

# The Roman vexillum

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## Abstract

The *vexillum* was the only Roman cloth flag, all other standards were vexilloids. The main sources for our knowledge of Roman flags are: great monuments, tombstones, coins, frescoes, surviving pieces of flags, texts of antique authors, inscriptions and papyri. The *vexillum* was a square cloth on a horizontal bar fastened to a lance; the cloth was usually red, partly decorated with inscriptions and perhaps images. The only surviving piece of a *vexillum* cloth shows a Victoria on a red field. The origin of the *vexillum* remains elusive; converging Italic and Celtic influences are the most probable ones. The *vexillum* was a multi-purpose flag: permanent flag of units of cavalry, but perhaps also of infantry; temporary flag of a detachment (*vexillatio*); signal flag, emperor's standard, corporational flag, religious flag and symbol of a province. The bearer of a *vexillum* was called *vexillarius*. The *vexillum* was also awarded to high-ranking officers as a military decoration. The *labarum* was a special form of the *vexillum* created by Constantine the Great; it contained the monogram of Christ. The form of the *vexillum* has been revived in more recent times in military and church banners, and influenced the shape of municipal flags in Central Europe and Italy. Being the first cloth flag in Europe it might be called the root of the modern European flag tradition. Vexillology, the study of flags, takes its name from the word *vexillum*.

## 1. Introduction

Only rarely do vexillologists investigate the early flags and vexilloids [60; 80]. Even the *vexillum* from which the term "vexillology" is derived, does not get much attention. This leads to erroneous or at least half-true statements about this flag in vexillological books [20; 39; 83; 99]. However, also the historians seem to either neglect the *vexillum* to some degree [74] or to debate its use and significance [100]. I want to describe the *vexillum* as the multi-purpose flag of the Romans; and, being the only cloth flag among vexilloids, as the root of the European flag tradition.

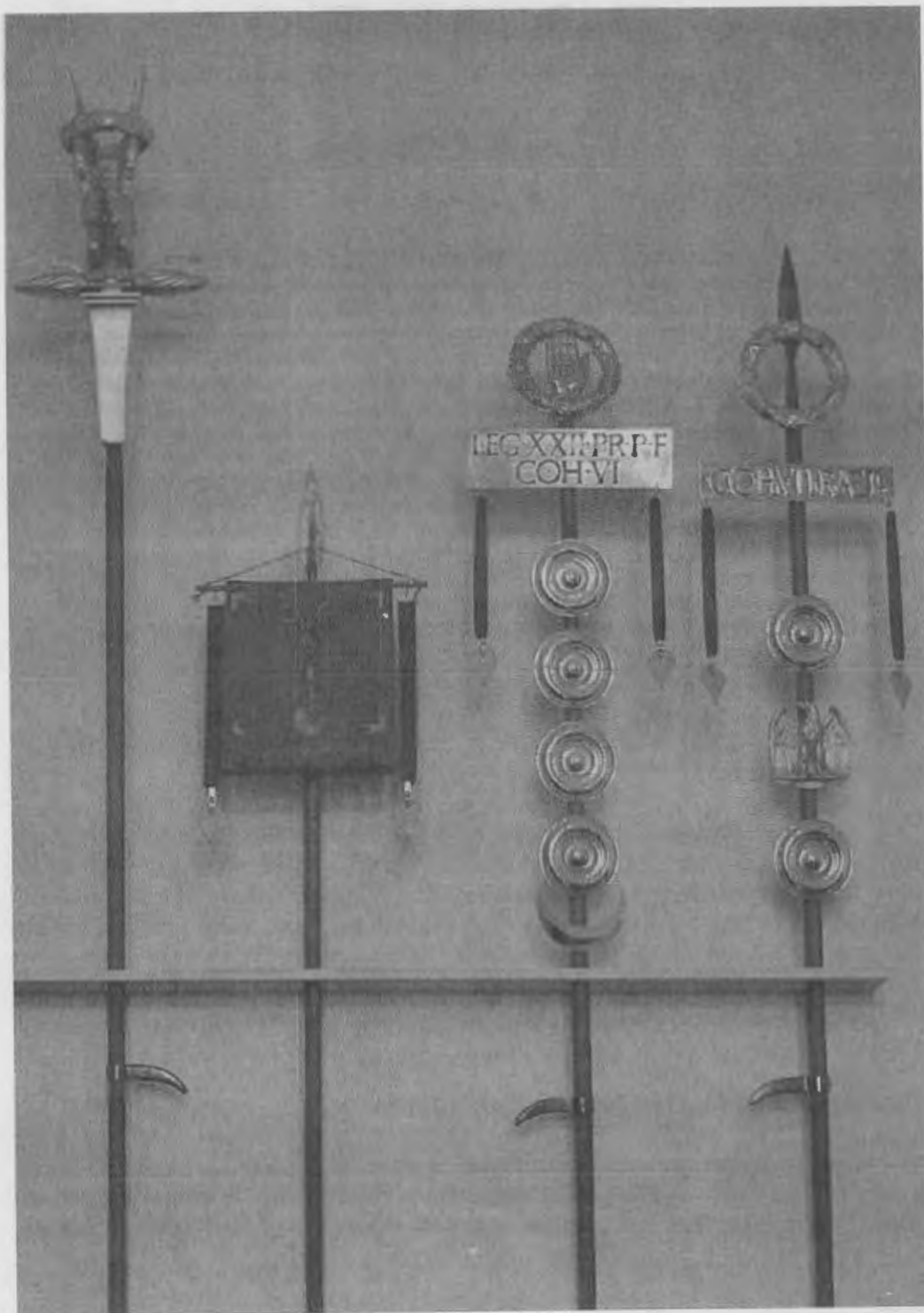
## 2. Overview of Roman flags and standards

