

FLAG FINIALS : ARE THEY OF INTEREST TO VEXILLOLOGISTS?

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Abstract :

This presentation sets out to draw attention to two aspects of vexillology, that of daytime finials, and night time coloured light finials, which in the Maltese Islands have attained particular significance in identifying the households of members of the different factions within a community.

It is only after looking at the flags hoisted in various villages in Malta and Gozo on the occasion of their *festas* that one might notice the finials perched above the disc holding the truck for hoisting and lowering the flag, these often bear symbols associated with the iconography of the community. This could be religious or secular.

Finials on flag poles, might be considered to form a branch of vexillology, like the ribbons, streamers, and wreaths and possibly even the cords and tassels, that accompany many classes of flag. It is my belief, that unlike these other accoutrements flag finials as such, probably deserve more attention than they have generally received in the past.

In the Maltese islands, "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 organize the external celebrations and provide music for the annual *festas* of village patron saints". Each band club has its own members, from among whom the musicians are selected, trained and practice. During the *festa* season, which is really, right through summer, the clubs will be hired to play at each other's *festas* and members of the band, together with their communities and supporters will often travel to other parts of the world, usually in Europe to participate in festivities in other cities. The Maltese communities in Australia, Canada and the United States have continued the village *festa* traditions in the countries of their adoption and hold processions and other festivities in a manner to that still pertaining in their home country.

In Malta, each band club has its own insignia, and there is nowadays a renewal of the enthusiasm for uniforms. The symbols that appear in the uniform cap badge, the band standard, and the various carvings in the soft Malta stone that decorate the band club's premises also appear on the finials of the flag poles erected on the roofs of members' personal residences. These symbols are usually drawn from the insignia of the village patron saint, but also occasionally from some other calling or political event in the history of the community.

Since it is normal for the finial to stay up in all types of weather, it must be made of very resilient material as it will only be attended to when the flagpole itself is lowered for maintenance and together with the timber spar, the finial is also given another coat of paint. The finial is therefore usually made of metal sheeting, hammered out and welded by the dilettante himself or else by the local blacksmith, or it may these days, be made of resin, cast from a mould and in both cases, painted in bright colours. Other finials are also to be found surmounting the staff to which the band's gonfalon or standard is fixed.

The gonfalon is normally made of costly material and heavily embroidered in old thread, and is kept in the club house. The standard however is usually borne in front of the band, during their 'marches'. These finials, unlike the 'all weather' rooftop ones, are usually made of silver or white metal and are often in the shape of a classical lyre, with the insignia of the band club fixed to the front and back. Finials atop band standards are usually accompanied by a large cloth rosette and streamers with tassels, while those on the gonfanons, usually have tassels suspended from the ends of the crossbar.

Most band clubs are located in the central square of each of the towns and villages of these islands. They are fairly prominent and grand buildings, usually built by the membership themselves, everyone contributing through their own skills and labour and if they cannot, then through their pockets for the greater grandeur of their own club. The club has always been a male dominated

entity, band practices, tombola, card games and social drinking constituting the main activities. With the increasing appearance of lady musicians in the bands fielded by the band clubs, there is an insidious penetration of females in what has heretofore been almost exclusively a male preserve. In those villages with more than one club, members of the same family usually belong to the same club.

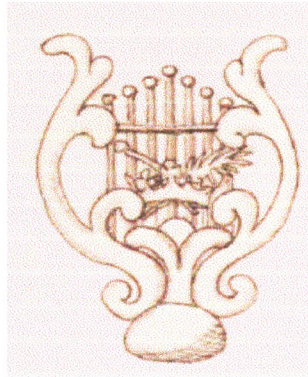


Fig. 1 - The Finial of the Bandalora or gonfanon of the St. Joseph Band Club in Kirkop.

