

# The vexillological heritage of the Knights of Saint John in Malta

Adrian Strickland

**ABSTRACT:** This paper illustrates some of the flags used by the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. We discuss the flags used during the period when the Knights ruled in Malta (between 1530 and 1798), together with some of the flags used by the Order in the present day. The final part of the paper illustrates flags presently in use in the Maltese islands, which derive from the flags of the Order.

*The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 82-87.*

## 1 The flag of the Order and the Maltese cross

Before the famous battle of the Milvian Bridge in October 312AD<sup>1</sup> the Roman Emperor Constantine is said to have dreamt of a sign by which he would conquer his enemy. In his dream the sign of a cross appeared with the motto *In hoc signo vince*. Later, the cross and this motto were reputed to have been borne on his battle standard, and a form of the cross was painted on the shields carried by his soldiers. There was something mystical about the strength of this sign and, indeed, the cross in all its variants was later to be included in the symbols and ensigns carried by Christian armies, a tradition which persists even to the present day. The Crusades, which later brought the flower of European chivalry together under one banner, were named after it, the banner of the cross.

Pious merchants from Amalfi, a port on the western coast of southern Italy, had founded a hospice in Jerusalem and by the time of the first Crusade in 1099 this was administered by a brotherhood dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. Their principal aim was the care of sick pilgrims en route to the Holy Land.

The brotherhood used an eight-pointed cross as their emblem. This was similar to the cross found on the arms of Amalfi, whose arms differed in having

a blue field as opposed to black. Black is the colour of the robes on which the successors of this brotherhood today wear the white eight-pointed cross (Fig. 1). The Amalfitan eight-pointed cross on blue together with the arms of three other Italian maritime republics, Genova, Pisa and Venice, may be seen on the jack and in the centre of the ensign of the Italian Navy (Fig. 2).

The successors of this brotherhood, the present Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John are probably equally well known for their red shield with its plain white cross. This also appeared on the surcoat, worn over the armour of those serving the Order in battle. This design, which derives from the Crusades, also serves as the flag of the Order (Fig. 3).

Today the Order's cross, made up of a white vertical bar crossing a horizontal bar on a red field, is found in the flags of Savoy, Switzerland and Denmark, the latter of which our late lamented colleague Dr. William Crampton tells us 'is the oldest national flag in continuous use.'<sup>2</sup> With the colours reversed it is the flag of St. George of England, and of the former Italian maritime republic of Genoa, and in different colours does for the rest of Scandinavia (Fig. 4). The cross is still often encountered in regimental colours, naval jacks and ensigns.

## 2 Flags of the langues and maritime flags

By the time of the Order's arrival in Malta in 1530 it was customary for the Grand Master to quarter his own personal arms with those of the Order in the first and fourth quarters. This was the usual manner to distinguish the Grand Master's personal arms from the end of the fifteenth century. The 39th Grand Master, Peter d'Aubusson (1476–1503),<sup>3</sup> is assumed to have started the custom since subsequent armorial banners were similarly quartered.

In 1530, when the 43rd Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam sailed into Malta's stupendous natural Grand Harbour on the Order's flagship, the Great Carrack of Rhodes, his banner (Fig. 5) was flying from the foremast together with various other flags of the Order on different parts of the vessel.

### 2.1 The langues

The Order, from its early days, had been divided into *Langues*, which, at the time the Order was in Malta numbered eight, each with its own flag. Although called *Langues* or Tongues, these divisions were not based exclusively on language, (the three senior *Langues* were all French). They were administrative divisions which facilitated the distribution of duties and responsibilities: for example, the Admiral of the Order's Navy was drawn from the Italian *Langue*.

In Malta, each of the *Langues* had its own home or *Auberge* where the younger knights lived. The eight *Langues* and their flags at the time of the Order's arrival in Malta<sup>4</sup> were Castille (Fig. 6), Bavaria (Fig. 7), England (Fig. 8), Aragon (Fig. 9), Italy (Fig. 10), and the three senior *Langues*, France (Fig. 11),

Auvergne (Fig. 12) and Provence (Fig. 13). The flag of the Italian *Langue* with its 'ITALIA' is from a vexillological point of view quite unacceptable. This unfortunate design is understood to be due to the propensity for litigation among the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula. They could not agree on which state's colours or ensigns should appear in the first quarter, or in the hoist! A compromise solution was found in which no single state dominated, but which at the same time proclaimed the origins of each and every one.