The most important standards of the Roman legions (heavy infantry) were [35] (Fig. 1): the *aquila* (eagle-standard), being the main vexilloid of a whole legion, and the *signum* of the maniple (two centuriae); similar were the *signum* of the Praetorian cohorts,



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*Figure 1 Reconstructions of different types of Roman standards (Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, Germany). From left: an eagle standard (aquila); a vexillum; a manipular signum; a signum of an auxiliary infantry cohort. Illustration from [70].*

and a diverse array of *signa* of the *auxilia* (cavalry and light infantry). The *imago* was an emperor's portrait on a staff; the *draco* was adopted in the second century AD [31]. The *vexillum* as the only cloth flag does not easily fit into this background of vexilloids; it is confusing especially regarding its diverse use [25].

The most important publications about Roman flags are rather old: Domaszewski [35], Renel [74], Zwikker [100], Reinach [33], Wissowa et al. [97]; on the *vexillum*: Rostovtzeff [76; 77]. Only some aspects have been treated in more recent publications [25; 31; 84; 89; 90; 91; 96].

### 3. Our sources

For our knowledge of Roman standards we have different sources, that we have to put together to get the whole picture. One main source are the reliefs on great monuments, e.g. Trajan's column at Rome [41; 58] (Figs. 2, 7, 8) and several other columns and triumphal arches. What regards details of standards and of the uniforms of the standard-bearers, tombstones of standard-bearers are especially valuable [18; 22; 79; 84; 89]. Only one of these shows the bearer of a *vexillum*, a *vexillarius*: the tombstone from Ptuj (Slovenia) shows the legionary cavalryman Caius Rufius with a *vexillum* in his hand (Fig. 3) [35; 46; 79]. Also many Roman coins show standards, albeit without much detail. Coins are especially valuable to cover the whole timeframe from about 82 BC to 370 AD, whereas other sources only cover shorter periods [75; 81]. A typical presentation of standards on coins is the *aquila* between two *signa*, for instance coined by Marcus Antonius (Fig. 4). Another frequent image is the *adlocutio*, a speech of the emperor to his soldiers, who hold several different types of flags, including the *vexillum* (Fig. 5).

More rarely we find depictions of Roman standards on other media, e.g. distance slabs, swords or cameos [25; 54; 55]. More important however are several frescoes, for instance the "Tribune fresco" from Dura Europos (Syria), where a *vexillarius* with his *vexillum* is prominently shown in the center (Fig. 6) [32].

Only a small number of excavated artifacts can be interpreted as parts of flags; the most important ones are the head of a *draco* standard from Niederbieber (Germany) [38] and a piece of cloth from Egypt interpreted as *vexillum* cloth (Fig. 11) [76; 77].

The literary sources do not help us much in investigating Roman flags and standards; although many authors do mention flags, they usually do it in a superficial manner and are therefore not very reliable. Livius, Caesar, Tacitus and Vegetius are the most prominent of the authors where we can find some information on Roman flags [1; 5; 13; 14; 16]. Other written sources (inscriptions, papyri, writing-tablets) are as yet insufficiently investigated, what regards our topic [29].

### 4. What did the *vexillum* look like?

In one ancient source a derivative of the *vexillum* is described in written form: the *labarum* in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* [2: 1.31]. The core of this description, without the details belonging to the *labarum* is as follows:



*Figure 2 Relief from Trajan's Column (Rome, approx. 107-117 AD), scene LIV, showing the emperor during a speech to his troops (adlocutio), accompanied by flag-bearers with two Praetorian signa and one vexillum. Illustration from [41].*



*Figure 3 Tombstone of Caius Rufius, vexillarius of Legio XIII (approx. 45-69 AD), at Ptuj (Slovenia). The vexillum shows the inscription VEX EQ for VEXILLUM EQUITUM (flag of the horsemen). Illustration from Ptuj town museum.*



*Figure 4 Denarius, coined under Marcus Antonius (approx. 33-31 BC). The reverse shows an aquila between two manipular signa; this coin belongs to the famous "legion series", providing a model for many flag illustrations on Roman coins. Illustration from [43].*



*Figure 5 Sestertius, coined under Galba (68 AD). The reverse shows a speech (adlocutio) of the emperor to his soldiers, carrying a vexillum, a manipular signum and an aquila. Illustration from [92].*



Figure 6 So-called „Tribune Fresco“ from Dura Europos (Syria), approx. 239 AD (now at Yale University Art Gallery), showing a religious ceremony including a flag-bearer with a vexillum. Illustration from [32].

