

# Metal vexilla on Viking ships

*Jan Henrik Munksgaard*

## So say the sagas

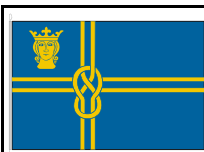
Viking ships with dragonheads are well known from many medieval illustrations (Fig. 1). The fact that also other symbols were used at the stem of Viking ships, is less known. Written sources from the Middle Ages in Norway mention, among other things, *veðrviti*, metal vexilla, which were attached to the stem of a ship to indicate by whom a ship was led.

According to *Håkon Håkonssons saga*, the Norwegian king Håkon sailed into the Oslo Fjord with his fleet in 1221. He dispatched a few small ships ahead of the others. The king's enemies attacked these small ships, but when they saw the main fleet with metal vexilla shining in the sun, they understood that the king's ship was approaching, and they fled as fast as they could.

Later in the same saga, the longship *Mariasuda* is told to be the finest ship ever built in Norway. The sail was beautifully decorated, and the gilded metal vexilla looked like flames of fire in the sunshine.

*Håkon Håkonssons saga* was written only a few years after the actual events took place. Consequently, there is no reason to doubt that the information is correct, and that it gives the right idea of how metal vexilla were used and what they looked like in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Indirectly, the texts indicate that only kings, archbishops and other important persons had metal vexilla at the stems of their ships. A high position in society was a prerequisite for sailing with these splendid objects. The metal vexilla had a golden colour, and twinkled and shone with a red glow in the sun. No doubt these beautiful objects were part of the equipment used to decorate certain warships. The resplendent metal vexilla must clearly have functioned as a sign of dignity and a hallmark for the prominent men who owned the ships. Other sources say that some ships carried several metal vexilla, and that the vexilla were loose and could be unhooked from the stem of the ship. But what did the metal vexilla look like?



Jan Oskar Engene (ed.): *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Vexillology, Stockholm, 27th July to 1st August 2003*, Bergen: Nordic Flag Society, 2004. ISBN 82-996983-1-6

© 2004 Nordic Flag Society and the author



*Figure 1 Viking ship with dragonheads. Bergen's double seal from the end of the 13th century.*



*Figure 2 Medieval candleholder from Urnes Stave Church, West Norway.*

## **Two candleholders and a carving with vexilla**

Two medieval candleholders shaped like ships are still in existence (Fig. 2). One is from Dale Church and the other from Urnes Church in the district of Sogn in West Norway. Both have a vexillum stem and stern. Each of the four vexilla has a curved lower edge which ends up in an animal face at the upper tip (Fig. 3). The vexilla on the candle ship from Urnes have no adornments apart from their metal silhouettes, while the vexilla on the Dale ship are red with a white crescent and a white animal face. (Fig. 4). There is reason to believe that both candle ships, which date back to the time when *Håkon Håkonssons saga* was written, are miniatures of big ships. The contents and shapes of the vexilla are probably close to the originals.

During excavations at *Bryggen* in Bergen in 1963, a wooden pole dating from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century was found (Fig. 5). The pole had a carving of a fleet comprising 48 ships. The boats lie side by side ready for battle. Three of the ships have vexilla at the stem (Fig. 6). These three ships are among the biggest, and are centrally located in the fleet, where one would expect that the king, earl or commander would be situated with his ships. The vexilla are shaped like triangles with the longest side curved away from the stem. Foliage, attached to the curved outer edges, hangs freely and creates movement, thus drawing attention to these ships in particular. In addition, the vexilla are decorated, and one of them has a geometrical shape almost like a Saint Andrew's cross. However, the carvings are so small that they provide little definite information about the motifs on the vexilla.

## **Weathercocks on churches, or metal vexilla?**

Fortunately, four metal vexilla from the Middle Ages in Norway<sup>1</sup> still exist (Fig. 7). The four vexilla were found in churches in East Norway, and have been named after the churches: *Heggenfløyen*, *Tingelstadfløyen*, *Høyjordfløyen* and *Norderhovfløyen*. In recent times, these vexilla have been used as weathercocks on the respective church buildings.<sup>2</sup> These four churches are all located several miles inland and at quite a distance from the coast. The question has therefore been raised whether the weathercocks in fact can have been used as vexilla on ships. Have these weathercocks really been heraldic symbols on ships?

