendi's album is dedicated to flags bearing crescents and stars (Fig. 8). For the first time we can see that the symbols of crescent and star were used exclusively for Imperial or State symbols. Even Sultan Selim III abandoned the traditional symbol of a red flag with three golden crescents in 1518 and established a new symbol for himself - a red field with a white *tuğra*, a calligraphic rendition of the sultan's name. The Ottoman flag hoisted on the ship of the captain pasha was red with three white crescents and an eight-pointed star. The flag at the stern of other vessels was of two types. A

monochromatic flag (originally red, later green, and now again red) had been introduced during the reign of Ahmed III (1703–1730) by his Vizier Nevşehirli Ibrahim Pasha. This plain flag was reserved for Turkish vessels after Nizam-i Cedid, while vessels from beyliks used the second type of ensign, a red rectangle charged with a white crescent and the eight-pointed star. When in the form of a guidon hoisted on the gaff of the midmast, it indicated the ship of the squadron commander.

Halis Effendi's Album is the first complete Ottoman work dealing with flags used in the Ottoman navy. The merchant marine flags, the flags of the Ottoman possessions (Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli), and the flags of other Moslem and non-Moslem powers in the Mediterranean region (Egypt, Iran, Venice, Genoa, Malta and France) are shown on the flag charts in the album.

Similar albums made in Turkey have become a reliable source for research on the later development of Ottoman naval flags. For example, a flag chart of 1857 reveals the introduction of two types of sultan's flag - an official one bearing the sunburst motif and a private one with the *tuğra*. The only rank flag in the navy was that of captain and it consisted of a white crescent and eight-pointed star on a red background.

The situation regarding the Empire's naval symbols after the adoption of the first Ottoman constitution is described in the book by Mehmet Salih Bey (Fig. 9). In this book the red flag with crescent and five-pointed star was described as the national flag for the first time. Sultan's flags were illustrated as being red with a sunburst (Fig. 9.1 and 9.2). The guidon (Fig. 9.3) was meant to be hoisted at night. The book also shows how the number of naval flags increased. In addition to the flag of captain-pasha (Fig. 9.5 and 9.6), the flags of commodores were newly introduced (Fig. 9.7 and 9.8 for commodores of the first and second rank, respectively). Also introduced was a naval academy flag (Fig. 9.10), flags of the administrated territories (Fig. 9.11–15), a customs flag (Fig. 9.16), a ship owner's flag (Fig. 9.17) and a postal service flag (Fig. 9.18).

This situation lasted from 1876, when the constitution was adopted, until 1912. The political movement of the Young Turks gained a significant victory in 1908 when the constitution (abolished in 1877 during another Russian-Turkish War) was re-adopted. After the adoption of the second constitution changes in navy flags were prescribed in 1912 [12] (Fig. 10). Leaving aside the symbols of the Sultan (Fig. 10.1), heir apparent (Fig. 10.2) and other members of the ruling dynasty (Fig. 10.3), we see the insignia of the other supreme commanders. Fig. 10.4 shows a white anchor and four stars on a red field, the flag of the sultan as commander in chief of the armed forces. The flags of the minister of the navy (Fig. 10.6), pasha fleet admiral (Fig. 10.7), pasha admiral (Fig. 10.8), pasha vice-admiral (Fig. 10.9) and pasha rear admiral (Fig. 10.10) are well known from descriptions in numerous similar publications. The commodore's flag (Fig. 10.11) is in the form of a guidon. In a group of ships a triangular flag (Fig. 10.12) was hoisted on the masts of the ship of the senior captain present. All of these flags feature the Turkish national colours (Fig. 10.5). They generally

survived into the Republican era since 1936 with slight modifications, namely, a square form and a slightly different arrangement of stars.

The remaining flags shown on this chart are those of non-military vessels. Fig. 10.13 is the merchant marine flag; Fig. 10.14 a steamer on the mainmast; Fig. 10.15 is a flag hoisted on ships transporting pilgrims to Mecca; Fig. 10.16 is the customs service flag; Fig. 10.18 was the flag of the caliph between 1922 and 1924.