On the roof and in the centre of the facade of the building, the club will usually have a large tall flag pole from which will be flown in elaborate succession, a variety of flags appropriate for each occasion, whether it be club, village or national. The finials on these flag poles are usually the lyre. Adherents, supporters or members of a club, that have flag poles on their own homes will usually have finials that proclaim their allegiance, to their particular club. For example, Zejtun in the southern part of Malta, is a city dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who is reputed to have achieved martyrdom by being beheaded after several attempts to kill her on a spiked wheel had failed. The symbols associated with this saint, include a broken wheel armed with blades, the palm of martyrdom, an upright sword and a coronet. Naturally most of these symbols appear on the finials atop the flag poles on the houses of her adherents in Zejtun.



Fig. 2a The Catherine Wheel
The emblems of Saint Catherine, as flag finials at Zejtun

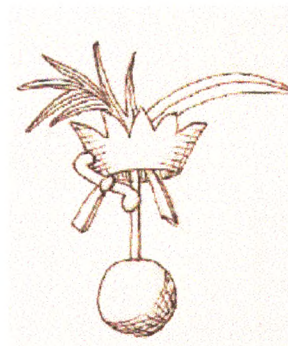


Fig. 2b - Sword, palm and coronet
The emblems of Saint Catherine, as flag finials at Zejtun

Another band club in Zejtun, was born as an offshoot of the older Beland Band club in 1932. The dissident faction formed their own band, erected their ONM club-house and now share the ceremonial honours whenever the appropriate occasion arises. The oldest Band Club, Saint Catherine's was, some years ago, precluded from participating in the Band Marches due to riotous behaviour. The activities of this club are now limited to the organization of the *fešta* fireworks. The finials of the supporters of the new Zejtun Band are not dedicated to Saint Catherine, and are instead in the form of Maltese crosses, usually in gold. The Maltese cross is a popular motif for finials, and can be found also in other villages. In the village of Ghaxaq, quite close to Zejtun, the secondary

feast is dedicated to Saint Joseph, whose colour is green. In the week prior to his feast the village will be seen ablaze with green, and white/green flags each bearing a Maltese cross in the centre, this latter is often counter-changed red/white but sometimes within a circle. In the middle of May, just when the evenings are losing their chill, at the time of the *fešta*, at night one can see many of the flag poles there decorated with green lights at the mast head.

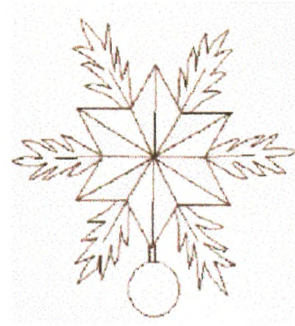
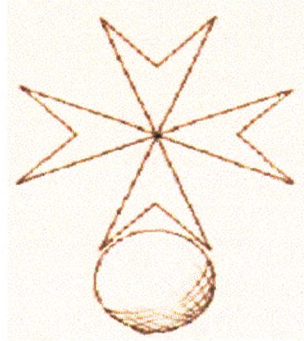


Fig. 3 - The Flag Finial used by supporters of the Zejtun Band Club

Fig. 3 b- Marian star motif from the village of Ghaxaq.

Followers of the Pinto Band Club, the oldest of at least three band clubs in the city of Qormi have their Maltese cross in white and red. Sometimes parted *per pale*, that is vertically and sometimes *quarterly*.

Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is very strong in the Maltese archipelago, many of the churches, and hence the band clubs being dedicated to her, consequently many of the band clubs have insignia based on Marian themes. The most common of these is the six-pointed star, usually painted 'per gyron' in white and blue, often with yellow or golden rays of light emanating from the interstices, or with one long tail when the star is also used as a wind-vane.

Another of the Marian motifs, is the monogram of Mary, the 'M' interlaced with the 'A' of Ave, surrounded by a ring of twelve silver stars. The monogram is usually in blue, with the stars in white or silver. This motif is common in the village of Ghaxaq, where the parish church is dedicated to the Assumption and whose feast is celebrated on August 15



Fig. 4 - The interlaced A and M, of Ave Maria or Hail Mary, symbols of the Blessed Virgin, with stars in Fig. 4a and with roses in Fig 4b.

A variation of the usual Ave Maria finial at Fig 4a, is shown at Fig. 4b, this is from the village of Gudja where the AM interlaced monogram is surrounded not by the twelve silver stars, but by a wreath of red and white flowers, topped with a golden crown.