According to Magnus Lagabøte's national act of 1274, equipment belonging to a fleet of conscripted warships, such as sails, masts, etc, should be stored in churches.<sup>3</sup> The equipment of course included metal vexilla. When the conscription system broke down in the late Middle Ages, it is probable that the metal vexilla were left and forgotten in the churches, and that they later were placed on top of the church buildings as weathercocks. That might be the reason why the metal vexilla were found exactly there in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the distance to the coast does not necessarily undermine the theory that these objects were used as metal vexilla. According to the saga, warships sailed on big lakes such as Tyrifjorden and Randsfjorden, and the ships there carried, undoubtedly, the same equipment as the warships along the coast. The provenance of the finds can therefore be explained in a satisfactory manner without weakening the warship theory.

Another factor indicating that the metal vexilla originally were used on ships, is



*Figure 3 Candleholder from Urnes. Detail.*



*Figure 4 Medieval candleholder from Dale Church, West Norway.*

*Metal vexilla on Viking ships*



*Figure 5 Carved viking ships on a pole from approx. 1250.  
Found during excavations in Bergen, 1963.*



*Figure 6 Pole. Detail.*

their shape (Fig. 8). The upper edges of the vexilla are not perpendicular to their vertical sides where the rods are attached. Because the upper edge under normal conditions should be in a horizontal position, it is quite unlikely that the vexilla originally were fixed to a church spire, or a mast top for that matter. However, they fit well at the stem of a ship. The stem usually has a forward inclination that would give the upper edge of a vexillum a normal horizontal position. Consequently, there are several reasons to believe that the four church vexilla originally were metal vexilla on ships.

This theory is strengthened when we compare these vexilla with the vexilla on the candle ships from Dale and Urnes, and the vexilla carved on the wooden pole from Bergen. The general shape and character of those vexilla are almost identical to the triangular formats and curved edges of the vexilla from the churches (Fig. 9). All of the four medieval vexilla are of gilded copper and at least three of them, maybe all four, have had holes for hanging foliage or colourful ribbons.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, there can be little doubt that they are metal vexilla.<sup>5</sup> But what did these metal vexilla look like in detail?

### **Four Norwegian metal vexilla**

*Heggenfløyen* has different motifs on each side. The main design on the one side is a bird fighting with a snake, while the other side has two four-footed animals which stand snarling at each other (Figs. 10-11). Both decorations have narrow, long and wide, vine sprouts in asymmetrical clusters around their linear main composition. At the tip of the vexillum is a lion cast in brass with characteristic spirals in its thigh joints. Art historians call this style the Ringerike style. The style was dominant in Scandinavian art around the first part of the 11th century and was based on, and a continuation of, the animal ornamentation of previous centuries. Metal vexilla of this type must consequently have been used as early as from the end of the Viking Age.<sup>6</sup>

*Tingelstadfløyen* differs from *Heggenfløyen* in that it has an open-worked design and consequently inverted sides (Fig. 12). At the centre of the design is an illustration from the Old Testament showing Samson's fight with the lion, while the rest of the surface is filled with two vines. The pagan animal ornamentation from *Heggenfløyen* is here replaced by a Biblical story. At the tip of the metal vexillum, a freely modelled Romanesque dragon has taken the place of the lion. Stylistically this metal vexillum has been dated to the second half of the 12th century.

*Høyjordfløyen* also has an open-worked design (Fig. 13). Along the curved front edge is a lily-shaped border inscribed in circular medallions. This border continues into a dragonhead that forms the tip of the vexillum. The dragonhead has a resemblance to the medieval gable head found on Lom Church. The decorated surface of the vexillum shows a spiral-shaped vine that runs out of a dragon's mouth. In the vine, a lion rampant. This vexillum is generally dated to the mid-13th century.

*Norderhovfløyen* has, like the ones mentioned above, an open-worked surface with large, three-lobed vine leaves (Fig. 14). At first glance, it is not easy to identify the main motif. However, the contours clearly form the silhouette of a person sitting on a throne chair. The figure holds a millstone in its right hand and a bundle of arrows in its left hand. This can only be Saint Hallvard. The dragonhead at the tip of the vexillum consists of a copper plate with open-worked sections of the same kind as the rest of the object. There is a striking resemblance between its head and the head that adorns

*Metal vexilla on Viking ships*



*Figure 7 Metal vexillum from Heggen Church, East Norway.*



*Figure 8 Metal vexillum from Heggen Church, East Norway.*



*Figure 9 Metal vexillum. Reconstruction.*



*Metal vexilla on Viking ships*



*Figure 10 Metal vexillum from Heggen.*



*Figure 11 Metal vexillum from Heggen. Reverse.*



*Figure 12 Metal vexillum from Tingelstad Church, East Norway.*



*Figure 13 Metal vexillum from Høyjord Church, East Norway.*

*Metal vexilla on Viking ships*



*Figure 14 Metal vexillum from Norderhov Church, East Norway.*



*Figure 15 Seal of Oslo town.*

the candle ship from Urnes. This vexillum is generally dated to approximately 1300.