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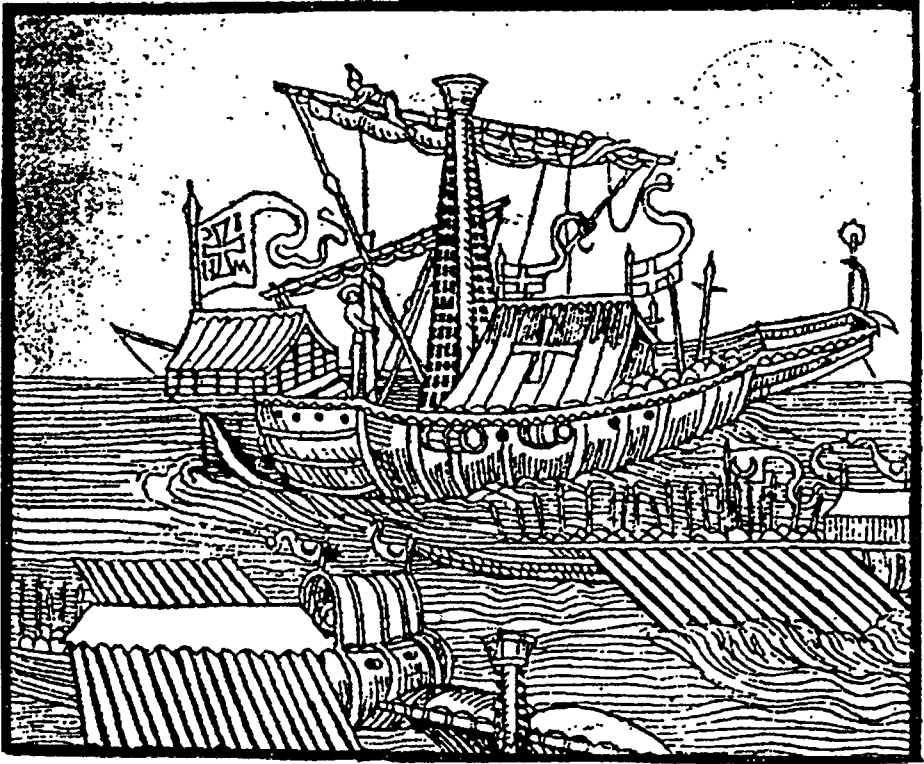


Figure 1

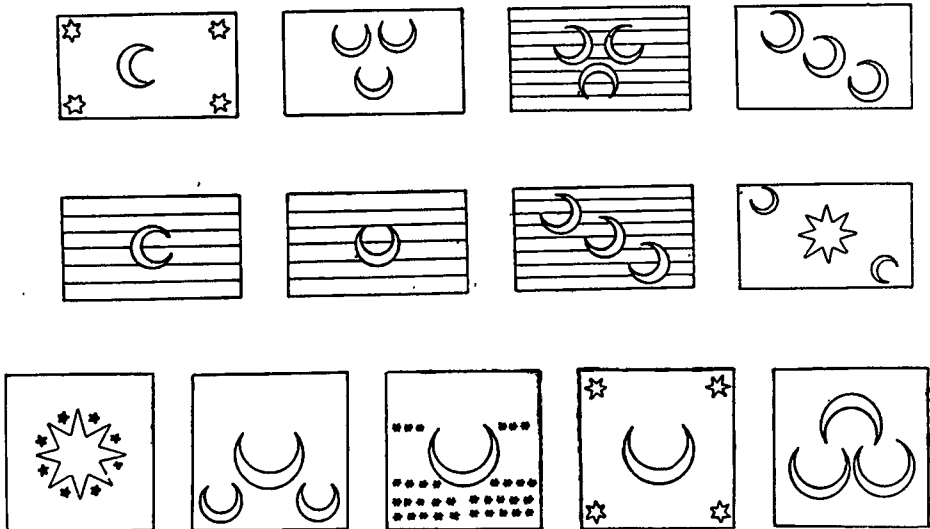
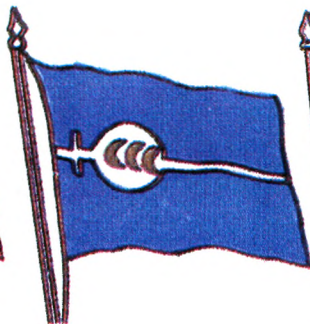