ὑψηλὸν δόρυ χρυσοῦ κατημφισμένον κέρας εἶχεν ἐγκάρσιον (σταυροῦ σχήματι πεποιημένον), (...).  
τοῦ δὲ πλαγίου κέρως τοῦ κατὰ τὸ δόρυ πεπαρμένου ὀθόνη τις ἐκκρεμῆς ἀπηώρητο, (...). τοῦτο μὲν οὖν τὸ φᾶρος τοῦ κέρως ἐξημμένον σύμμετρον μήκους τε καὶ πλάτους περιγραφὴν ἀπελάμβανε·  
τὸ δ' ὄρθιον δόρυ, τῆς κάτω ἀρχῆς ἐπὶ πολὺ μηκυνόμενον ἄνω μετέωρον, (...)

*A long spear, sheathed with gold, with a transverse bar (made in the form of a cross) (...).*

*From the transverse bar, fixed to the spear, a piece of linen was suspended, (...). This little sail, hanging from the transverse bar, had an outline of equal length and width; the upright staff, the lower part of which was much longer than the upper one, (...).*

This description is in good accordance with the pictorial sources (Figs. 6, 7). The *vexillum* was an approximately square cloth suspended from a transverse bar attached to a lance. The lance had a spear-like top in most cases, only rarely the top was a disk or a sculpture of the goddess Victoria (Fig. 8), although the latter is frequently shown in vexillological publications [60; 65; 83]. Under the top there was the transverse bar, from which the cloth, and frequently also ribbons at both ends, were suspended.

The cloth itself was roughly square, its size between about 30 cm and 60 cm; the material of the only surviving example is coarse linen [76]. The fringe at the bottom of the cloth seems to be important, as it is shown on many depictions, even on coins (Fig. 9).





Figure 7 Relief from Trajan's Column, scene VII, showing a dismounted horseman with vexillum. Illustration from [35].



Figure 8 Vexillum with Victoria statue as top; relief from Trajan's Column, scene V. Illustration from [35].

In most cases the colour of the cloth was probably a shade of red, be it scarlet or purplish. This we can conclude from the Tribune fresco (Fig. 6) [32] as well as from the Egyptian specimen (Fig. 11) [76; 77]; also literary texts mention this, for instance Plutarchos [7: 15]. However, Servius tells us about *vexilla* in two different colours, one (*russeum* = pale red) for infantry, the other (*caeruleum* = sky blue) for the cavalry [12: 8.1]. However, this source is not too reliable. Two decorative elements are frequently found on the cloth, namely a golden yellow border (Fig. 6) [32] and golden angle-fillers (*γαμμάδια*) (Fig. 11) [76].

We have pretty good evidence, that *vexilla* contained inscriptions. The literary sources mention, that unit names or numbers [16: 2.13] or the names of the emperor [14: 2.85] were written on the cloth. Also several depictions show inscriptions, e.g. the *vexillum* on the Bridgeness distance slab (Fig. 14) contains "LEG II AUG" for *Legio II Augusta* [25]. However, „as regards ornaments, figures, or images our literary sources are silent“ [76]. Also pictorial evidence is scarce: the "vexillum" with a bull's head from the tombstone of Vellaunus is highly debatable [57; 96]; a cameo shows two human heads on a *vexillum* [54]; and finally we have the goddess Victoria on the Egyptian specimen (Fig. 11) [76; 77].

For the *vexillum* therefore we always have to refer to this Egyptian specimen (Fig. 11), the only surviving example of its kind [76; 77]. This was excavated in Egypt and is now in Moscow, at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. It is 47 cm high and 50 cm wide, of coarse linen and shows remnants of fringe at the bottom and a sleeve at the top. The cloth is red with a golden painted depiction of the goddess Victoria and golden angle-fillers. It is controversial, if this specimen was actually used as a flag of a military unit, or if it was a military decoration awarded to the unit or an high-ranking officer, as suggested by Rostovtzeff [76].





Figure 9 Bronze follis, coined under Constantinus I (the Great), approx. 320 AD; the reverse shows a vexillum with obvious bottom fringe. Illustration from [51].