The four metal vexilla thus cover a time span of between 250 and 300 years, and in the course of this period, they changed in style and content: the pagan animal ornamentation of the 11th century was replaced by the vine design introduced with Christianity, the entire surface of the vexilla became open-worked, and animal fights were replaced by Christian motifs. Even though four metal vexilla constitute a very limited basis on which to draw conclusions, these examples nevertheless indicate that the designs on the metal vexilla changed along with the general historical development of style.

In our vexillological context, we have already established that the metal vexilla with their resplendent shining appearance and movable plates with flying foliage or colourful ribbons signalled that kings or important persons were on board. This was probably the main purpose of the metal vexilla. It is more uncertain whether the motifs could tell who the owner of the ship was, or who was on board. The figures and designs on the metal vexilla were too small, detailed and complicated for anyone to see at a long distance. Consequently, they can only have carried meaning at close range, and the details must have been secondary to the shape and golden shine of the vexilla. Nevertheless, the main motif on a metal vexillum may have represented a particular person, a family or a group of people. How is that expressed in the vexilla?

## **From pre-heraldry to vexillology**

The animal designs on *Heggenfløyen* are of a pre-heraldic nature and can hardly have been related to any person. Nor is the religious motif of Samson's fight with the lion on *Tingelstadfløyen* well suited as a symbol and personal hallmark. However, both the lion figure on *Høyjordfløyen* and the Saint Hallvard figure on *Norderhovfløyen* are so uniform and clear in their shapes that they can have represented someone or something. Both these symbols were, moreover, used in Norwegian seals from the 13th and 14th centuries. In the High and Late Middle Ages, Saint Hallvard was made patron saint of Oslo Episcopal Church, and the Oslo Cathedral carried his name. According to *Håkon Håkonssons saga*, bishop Nikolas of Oslo owned in 1221 the ship *Skjeggjan*, which was the "ship of the holy Hallvard".<sup>7</sup> From around 1300, Saint Hallvard was depicted on Oslo's town seal (Fig. 15). The Saint Hallvard design on the metal vexillum, which in shape and time agree with Oslo's town seal, may indicate a connection between the ship that carried the metal vexillum and the bishop of Oslo or other important men in the town, but that is just a guess.

A lion rampant is found in many seals from the end of the 12th century onwards. In Norway this heraldic lion is usually connected with the lion symbol of the royal family (Fig. 16). In this context, we can mention that the lion on *Høyjordfløyen* is standing up, striding, without holding anything in its front paws. It resembles to a certain extent the lion symbol of the Norwegian royal family in the latter part of the 12th century and first part of the 13th century before the lion got an axe in his paws. Consequently, one cannot ignore the possibility that both the lion and Saint Hallvard were used as heraldic motifs on the two vexilla.

If the painted vexilla on the candle ship from Dale are miniatures of original metal vexilla, we are, however, faced with a real heraldic motif (Fig. 17). The white half-moon on a red background is a simple, clear symbol that possibly was used as