Figure 2

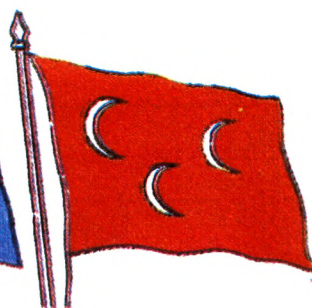
Plate 68



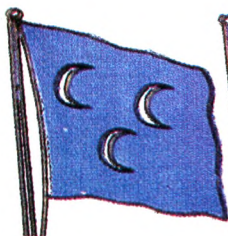
(1) Grate turks
standart



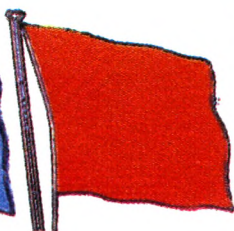
(2) Turks Vlag Von
Pacha



(3) Vlag Von Creden
turks



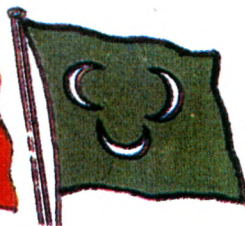
(4) Turks Blaovos
Vlag



(5) Turk Calyon
Vlag



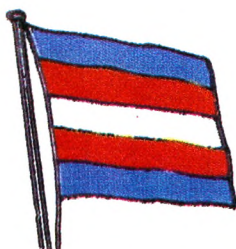
(6) Turks yarper



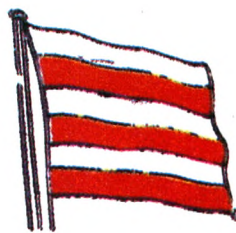
(7) Turk Creen
Vlag



(8)



(9)