Figure 10 Reconstruction of a simple vexillum. Some vexilla additionally had ribbons hanging down from the transverse bar (see Fig. 7) and presumably showed inscriptions and illustrations on the cloth.

## 5. Modern reconstructions of vexilla

Increased fascination about Roman history has brought about the formation of Roman military re-enactment groups; the most remarkable action of one of these was the march in legionary's uniform from Verona crossing the alps to Augsburg, undertaken by Marcus Junkelmann with several others [49]. Most of the re-enactment groups do reconstruct flags, more frequently *vexilla* than the more authentic manipular *signa*, though. Several examples are shown here (Fig. 12).

Almost all the modern *vexilla* show inscriptions of the abbreviated unit names, such as "LEG XX" or "LEG VI", sometimes including the unit epithets like AUG (short for Augusta in the names of the LEG II and LEG VIII). Although most of the reconstructions are *vexilla* of legionary units, sometimes also flags of cavalry *alae* or infantry *cohortes* of the *auxilia* are shown. In addition to inscriptions, many reconstructed *vexilla* contain animal figures, although we have already seen, that the historical evidence for this is scarce. The animals shown are symbols that are connected with the respective legions, usually the zodiacal signs either of the founding emperor or the foundation of the legion itself [35; 36]. For the Legio II Augusta this is the capricorn, for the Legio VIII Augusta and the Legio VI Victrix the bull; the origin of the boar,



*Figure 11 Vexillum from Egypt. This is the only surviving example of a vexillum cloth, found in Egypt, described by Rostovtzeff [76; 77] and now at Moscow (Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts). Illustration from [77].*

## The Roman vexillum



Figure 12 Modern reconstructions of vexilla (from top left): Vexillum from Egypt (illustration from [77]). Reconstruction of the Egyptian vexillum (illustration from [82]). Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Legio XIII Gemina Martia Victrix“ from England [70; 107]. Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Cohors III Gallorum et Britannorum“ from Northern California [101]. Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis“ (Antonine Guard) from Scotland [105]. Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Legio XX Valeria Victrix“ from England [70]; the boar is attested as symbol of this legion. Vexillum of the Ermine Street Guard („Legio II Augusta“) from England [70; 98; 103]; the capricorn is attested as zodiacal symbol of this legion. Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Legio VIII Augusta“ from Germany [106]; the bull is the zodiacal sign of the Julian dynasty. Vexillum of the re-enactment group „Legio VI Victrix“ [70]; the bull is the zodiacal sign of the Julian dynasty. Vexillum of the German re-enactment group „Ala II Flavia miliaria pia fidelis“ [50]; the Pegasus symbolizes the speed of the cavalry unit.

symbol of the Legio XX Valeria Victrix, is unknown [74]. Several of the modern reconstructions are influenced by the Egyptian specimen, showing the goddess Victoria [40; 82]; more frequently, however, only the angle-fillers are adopted as decorative elements.

## 6. The origin

As with the other Roman standards, we have to admit that the origin of the *vexillum* is elusive and highly speculative. Different origins or at least influences have been suggested (Fig. 13). The two main schools either claim, that the *vexillum* had been the oldest standard of the Roman army [35], or that the *vexillum* was inherited from the Celts [30].

Literary texts about the early times of the Roman Republic do mention the *vexillum* frequently, however the two most important historians for this time, Livius and Polybios [5; 8], do not use proper terminology, so that we are not able to distinguish between *vexilla* and other military standards. Supporting pictorial evidence is not



Figure 13 Possible influences on the origin and development of the vexillum. Top left: tomb fresco from Paestum (Italy, 4th century BC), showing Samnitic warriors carrying a piece frequently interpreted as flag, by others interpreted as a trophy (illustration from [94]). Top right: Relief from the Arc of Orange (France, approx. 25 BC), showing trophies captured from the Celts, including a boar standard and a vexillum (illustration from [17]). Bottom left: Coin of the Fratarada dynasty (Persia, approx. 300 BC), showing a vexillum-like flag with fringe at the bottom (illustration from [67]).

available until about 100 BC. The idea for an early use of true cloth flags in Italy has been nourished mainly by a fresco from Paestum showing Samnitic warriors (4th century BC) (Fig. 13). One of the warriors carries a cloth on a spear, that has been interpreted as a flag [33: *signa militaria*; 99]. Others think this is only the display of a captured piece of garment, a view recently corroborated by Burns [26].

As the Roman military was heavily influenced by its neighbours and enemies, especially the Celts, it is probable that not only weapons and tactics found their way into the Roman army, but also flags. It has been suggested, that the Celts had used cloth flags like the *vexilla* and introduced them into the Roman army, when hired as auxiliary cavalry [30]. However, we have no early evidence for the use of cloth flags by the Celts; the triumphal arc at Orange, showing captured Celtic weapons and flags, including boar standards and *vexilla* (Fig. 13), is only from around 25 BC [17].