The flags of the eight *Langues* may be seen today in the Embassy of the Sovereign Military Order in Saint John's Cavalier and in the Palace Armoury in Valletta. They are also carried in procession on ceremonial occasions whenever the Grand Master is present, together with his personal flag.

The personal flag of the Grand Master is a square red flag with a large white Maltese cross in the centre (Fig. 14). This is flown, for example, from the ramparts of the Chateau Fort in Lourdes during the annual pilgrimage of the Order when the Grand Master is present.

A different personal flag may also be seen on the Grand Master's motor car on official occasions. As Grand Master of the Order, he flies a distinctive red flag with a white Maltese cross encircled by a rosary and surmounted by a crown of sovereignty in gold<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 15).

### 2.2 The ensign

The flag of the Order also served as the maritime ensign. It varied in size and was usually flown from the poop of vessels of the Order. A manuscript in the National Library in Valletta shows several paintings of the ceremonial galleys of various Grand Masters. One notices in these paintings that the ensign was sometimes a large flag flown alone, as on the galley of the Aragonese Grand Masters Raphael (1660–63) and Nicholas Cottoner (1663–80)<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 16). A century later, the ensign was smaller and flown on the stern, together with the Grand Master's banner as in the galley of the Portuguese Grand Master Pinto (1741–73)<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 17).

In the time of the French Grand Master Rohan (1775–97) a larger ensign began to be flown together with other flags, including several pennants of the Order (Fig. 18) and three round-tailed guidons bearing the eight-pointed cross of the Order in white on a red field<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 19). This was the forerunner of the Grand Master's present standard.

### 2.3 The jack

The flag of the Order normally also served as the Navy's 'jack' (Fig. 20). That this was not always the case is shown in a painting of a naval action of ca. 1703. Here the banner of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722–1736) is flown as a jack on the San Antonio<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 21).

The gonfalon, with accompanying cords and tassels (Fig. 22), was flown on the ceremonial galley of the Grand Master, usually from the stern end of both lateen booms. Similar smaller pennants without the cords and tassels were hoisted at the masthead of both booms.

## 2.4 Other maritime flags

A flag code manual from the time of Grand Master Pinto shows many signal flags together with the *Stendardo di Battaglia*, or Battle Standard<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 23). It appears to be a round-tailed gold-fringed red flag showing the Sacred Host or Blessed Sacrament within a wreath of thistle and a black Latin cross in the centre.

The flag of Saint Barbara, patroness of artillerymen (Fig. 24), flies from the foremast of Grand Master Pinto's galley. The palm branch in her hand (which indicates martyrdom) and the tower in the background are customary in images of this saint.

The manual also illustrates other religious flags, like that of Christ the Good Shepherd, flown from the poop deck, and a flag of the Blessed Virgin flown from one of the lateen booms. Because of the scale of the drawings in the flag manual, the reproductions are rather poor. A standard of the Blessed Virgin known to be contemporary with the period may be seen in the museum of Cortona in Italy. This flag was presented by a high ranking knight, the *Balí* Frá Filippo Marucelli in 1752 (Fig. 25).<sup>11</sup>

This banner shows the Blessed Virgin standing on a serpent entwined about the crescent moon. This latter could be construed as the crescent of Islam. In the fly are the arms of the Florentine<sup>12</sup> family of Murucelli, with the Order's cross in the chief indicating the rank of *Balí* or bailiff. Behind the arms, one can just make out the Maltese cross of a professed knight, a trophy of arms and a grappling hook, all surmounted by a (ducal) coronet.<sup>13</sup> The border of the flag is a heavily embroidered geometric design with a floral motif.

These flags, together with six flags of the Order aloft and fourteen other pairs of flags on the gunwhales, make a grand total of forty-one. Besides being a vexillologists dream, one must assume it was difficult to row to windward!

## 2.5 The signal flags of the Order's navy

The flags mentioned so far were not the only flags flown by vessels of the Order's navy. The command of a warship at sea was always difficult and the control of a number of vessels forming a squadron even more so. Without the modern benefit of radio, visual methods of communication were developed. The Order was among the first of maritime nations to solve the problem of communicating over visible distances by devising a flag code. Flag code manuals from the time of the knights still exist. A number of these manuals of the navy of the Order

are in private collections in Malta, as well as in the National Library<sup>14</sup> and the Maritime Museum in Malta.<sup>15</sup>

Typically, there are flag signals while lying at anchor and for sailing during the day, as well as light signals for use at night and also various sound signals for use in mist and fog.