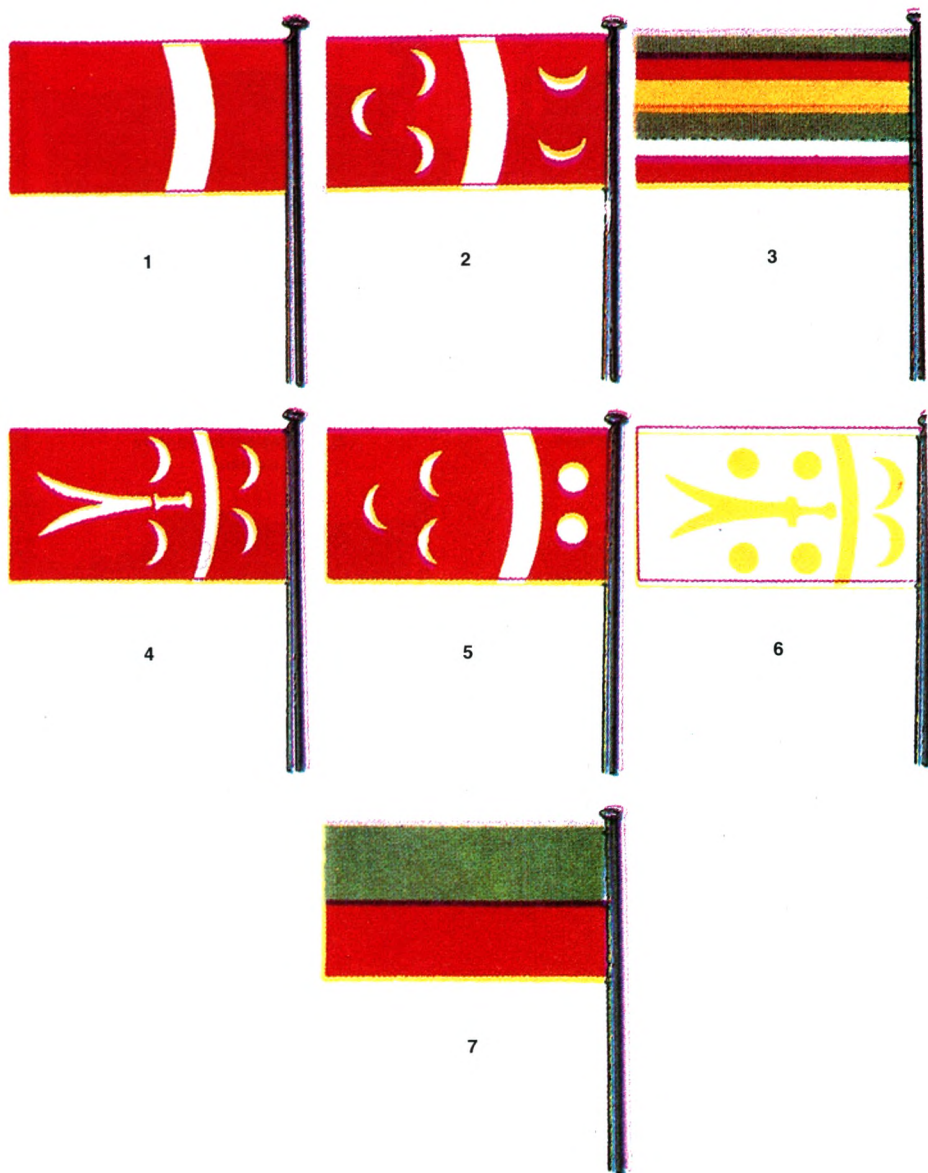


(10)

Turkish flags in "Atlas Novus" (1712)

Figure 3

Plate 69

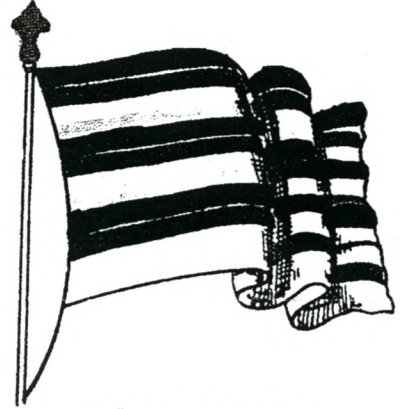


The "hümayun" flags from the paintings of the Battle of Cap Lori (1738)