The claim for a Cantabrian origin of the *vexillum* is especially weak, and is only based on the cryptic use of *cantabrum* as a term for a flag by two 2nd century Christian authors, Tertullian and Minucius Felix [6; 15]. However, modern Cantabrian nationalists, propagating their party flag as regional flag for Cantabria, nevertheless believe, that the *vexillum* is from Cantabria and that their banner is the oldest flag of the

world [42; 102].

The Greeks in Hellenistic times used a *vexillum*-like flag (*phoinikis*) as signal flag and as a sign for the location of the king [60; 97: *signa militaria*]; it is quite probable that the Greeks had adopted the cloth flag from their enemies, the Persians. These used this flag as royal standard, as can be seen on the Alexander Mosaic (now at the Museo Nazionale at Naples) [67]; slightly younger Persian coins also show flags strikingly similar to the *vexillum*, displaying a square cloth and a fringe (Fig. 13).

Beside the Celts the Carthaginians were the most dangerous enemies of the Roman Republic, and therefore precipitated military reforms. We have no evidence for Punic influence on Roman standards, but there are two hints: the Greek *phoinikis* might have derived its name from a Phoenician/Punic flag [60] and not only from its purple colour (purple dye was mainly sold by Phoenicians); this Punic flag might have influenced Roman flags. Furthermore, a similar influence of Carthaginian vexilloids on Roman manipular *signa* has been proposed [30].

All things considered, it seems most probable that there is no single origin of the *vexillum*, but that several influences and sources together produced the flag, that we now know as *vexillum*. That the Roman flag system could be heavily influenced from quite distant people, is shown by the adoption of the Eastern *draco* standard in the 2nd century AD [31]. I want to propose another, admittedly speculative hypothesis, from a vexillologist's point-of-view: perhaps the *vexillum* was originally a ship flag, first used during major Roman naval activities during the Punic wars. Some hints might point this way: the etymology (*vexillum* is derived from *velum*, meaning "little sail") [33: *signa militaria*]; in early times the Roman *vexillum* is mainly reported as a signal flag, similar to the Greek ship signal flag, the *phoinikis*; and finally, early Roman naval tactics involved infantry units (detachments, that would later be called *vexillationes*) fighting from the warships [52]. Possibly, these infantry units took the originally naval flag with them, and the *vexillum* became a regular army flag afterwards.

## 7. Use of the *vexillum*

The most controversial topic is: which units used the *vexillum*? There are three schools competing with each other: The first views the *vexillum* as temporary flag of a temporary military unit, in contrast to the *signum* as the flag of a permanent unit [29; 35]. The second school proposes the *vexillum* as permanent flag of several kinds of units, including the legionary cohort (a tenth of a legion) [100], whereas the first school even denies the existence of an own flag for the legionary cohort [35; 64]. In more recent times a third school believes the *vexillum* was (also) an additional standard for the whole legion, beside *aquila*, *imago* and perhaps zodiacal sign [25]. To me, a synthesis of the three opinions seems plausible, assuming a multi-purpose role of the *vexillum* in the Roman flag system.

The main controversy is about the role of the *vexillum* in the legion. The legion was a formation of heavy infantry (between 4000 and 6000 Roman citizens), always containing a small body of cavalry (*equites legionis*) [23]. In inscriptions the flag-bearer of the equites (*vexillarius equitum*) is frequently mentioned [25; 29]; also the tombstone from Ptuj (Fig. 3) shows a legionary horseman with a *vexillum* containing the inscription VEX EQ (for *vexillum equitum* = flag of the cavalry). Highly controversial is the *vexillum* as the flag of the legionary cohort. Although Zwicker [100] be-



Figure 14 Bridgeness distance slab from Antonine wall in Scotland (approx. 160 AD), showing a religious ceremony of the Legio II Augusta, with a vexillum bearing the inscription LEG II AUG. Illustration from [25].

believes that the *vexillum* was the flag of the cohort, the inscriptions do not mention enough legionary *vexillarii* for this claim [25; 29]. Two kinds of pictorial evidence, however, indicate that the *vexillum* might have been one of the flags of the whole legion (beside *aquila* and *imago*) [25]. This can be deduced from the Bridgeness distance slab showing a *vexillum* of the Legio II Augusta (Fig. 14), as well as from the regular display of *vexilla* together with legionary *signa* and *aquillae* in *adlocutio* representations on coins (Fig. 5).