The number of flags in use at different times averaged around fifteen. Several signal flags were rectangular, some were of a single colour, but horizontal bi-colours or tricolours were also used. There were a further eight signal pennants, called *fiamme* in Italian, including a red and white checked one (Fig. 26).

Making use of these flags, singly or in pairs, and hoisting them on different parts of the vessel, then lowering, sometimes to be hoisted and lowered again a number of times, enabled complicated signals such as 'I am reporting a number of enemy square-rigged ships' to be communicated to the rest of the squadron.

The manual for use by the *Captana* or flagship of the Order included a number of additional flags. The flag of Jerusalem, a white flag with a red cross potent between four smaller red crosses potent (Fig. 27), signalled that Holy Mass was being celebrated. A flag with two white crescent moons and two gold stars (Fig. 28), when flown on its own, meant that all surgeons were to report to the flagship.

The manuals are interesting as they were usually the personal property of individual young knights, who would have had to prepare their own manuals, carefully drawing in the different flags and colouring them while at the same time noting the significance of each signal.

### 3 The flags of the Grand Masters

We have seen in Fig. 17 the banner of the Portuguese Grand Master Pinto (1741–73) as it was flown from his galley. This banner showed the Pinto arms quartered with arms of the Order. A manuscript dated around 1770<sup>16</sup> has about twelve pages of maritime flags, including a banner of Grand Master Pinto in which his arms are not quartered with the Order's in the normal way but 'per saltire,' or quartered diagonally (Fig. 29). This fashion could have been derived from the early arms of Sicily in which the arms of Aragon and Hohenstauffen were similarly quartered (Fig. 30).

Personal standards of the Grand Masters were used in various other roles on their sailing vessels. A painting in the Sanctuary Museum at Zabbar depicting the 'Great Carrack of Rhodes,' the Order's Flagship at the time of their arrival in Malta in 1530, shows the standard of Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam (Fig. 31) flying from the head of the foremast. Another painting in the Palace in Valletta shows the personal standard of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. (1722–1736) (Fig. 32), being flown as a jack while the vessel is capturing the flagship of the Algerian Admiral.

Other Grand Masters indicated their presence by flying a banner of their

arms, without necessarily quartering them with the Order's. Other flags were flown including *stendardi* with the arms of Grand Master Rohan (Fig. 33) and in one of the signal manuals<sup>17</sup> there is a reproduction of the *gagliardetto* or burgee (Fig. 34) of the Aragonese Grand Master Perellos (1697-1720). It seems that the burgee was flown by the vessel carrying the Grand Master on less formal occasions.

#### 4 The flags of the Order today

The flags of the Order are kept alive today by the Order of Saint John itself in its institutions and establishments all over the world. Flags of the Order fly at the Order's headquarters in Rome and on occasions when members of the Order are in religious procession. Armorial banners<sup>18</sup> are also sometimes carried in attendance on Professed Knights of Justice (Fig. 35).

The flags of the eight *Langues* are carried in solemn procession when representatives of the Order are present from all over the world, as in the annual pilgrimage that the Order makes to the Sanctuary of Our Blessed Lady in Lourdes. These eight flags are joined by two others, that of the Order itself and the standard of the Grand Master when he is present in person.

The year 1998 marks the second centenary of the departure of the Order from Malta. Yet, despite the passage of time, popular enthusiasm for flags keeps these vexillological motifs very much alive. Today the Order's flag flies in Malta on all religious feasts, particularly at Easter time, when *ir-Religjon* (which is what the Order's flag is called in Maltese) (Fig. 36) can be seen flying over most towns and villages. It also flies on most secular or state occasions to be seen only slightly less frequently than the Maltese national flag (Fig. 37).

These traditions and their appropriate flags are kept alive not only by the Order itself, but also by an almost fanatic fringe of flag fans in Malta and her sister island of Gozo. Cities, towns, villages and other institutions in Malta fly flags whose design has been influenced by the heraldry and vexillology of the Order, without there being any perceivable connection between the institution and the Order. One of the principal design features is the Maltese or eight-pointed cross of the Order, which appears in flags and standards of various band clubs.