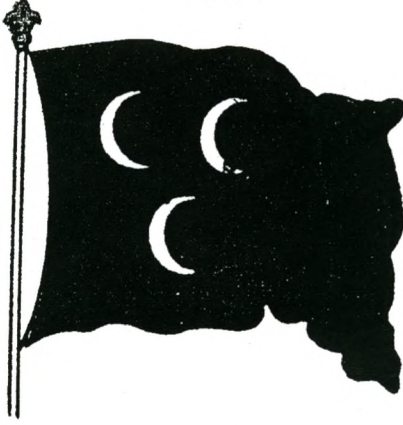
Figure 4



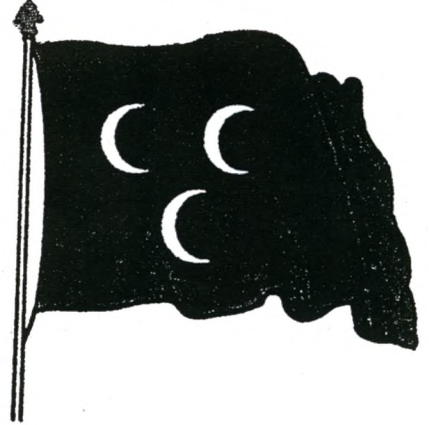
(1) Kaptanei Hümeyun Kalyonuna mahsus



(2) Üç ambarlı kalyonlara mahsus

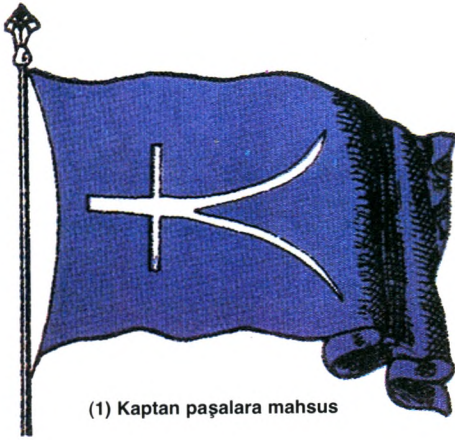


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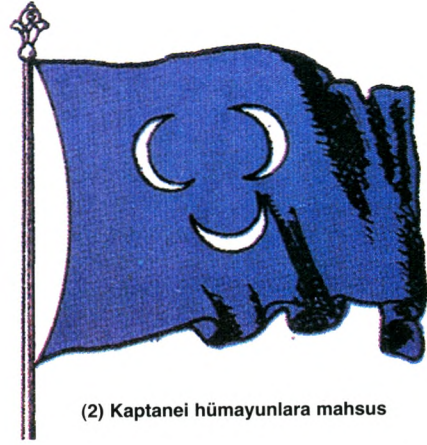


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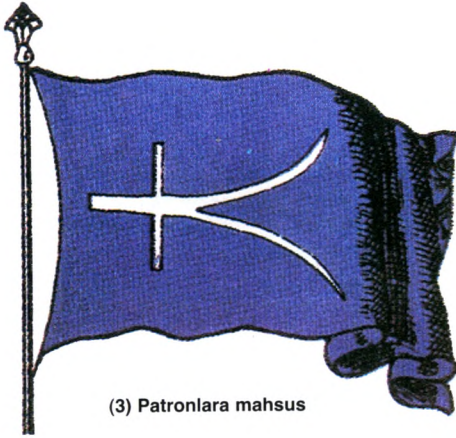
Plate 71



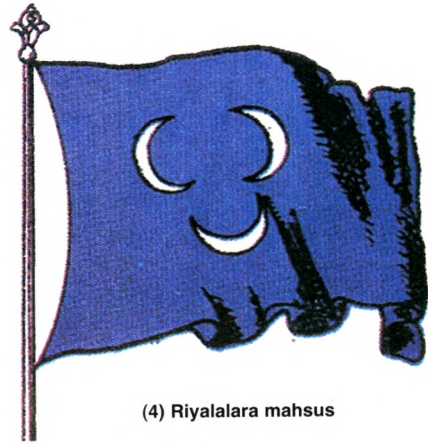
(1) Kaptan paşalara mahsus



(2) Kaptanei hümayunlara mahsus



(3) Patronlara mahsus



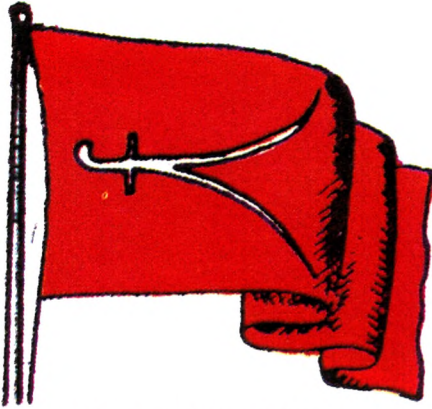
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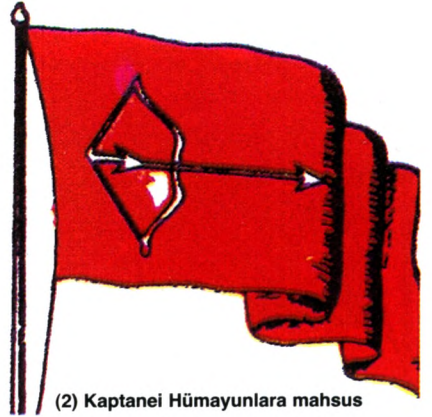
(5) Kalyon süvarilerine mahsus