The *auxilia* originally were units formed from non-citizens, providing the light infantry and the cavalry [52]. For the cavalry regiments (*alae*) we know that they had *vexilla* (Figs. 7, 15) as well as *signa* vexilloids. Although it is now usually assumed, that the *vexillum* was the flag of the whole regiment and the *signa* were used for the partial units (*turmae*) [57; 100], the tombstones of cavalry standard-bearers show a confusing picture [96]. The vast array of different standards seems to indicate, that these were possibly adopted from the (non-Roman) peoples that made up the units. Partially mounted regiments (*cohortes equitatae*) had *vexilla* and *signa*, as is best known from the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* in Dura Europos [25]. From this cohort we have the only coloured representation of a military *vexillum* on the so-called Tribune





Figure 15 Relief from the column of Marcus Aurelius (Rome, approx. 180 AD), showing galloping auxiliary cavalry with two vexilla. Illustration from [28].

fresco (Fig. 6). For the auxiliary infantry cohorts *signa* are attested, e.g. by the tombstone of a *signifer* at Bonn [35]; the use of *vexilla*, however, is debated, as it is not clear if respective cohorts mentioned in inscriptions were actually infantry cohorts and not *cohortes equitatae* [25; 29; 100].

As far as is known, Pretorian cohorts (*cohortes praetoriae*) and Urban cohorts (*cohortes urbanae*) had no *vexilla* [29; 35; 73]; however, the cavalry body of the Pretorian cohorts probably had *vexilla* [25]. Also the personal horseguard of the emperor (*equites singulares Augusti*) used *vexilla*, but *signa* as well [25; 29; 85]. The *vigiles*, the Roman fire-brigade, had *vexilla*, as is proven by many inscriptions [25; 29].

Roman naval flags are not well known. Only during the reign of Augustus a permanent navy including two main fleets at Misenum and Ravenna, and several provincial fleets, was established [52; 87]. Although the crew of a warship constituted a *centuria* with all the relevant functions and ranks, only rarely flag-bearers are mentioned [87]. However, the frequent occurrence of naval *vexillationes* suggests the use of *vexilla* at least by these temporary units [78; 87]. Although there are several depictions of ships with standards (including *vexilla*), for instance on coins (Fig. 16), we cannot learn much from these about their function.



Figure 16 Sestertius, coined under Hadrianus (117-138 AD). The reverse shows a sailing ship with a signum and a vexillum. Illustration from [62].

The *vexillum* was the typical flag of units temporarily detached from their parent unit; after this flag they were called *vexillationes* [35]. This practice is first mentioned by Caesar [1: 6.36.3]: “*ex quibus qui hoc spatio dierum convaluerant, circiter trecenti sub vexillo una mittuntur*” (“of those, who recovered during this time, around 300 were sent together under a vexillum”). *Vexillationes* could be formed from different parent units, in different strengths and for widely varying purposes [78; 97: *vexillatio*]. During the first two centuries AD the *vexillationes* became more and more important, so that during the wars of Marcus Aurelius armies were usually composed of *vexillationes*, instead of whole legions [78]; it is probable, that the higher number of *vexilla* shown on monuments from this time on (in comparison to the earlier Trajan’s column) is due to this higher importance of *vexillationes*. The army reforms of Diocletianus and Constantinus (after 300 AD) finally led to the establishment of *vexillationes* as regular, permanent formations [78; 97: *vexillatio*]. Also for construction work, e.g. the erection of Hadrian’s wall and Antonine’s wall, *vexillationes* were detached [25]. After the regular army service of roughly 20 years, *sub aquila*, Roman legionaries served another four or five years in the reserve, *sub vexillo* [53; 95; 97: *vexillatio*].

The *vexillum* was used as a signal flag for commencing a battle [1: 2.20.11; 7:15]; as a such it was associated with the respective general and later emperor. Some function of the *vexillum* as an emperor’s standard can also be inferred from frequent depictions of it together with the emperor [76].

The *vexillum* was not only a military flag, but also used by corporations [11: 8; 97: *vexillum*], especially youth corporations (*collegia iuvenum*) [97: *iuvenes*]. Such a flag is shown on a fresco from Ostia (Fig. 17), and also on a relief near Klagenfurt.