*Metal vexilla on Viking ships*



*Figure 16 Seal of the Norwegian king prior to 1280. Lion without axe.*



*Figure 17 Metal vexillum on candleholder from Dale Church. Detail.*

coat-of-arms and emblem of a person or a family. Ever since the Middle Ages, celestial bodies have been popular symbols. The sun, moon and stars symbolized that the universe was ruled by divine forces. It is in this context that Maria, the celestial queen, got the half-moon as one of her special symbols. The symbol on the candle ship from Dale Church may thus have been a symbol of Maria, and the candle ship was possibly placed on an altar to honour her. At the same time, the red vexillum with the white half-moon can have been a diminutive taken directly from contemporary daily life at the time, and can have been a vexillum for a guild or another association who had Maria as its patron saint. In any case, it is natural to believe that the vexillum on the candle ship reflects practice on real ships. If this is correct, a full size metal vexillum with simple heraldic and vexillological motifs would tell, at a long distance, who the owner of the ship was, and be an expressive hallmark of a person or an organisation.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of the above, we can conclude that metal vexilla were important hallmarks on medieval main ships in Norway. They were decorative and carried meaning. At a long distance they signalled that persons from the top secular or ecclesiastical layer of society were on board the ship. At close range, they have possibly provided information on the person who led the ship. The metal vexilla of the time were, just like today's textile flags, symbols that provided information far beyond themselves.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> There are two metal vexilla in Sweden, one from Söderala, and one from Källunge. In Denmark, a bronze horse dating from approximately 1000, is still existent. The horse originally stood at the top of a metal vexillum.

<sup>2</sup> *Heggenfløyen* is believed to have been in the possession of Heggen Church, while *Norderhovfløyen* was "discovered" at the minister's residence. The other two were taken down from the respective churches.

<sup>3</sup> *III Landevernsbolken*. Chapter 14. "4. The sails shall be taken care of by those who are the most judicious and live closest to the church closest to the ship. But all the equipment shall follow the sail to the church, as well as all tools, and it shall be stored so that it will not be damaged."

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to determine whether *Høyjordfløyen* originally had holes because long metal pieces have been nailed to the vexillum at a later stage.

<sup>5</sup> According to Aron Andersson in *The Art of Scandinavia*, p. 329, they were originally placed on church buildings. Henrik Cornell writes in *Den svenska konstens historia*, p. 13, that "the use of metal vexilla is uncertain. There is a guess that they were a chief's field sign, which does not seem unlikely".

<sup>6</sup> A metal vexillum from Källunge Church on the island of Gotland, Sweden, is also decorated in the Ringerike style.

<sup>7</sup> Sturla Tordsson: *Soga om Håkon Håkonsson*, p 74.

## References

- Andersson, Aron. *The Art of Scandinavia*. London, 1970.  
*Baglarsoger. Den norrøne litteraturen*. Band IV. Oslo, 1962.  
Berg, Knut (red). *Norges kunsthistorie*. Bind 1. Oslo, 1981.  
Bugge, Anders. *Gyldne Fløier. Norske fortidsminnesmerkers bev. Årbok 1927*. Oslo, 1929.  
Christie, Sigrid og Håkon: *Norges kirker. Buskerud*. Bind III. Oslo 1993.  
Cornell, Henrik. *Den svenska konstens historia*. Stockholm, 1959.  
Fjordholm, Odd: "Sant vitne er jeg ----". *Historisk tidsskrift* 3/1973, Oslo.  
Herteig, Asbjørn E.: *Kongers havn og handels sete*. Oslo 1969.  
Kielland, Thor B.: *Norsk guldsmedkunst i middelalderen*. Oslo 1927.  
*Magnus Lagabøters landslov*. v/A.Tananger. Kr.a., 1915.  
Nordhagen, Signe Fuglesang: *Norges kunsthistorie. Vikingtidens kunst*. Bind 1 Oslo 1981.  
Sturlasson, Snorre. *Snorres kongesoger log 2*. Det norske samlag. Oslo, 1994.  
*Sverre-soga*. Oslo, 1967.  
Theophilus Presbyter: *De diversis artibus*. Translated by C.R. Dodwell. London 1961.  
Tordsson, Sturla. *Soga om Håkon Håkonsson*. Oslo, 1963.  
Trætteberg, Hallvard. *Merke og fløy. Kultuhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*. Bind XI s. 549.

## About the author



Jan Henrik Munksgaard from Kristiansand, Norway, earned his Cand.philol. degree in history in 1971. From 1972 he was Curator at the Historical Museum, University of Bergen, where he was made Chief Curator in 1982. From 1986 he has been Museum Director, of the Vest-Agder Fylkesmuseum (Vest-Agder County Museum) in Kristiansand. He is the author of several articles on Norwegian and Danish flag history, and is former editor of *Nordisk Flaggkontakt*, the journal of the Nordic Flag Society.

Author's address: Jan Henrik Munksgaard  
Auglandsvei 26  
NO-4621 Kristiansand  
Norway  
E-mail: <jhm@vaf.museum.no>  
<janhenrik.munksgaard@c2i.net>