Naval flags of the second period (Halis Effendi's Album, 1800-1807)

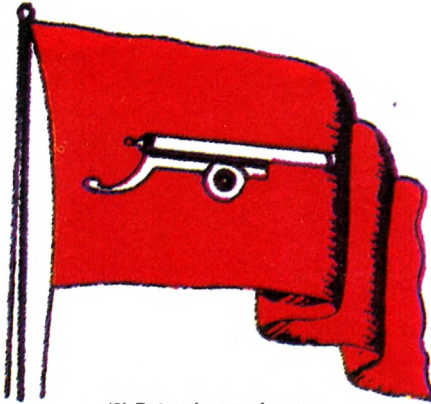
Figure 6



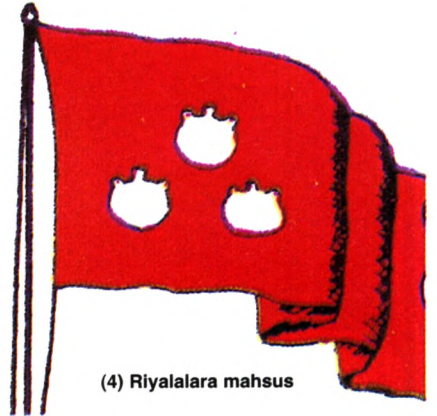
(1) Kaptan Paşalara mahsus



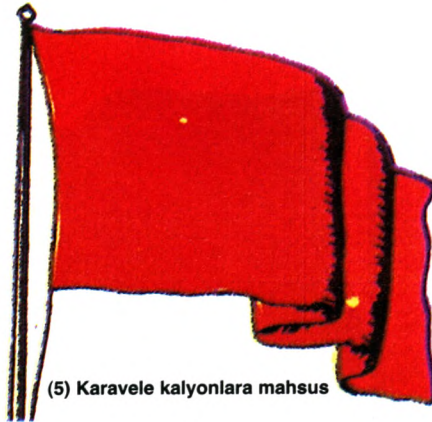
(2) Kaptanei Hümayunlara mahsus



(3) Patronlara mahsus



(4) Riyalalara mahsus



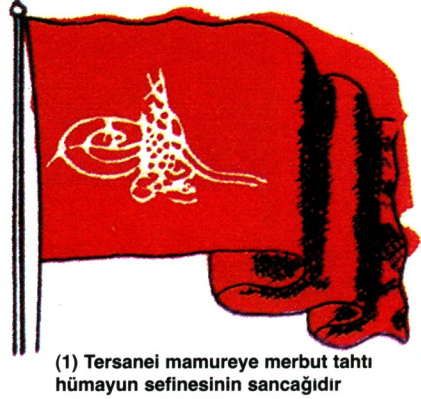
(5) Karavele kalyonlara mahsus

Naval flags of the third period (Halis Effendi's Album, 1800-1807)