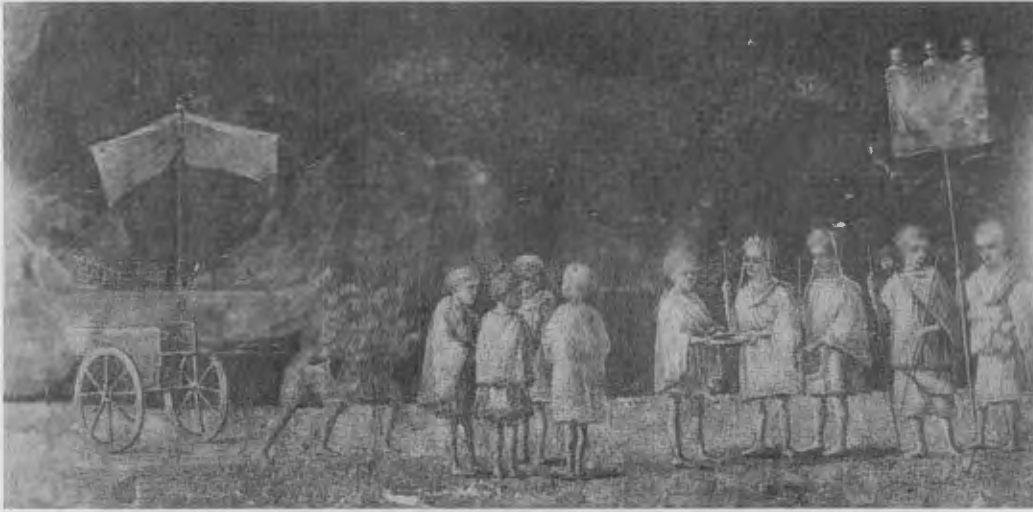


Figure 17 Fresco from a private house at Ostia (1st or 3rd century AD, now in the Vatican), showing a group of children with a vexillum, that has three little busts on top. Illustration from [54].

Rostovtzeff describes distinct religious *vexilla*, showing symbols like crescents and disks above the flag cloth [76]. Interestingly the *labarum* shows a similar pattern, namely a religious symbol above the flag cloth (see below).

A rather neglected issue are *vexilla* as provincial symbols. Many coins show allegoric representations of women holding a standard; if representing a province (and not some virtue) these standards are usually *vexilla*. Provinces symbolized like that are Africa, Armenia, Britannia, Cappadocia, Dacia, Ilium, Pannonia [88], Cilicia, Mauretania und Noricum [75]. Also reliefs from the Hadrianeum show provincial allegories, some of them with a *vexillum* (Fig. 18) [72]; it is therefore conceivable that a *vexillum* (probably with specific symbols painted or embroidered) symbolized the province as a territory, thus being an early form of a territorial or national flag.

The many uses of the *vexillum* discussed clearly show, that it cannot be reduced to a cavalry standard only nor to the flag of a detachment. The necessary conclusion is, that it was the multi-purpose flag of the Romans.

## 8. The *vexillarius* or *vexillifer*

The flag-bearer of a *vexillum* was known as *vexillarius*, at some time also as *vexillifer* [10: 31.7]. He was a soldier of NCO rank, as other flag-bearers, receiving twice as much pay as a normal soldier (*duplicarius*) [24]. Beside several *vexillarii* on Trajan's column (Figs. 2, 7) there is the tombstone of Caius Rufius at Ptuj (Fig. 3), and the *vexillarius* on the fresco from Dura Europos (Fig. 6).

In contrast to *signiferi* (the standard-bearers of *signa* vexilloids) *vexillarii* can only rarely be found in inscriptions [97: *vexillarius*], even Caius Rufius from Ptuj is simply called *miles* (soldier) (Fig. 3) [79]. This is probably due to the fact, that only permanent *vexillarii*, e.g. those of the *vigiles* [29], were consistently designated as



*Figure 18 Relief from the Hadrianeum (Rome, approx. 145 AD, now at the Musei Capitolini), showing an allegoric representation of a province, holding a vexillum. Illustration from [99].*

such; whereas the more common flag-bearers of a *vexillatio* were drawn from other ranks. In the papyri from Dura Europos for instance, a *vexillarius centurio* is mentioned twice, obviously a *centurio* (officer) also acting as flag-bearer from time to time [96]. Rather confusing is the later practice of calling all the soldiers of a *vexillatio vexillarii* [3: 5; 78].

## 9. The *vexillum* as military decoration

A comprehensive system of military decorations developed in the Roman military, including bangles (*torques*), disks (*patella* and *phalera*) and different crowns (*corona civica*, *corona muralis* etc.). One of the highest decorations was the *vexillum*. This was awarded to high-ranking officers, originally only of senatorial nobility [61]. According to the sources, Marius in the year 107 BC was the first to get this decoration; Agrippa achieved a blue *vexillum* (*vexillum caeruleum*) due to his feats during the battle of Actium. The last, not very convincing evidence, for the *vexillum* as decoration is from the 3rd century AD: two emperors, Aurelianus (270-275) and Probus (276-282), are attested as having been decorated with four *vexilla bicolora* each [61]. Although other decorations were also awarded to whole units [61], there is no good evidence for the *vexillum* as a decoration of military units.

Possibly the term “*vexillum obsidionale*” occurring during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD) was the proper term for this decoration. In contrast to other decorations that were worn with the uniform, we do not know how the *vexillum* was worn, as originally a true flag was awarded. Only later silver *vexilla* were presented, but we do not know if there were miniature versions for wearing with the uniform [61; 95]. One commemorative stone (from Bithynia) shows several military decorations: one *corona aurea*, two *coronae vallares*, five *hastae purae*, and finally a *vexillum* (Greek inscription ΟΥΗΣΙΑΛΛΟΣ) (Fig. 19).