Band clubs in Malta and Gozo fulfil a very special social function. To quote from Jeremy Boissevain's *Saints and Fireworks*, "The Band Clubs are the most important secular societies. They are formally constituted associations with elected committees, premises of their own and a large body of dues paying members drawn from all occupational and social classes. The first band clubs were established shortly after the middle of the last century in order to organise the external celebrations and provide music for the annual feasts of village patron saints."<sup>19</sup>

Most of the older band clubs were named after saints or Grand Masters of

the Order, while most of the later ones were named after British sovereigns, members of the Royal family, or something connected with the British Empire. The flags of these two principal categories of band clubs reflect their origins. For example, La Valette Band Club (Fig. 38) flies a banner of the arms of Grand Master de Valette, while the King's Own Band Club flies a blue flag with arms of the King Edward VII of England. Both these institutions are based in Valletta and they use insignia which proudly proclaim their respective origins.

#### 5 The Order's vexillological legacy in Malta's new local councils

##### 5.1 The cities

Although Malta and Gozo together cover only one hundred square miles, there are no fewer than ten cities! Apart from Malta's ancient capital Mdina, and Victoria, the capital of Gozo, the other eight cities received their charters from the Knights of Saint John. Their flags are therefore largely derived from this connection.

The 'Three Cities' that withstood the Great Siege by the Turks in 1565 all received honorary titles connected with their victory. Thus Birgu became *Citta Vittoriosa* or Victorious. The flag is red with an armoured forearm holding a sword with a wreath of olive and palm (Fig. 39). The olive and palm were adopted by the Knights of Saint John after the Great Siege in 1565.<sup>20</sup> L-Isla or Senglea, founded by Grand Master de la Sengle (1553-1557), is also called *Citta Invicta* or Invincible, and its flag is yellow with five white scallop shells on a black saltire (Fig. 40). This flag is based upon the arms of Grand Master Claude de la Sengle. Cottonera, also called *Citta Cospicua*, or Conspicuous, is still colloquially called Bormla. One hundred years after the Great Siege the city was protected from the landward side by a ring of fortifications built by the two Grand Masters, Raphael (1660-1663) and Nicholas Cottoner (1663-1680). This city has a yellow flag with a green cotton plant (Fig. 41) derived from the Cottoner arms.

The flag of the present capital, Valletta (or to quote the name given by its founder *Cittá Umilissima*), is red with a golden lion rampant (Fig. 42). The lion comes from the arms of Grand Master de Valette, who established the city in 1568. The cities of Qormi and Zebbug received their charters almost two hundred year later from Grand Master Pinto in 1743 and Grand Master De Rohan in 1777, respectively. Their flags are thus influenced by the arms of these two Grand Masters (Figs 43 and 44).

In 1797 the last of the Grand Masters to reign in Malta gave charters to three cities. It was to be the Order's last year in Malta before being ousted by the Republican French under General Napoleon Bonaparte. Of these three cities, only Zabbar and Zejtun have flags that are influenced by those of the

Order. In the former case the flag is identical with the arms of Hompesch, red with an engrailed white saltire (Fig. 45), while Zejtun's flag is similar to the Order's but is white with a green cross (Fig. 46).

## 5.2 The towns and villages

In addition to the cities there are other localities in these islands which still bear insignia of the Order or of personages connected with the Order. The village of Xewkija in Gozo, whose patron saint is Saint John the Baptist, flies the flag of Malta (pre-George cross) defaced with a Maltese cross counterchanged (Fig. 47). *Borgo Vilhena* (Floriana), which was so named shortly after the election of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena in 1722, flies a flag made up of his arms (Fig. 48). *Rahal Gdid*, meaning literally 'new village' in Arabic, was established during the time of Grand Master Antoine de Paule (1623–1636). The flag bears three peacocks and wheat sheaves derived from the single one in the de Paule arms, together with three conjoined whorls, or 'tree of life' taken from ceiling paintings of the prehistoric temple to be found in the same village (Fig. 49).

Santa Venera's Local Council flies a flag derived from the arms of Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt (1601–1622): red with three fleurs-de-lys on a white band (Fig. 50).