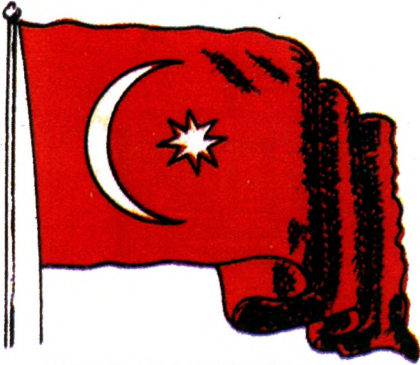
Figure 7



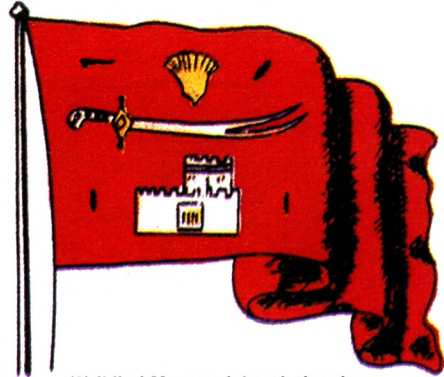
(1) Kaptan Paşalara mahsus



(1) Tersanei mamureye merbut tahtı hümayun sefinesinin sancağıdır



(2) Beylik gemilerin kiç gönderlerine mahsus



(2) İklimi Mısır ve iskenderiyenin fethinden sonra canibi şahanedan Kaptanı derya Hüseyin Paşaya mahsus olarak nişaneli fetih olmak üzere ihsan buyurulan sancaktır