In the village of Kirkop, the patron saint is Saint Leonard, and the finials of the flagpoles in this village, are often made up of a lion holding a lighted firebrand in one of his forepaws. Another less common motif for finials in this village, but which appears often on the red flags flown at the time of the *festa* is the abbot's mitre, crosier and pastoral cross, within a wreath. The cross, with its double bar, is in fact incorrectly used as insignia for an abbot. In this form the cross is the insignia reserved to archbishops.

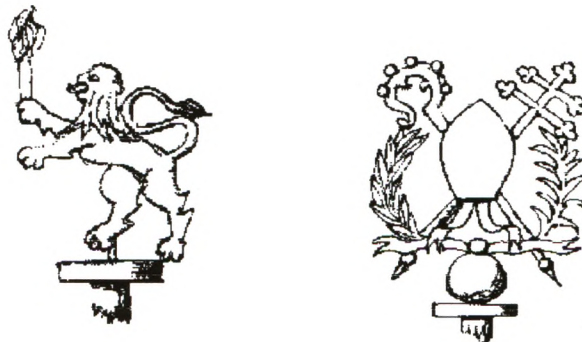


Fig. 5 - Insignia of Saint Leonard, from finials in the village of Kirkop. Fig. 5a, shows the lion holding a firebrand, Fig. 5b, shows the mitre, crosier and pastoral cross of an Abbot.

An unusual finial in the village of Zurrieq, which lies close to the sea and has many fisherman, is this fish. Known locally as Lampuka, better known world wide as dolphin fish, or *dorado*. Zurrieq, like Zejtun is dedicated to Saint Catherine and most of the decorated finials include her 'msigru'a. The broken wheel, wreath, sword and coronet are similar to those shown in Fig. 1, for Zejtun.

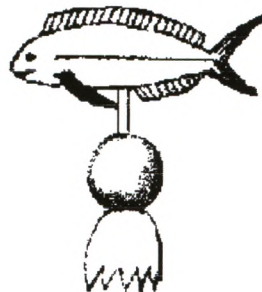


Fig. 6 - Dorado or 'lampuka' finial from the village of Zurrieq.

The village of Luqa, where Malta's international airport is located, is dedicated to Saint Andrew. There the single band club is also dedicated to the same saint and his *saltire* or diagonal cross is a prominent part of his iconography, even on the finials of the flag poles there.

Another of our villages dedicated to an early saint, is Saint Paul's Bay. It was here in the north of Malta that in AD 60, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles, on his way to Rome as a prisoner of the empire, was shipwrecked. He stayed in Malta for about three months and succeeded in converting the pagans into Christians. On the beach, some of the locals who had come down to the shore to witness the shipwreck, no doubt hoping for something of value to be washed ashore among the flotsam, had lit a fire. The Apostle Paul, picked up a piece of driftwood to toss into the fire, and a serpent curled about his arm. The Maltese drew back in horror, here indeed was an evil man, who had just escaped death in the shipwreck, but now was surely to die by

the venomous bite of the viper. Calmly, the story tells us, Paul shook his arm and the serpent fell into the flames to perish there. The story continues that after that time there were no more venomous snakes in those islands. Here in this finial we see the sword of Saint Paul, entwined about the serpent, within palm leaves and surmounted by a coronet.



Fig. 7 - The Saitire of Saint Andrew, who was martyred on a diagonal cross, stands above the truck of flagpoles in the village of Luqa



Fig. 8 - The sword and viper, symbols of Saint Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles, within a wreath of palm for martyrdom, surmounted by a coronet.

The old city of Qormi, is made up of two parishes, *San Gorg and San Bastjan*, Saints George and Sebastian, the latter was martyred by being stripped, tied to a tree and killed by arrows. These latter appear in the finials of flag poles in his parish, surmounted by a coronet between the triumphal palm fronds of Christian martyrs. The other parish has a band club called Pinto, named after the Portuguese Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca (1741 -1773), who gave his name to the city in 1743, following the request of the Parish Priest Don Giuseppe Vella, on behalf of the people of that town.⁴ This band, an older club, is dedicated to Saint George, and his equestrian figure killing the dragon appears on the cap-badges of the bandsmen and on the standard carried in the march, but not on the finial of the standard. Here the Sacred Heart of Jesus within a wreath is shown!