Many clubs, band clubs and other societies fly flags which include the eight-pointed cross of the Knights as the central motif.

## 6 The Order's vexillological legacy in other flags

### 6.1 Regimental colours

Reference has been made to the French ousting the Knights in 1798. They in turn were ousted by the British two years later, and the latter only left Malta upon independence in 1964. During the British period it was not until the Knights had disappeared from living memory that their insignia appeared in Maltese military dress. The first instance was upon the buttons of the Royal Malta Fencibles in the 1860s.

The dark blue regimental colour of the Royal Malta Militia had a small white Maltese cross in each corner. The successors of the Militia were the King's Own Malta Regiment, and their first Regimental Colour had a white Maltese cross in the centre, while the crosses in the corners were repeated in the last stand of colours of this regiment presented on 11 November 1967 by HM The Queen (Fig. 51).

The Royal Malta Artillery, on ceasing to form part of the British Army when Malta became a republic in 1972, removed the British royal crown from their regimental cap-badge, but the silver Maltese cross behind the gun remained.

This badge appears on the Forces colour of the Armed Forces of Malta presented in the 1970s (Fig. 52).

### 6.2 Other flags

The standard of the President of Malta has the National arms in the centre of a blue flag, with a golden Maltese cross in each corner (Fig. 53).

The Malta jack is a square flag flown from the jack-staff of vessels of the Armed Forces of Malta. It consists of a white square in the centre of which is a George cross in its proper colours, with a thin red edging. This is surrounded by a red square frame, in each corner of which is a white Maltese cross. Each of the small crosses, represents a port of entry (Fig. 54). The Malta Maritime ensign is red with a white Maltese cross and border (Fig. 55).

The national airline, Air Malta, flies a flag with a white Maltese cross in the centre of a red square. Many other corporations include the Maltese cross on their flags (Fig. 56). The national line Sea Malta also flies a house-flag with a Maltese cross (Fig. 57).

The General Officer Commanding the British Troops in Malta, (as well as the Maltese Troops raised by the British until independence in 1964) with the rank of Major General, flew a rectangular red flag with a white Maltese cross in the centre. With the reduction in troop strength towards the end of the British presence in Malta, this rank was reduced to Brigadier. The shape of the vehicle flag was consequently changed to triangular, while maintaining the design (Fig. 58).

## 7 Conclusion

It has been shown that many of the flags flown in the Maltese islands throughout the two hundred years since the departure of the Knights of Saint John are derived from the time the Order ruled in Malta from 1530–1798.

It is significant that the Maltese themselves adopted many coats of arms of prominent members of the Order and the flag of the Order to form their civic and military insignia. Even the mighty British Empire adopted the eight-pointed cross as the basis for the insignia of all the regiments raised in Malta after 1861.

This heritage has been maintained in the most active and virile manner through a transient and delicate medium such as bunting. It is remarkable that this should have been so successfully used to maintain this link over a period of almost half a millenium.

## Acknowledgements

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### Adrian Strickland

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Figure 1



Figure 2

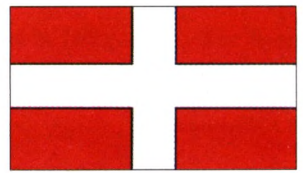


Figure 3

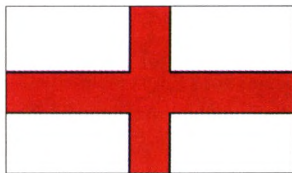


Figure 4A

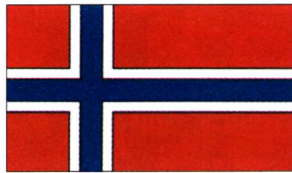


Figure 4B

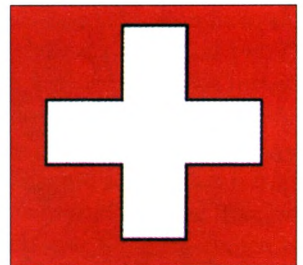


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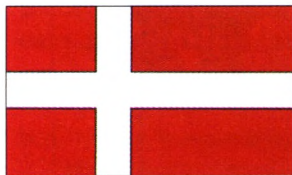