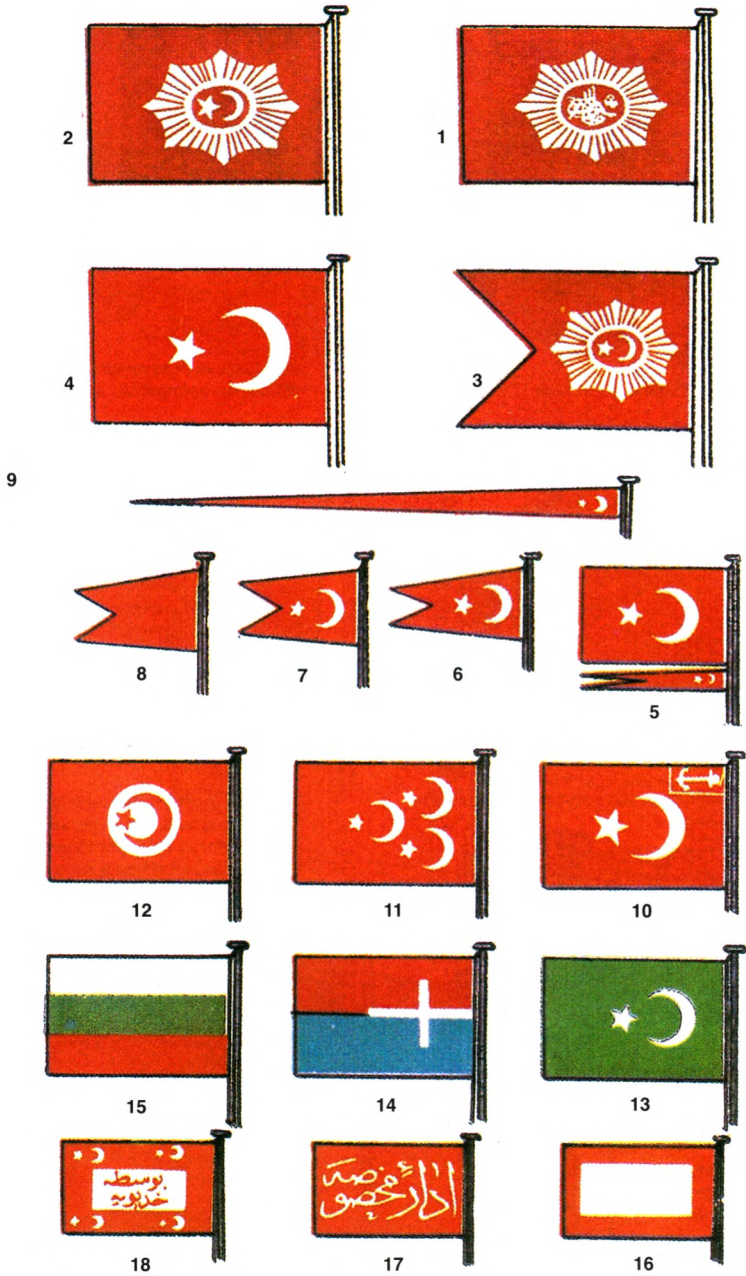


(3) Bir takım donanmaya sergerde olan kumandanlar orta direğe küşat ederler



(3) Hüseyin ağanın

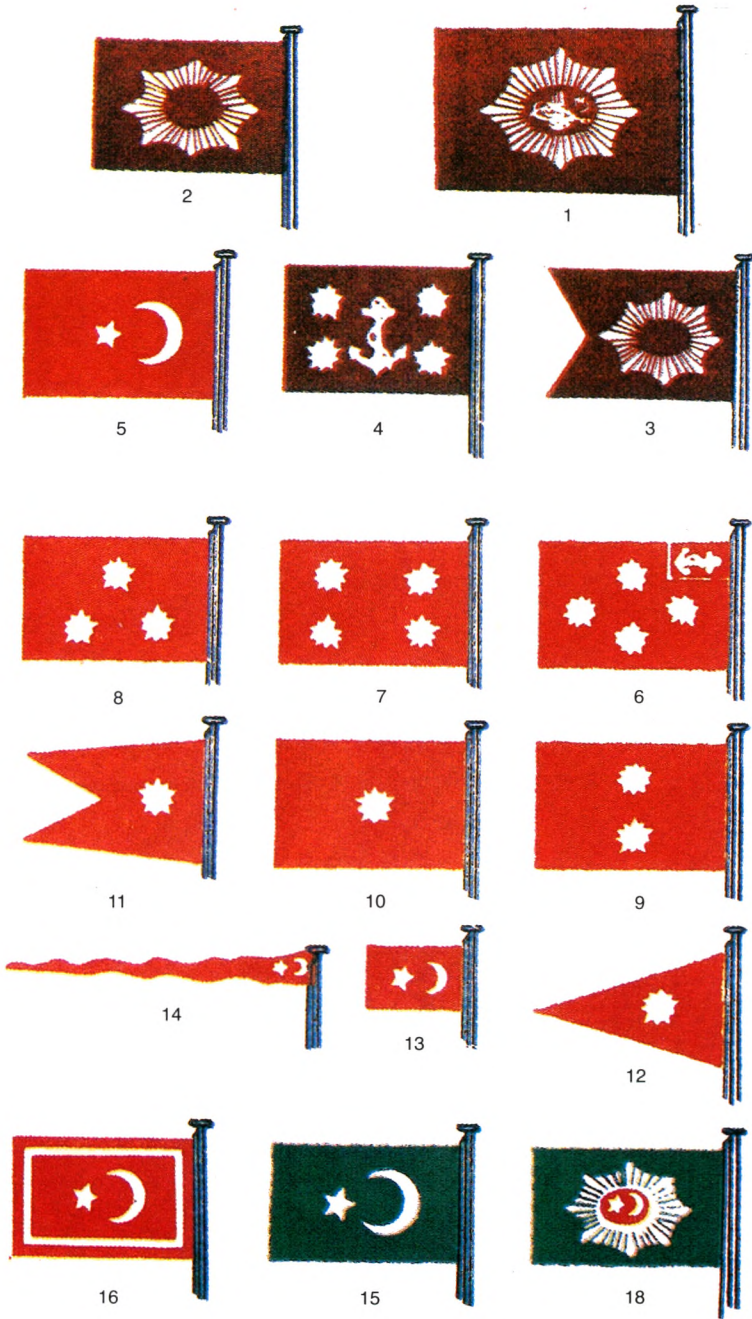
Naval flags of the third period bearing stars and crescents
(Halıs Effendi's Album, 1800-1807)



Turkish naval flags after adoption of the Constitution
(Book of Signals, 1904)

Figure 9

Plate 75



Naval flags after re-installation of the Constitution in 1908

Figure 10