Fig. 9 - The arrows of Saint Sebastian, together with the palm fronds and coronet of martyrdom, stand on the finials of flag poles in the parish of the same name in Qormi.

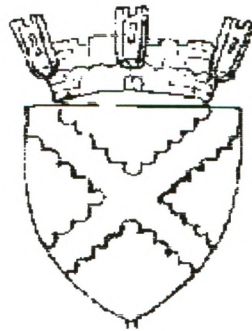


Fig. 10 - The arms of the last of Malta's Grand Masters, Ferdinand von Hompesch, grace the finial on the flagpole outside the office of the Local Council in Zabbar.

Another city in Malta, Zabbar, was given its charter in 1798, by the last of the Grand Masters of the Sovereign Military Order of Saint John to rule there, before being ousted by General Napoleon Bonaparte. The finial on the flag pole outside the local council's office is made up of the arms of the only German Grand Master, Ferdinand von Hompesch, surmounted with a mural coronet, of four turrets, (or *eschaugettes*), indicating its status as a city. The capital Valletta, and the former capitals, Mdina and Birgu, also have coronets above their arms, but these have six turrets.

The national obsession with flags, poles and finials, is not exclusively a daytime thing. Indeed, at sunset, when the flags are slowly and majestically, even reluctantly struck, there is only the short interlude of twilight, quite brief in fact due to Malta's proximity to the tropic of cancer. As darkness falls, a new regime takes over, no longer the waving fluttering contrasts of colour, but the ever present conflict of light and darkness. Within the small spheres of light that pierce the all-enveloping darkness, can be distinguished, different colours of light, the red for Saint Catherine, or the Sacred Heart, the green for Zejtun Band, or Saint Joseph in Ghazaq, the blue for the Blessed Virgin, in Tarxien and Gudja. In each village, the colours mean a different club, a different saint, a different feast.

It is a sad fact of life in these islands, that these ubiquitous nocturnal globes of light, which trumpet the affiliations of the different households within a given community are at the same time usurping the beautifully crafted metal and resin coloured finials that perform the same function during the day. Members of this gathering will of course have been more interested in the flags accompanying the illustrations of finials but the real purpose of this short talk is to ask ourselves if finials and possibly even the illumination of flag poles at night could be considered to belong, or maybe already do belong, to the science of vexillology, or do the few of us interested in this allied branch of study need to coin a new word? Perhaps we in this contest are not finalists, but finialists!

Notes :

- 1 Boissevan, Jeremy - *Saints & Fireworks*, New York 1965.
- 2 Strickland, Adrian. Pp. 17-19, *Flagmaster*, No. 075/076 1994.
- 3 Heim, Bruno Bernard, *Heraldry in the Catholic Church*, p. 74. Van Duren, Gerards Cross, 1981.
- 4 *The Cities, Towns & Villages of the Maltese Islands and Their Coats-of-Arms*, p. 6, Department of Information, Malta. 1993

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Adrian Strickland

Adrian Strickland is founder and president of the Heraldry & Vexillology Society of Malta (HAVSOM) established in 1995 and editor of the society's journal *It Tarka u l'Bandiera*. He is author of *A Look at Malta Insignia* (1993) and several articles on heraldic and vexillological subjects published in connected journals. He lectures part time at the University of Malta on heraldry and vexillology and is advisor to the Malta Government on these subjects and phallesiastics. He is the artist and publisher of a number of posters and cards, showing various aspects of the heraldry of the Order of Saint John.



Flag of the Heraldry and Vexillology Society of Malta. Right, Adrian Strickland at ICV 18, Victoria.



ICV 17 at Cape Town, with various South African dignitaries. Adrian Strickland at the far right in dark suit and blue shirt. Straight ahead of him we spot Teodoro Amerlinck and Bruce Berry.