Figure 4D



Figure 4E

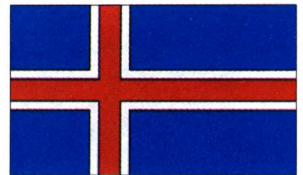


Figure 4F

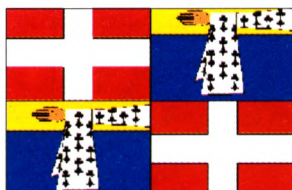


Figure 5

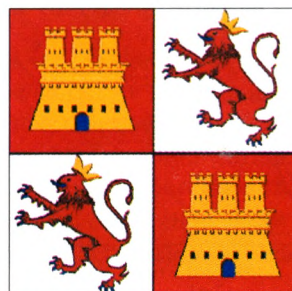


Figure 6



Figure 7



Plate 83

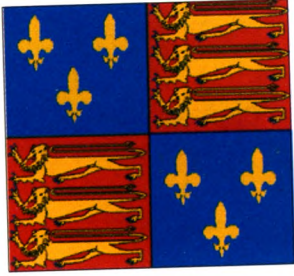


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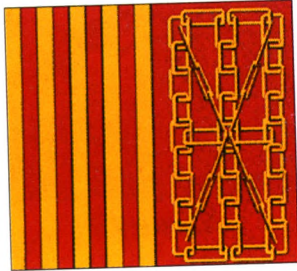


Figure 9



Figure 10

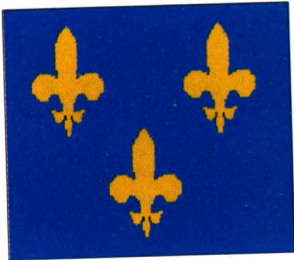


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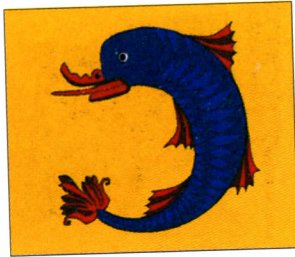


Figure 12

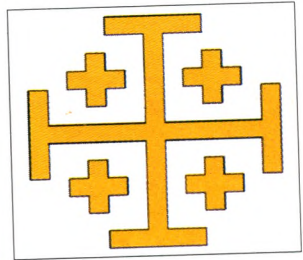


Figure 13

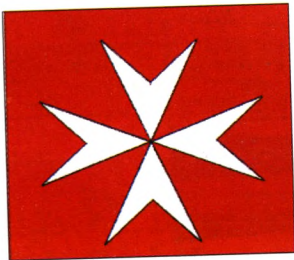


Figure 14



Figure 15

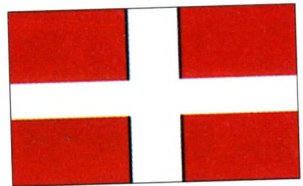


Figure 16

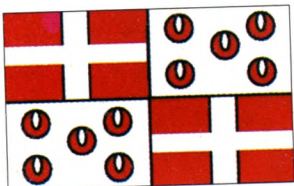


Figure 17

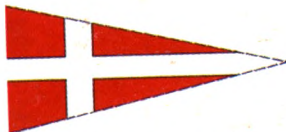


Figure 18



Figure 19

Plate 84

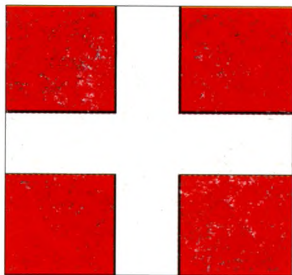


Figure 20

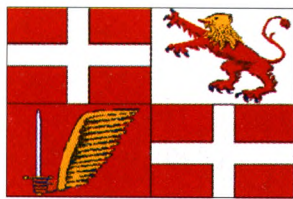


Figure 21

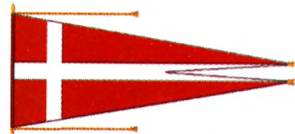


Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

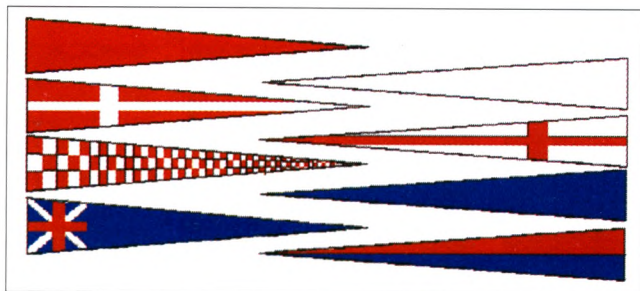


Figure 26

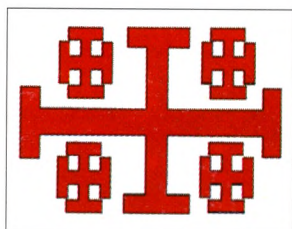


Figure 27



Figure 28

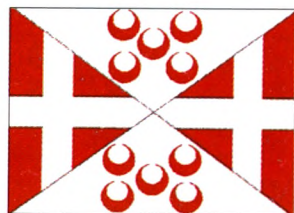


Figure 29

Plate 85

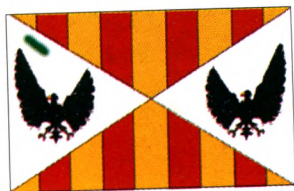


Figure 30

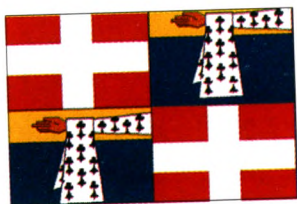


Figure 31

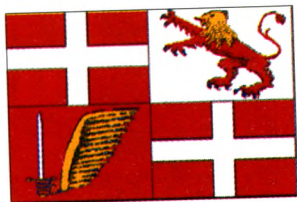


Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34

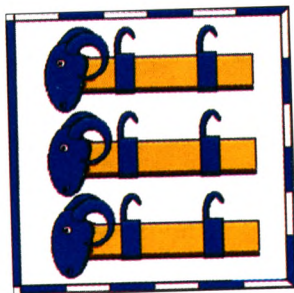


Figure 35

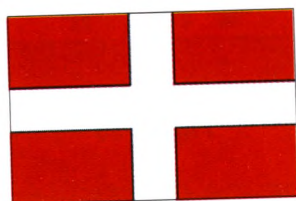


Figure 36

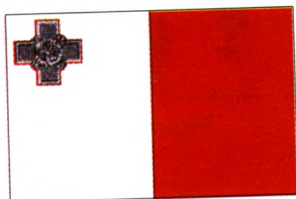


Figure 37

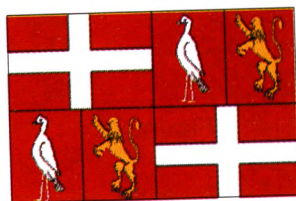


Figure 38



Figure 39

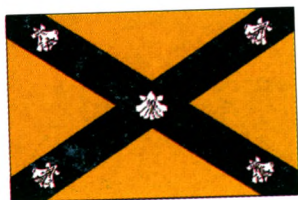


Figure 40

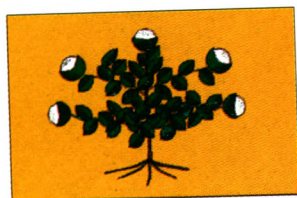


Figure 41



Plate 86



Figure 42

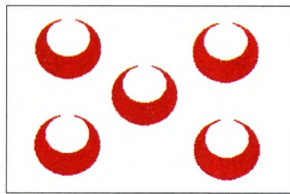


Figure 43



Figure 44



Figure 45



Figure 46

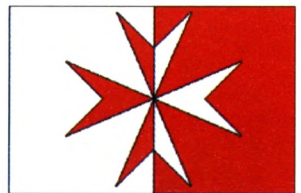


Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49

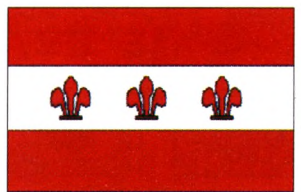


Figure 50



Figure 51



Figure 52



Figure 53

Plate 87

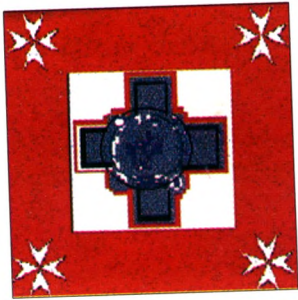


Figure 54

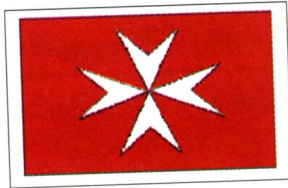


Figure 55



Figure 56



Figure 57



Figure 58