## 10. The *labarum*

Our knowledge about the *labarum*, a *vexillum* derivative, is heavily influenced by the *Vita Constantini* of Eusebius [2]. According to Eusebius, Constantinus (later called “the Great”) had a vision before the battle at the Milvian bridge against his rival Maxentius (28 October 312 AD): “He said, that at noon, just when the day turned, he saw with his own eyes a victorial sign of the cross lying over the sun, composed of light, and on that the inscription “with this conquer!” [2: 1.28.2]. This τούτῳ νικά is frequently and erroneously referred to as „in hoc signo vinces“ (in this sign you will conquer). After an additional dream, Constantinus reportedly ordered the production of a special flag with a the monogram of Christ, the *labarum*. The older text by Lactantius tells a different story, namely that after a dream Constantinus ordered to paint this sign on the shields [4: 44].

Only around 400 AD, the term *labarum* was first used, by Prudentius [9: 1.487]. The etymology of this term is totally unknown and up to a lot of speculations including Latin, Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Cretian, Basque, Germanic and Celtic roots [37]. Most convincing seems a derivation from a Celtic *labaron* for “talkative, canting”.



*Figure 19 Left side of the commemorative stone for Sextus Vibius Gallus (early 2nd century AD), from Amastris, Bithynia, now at the Archaeological Museum at Istanbul. The stone shows several military decorations: two coronae vallares, one corona aurea, five hastae purae and one vexillum (Greek inscription ΟΥΗΣΙΛΛΟΣ). Illustration from [59].*





Figure 20 Bronze follis from Constantinople, coined under Constantinus I (the Great) (327 AD). This is the oldest depiction of the labarum, showing the christogram over a flag cloth with three disks. Illustration from [92].

What the original *labarum* looked like, is impossible to say. Most modern reconstructions follow Eusebius' description [2: 1.31]: "A long spear, sheathed with gold, with a transverse bar (made in the form of a cross), at the top of the whole thing a wreath bound from precious stones and gold, in it the symbol of the deliverance from the indictment, two signs, showing the name of Christ (by the first letters), the Rho crossed in the centre. (...). From the transverse bar, fixed to the spear, a piece of linen was suspended, a royal fabric covered with an embroidery of linked precious stones reflecting the light and interwoven with a lot of gold, presenting the viewer an unspeakably beautiful piece. This little sail now, hanging from the transverse bar, had an outline of equal length and width; the upright staff, the lower part of which was much longer than the upper one, was bearing under the victorial sign of the cross directly above the described cloth the golden busts of the godloved emperor, as well as his sons."

The oldest image of the *labarum* we can see on a coin from the year 327 AD (fig. 20) [68], i.e. 15 years after the battle at the Milvian bridge. In accordance with the description by Eusebius the monogram of Christ is placed above the flag cloth, three disks on the cloth can be interpreted as images of Constantinus and his sons. However, later coins show a vast array of very different patterns. Modern reconstructions of the *labarum* also show a confusing picture, only two examples are shown here (Figs. 21, 22) [65; 83]; several others can be found in Rivista Araldica [19; 63; 71; 86]. The reconstructions mainly differ in the placement of the monogram of Christ and the placement and pattern of the images of the emperor and his family.



Fig. 21: Reconstruction of labarum from [65], basically following the description of Eusebius [2: 1.31].



Fig. 22: Reconstruction of labarum from [83]; different from other reconstructions showing images of the imperial family directly on the cloth, not above or below (as in Fig. 21).

Although later viewed as the first Christian flag, the *labarum* was mainly a symbol of the religious tolerance and syncretism sponsored by Constantinus [47]. It is no coincidence, that this symbol was based on the *vexillum*, as this flag was more religiously neutral than other Roman standards; the cloth could show a message (the monogram of Christ); and finally the *vexillum* itself showed the form of a cross [2: 1.31; 6: 29; 15: 16.8]. The pattern of a *vexillum* with an added religious symbol above the cloth, was nothing new [76]. The new thing was the monogram of Christ, that also was interpreted differently, at least during the first several decades; it could be seen as Christian symbol, but also as a symbol of the sun god, the *Sol Invictus* [44].

## 11. Influence on flag history

The *vexillum* as the first known cloth flag in Europe is at the base of the European flag history. It is probable that the military standard of the Byzantine empire, the βάνδον [34; 78], was derived from the *vexillum*, as were early medieval cloth flags in the western parts of Europe (of the gonfanon-type), that we know for instance from the Bayeux tapestry [56].

The term *vexillum* became the generic term for flag in medieval Latin, frequently as *imperiale vexillum* or *vexillum imperatoris* [48]. It is also used in the earliest flag laws, e.g. the Marseille maritime law (1253/55): „Statuimus, quod quelibet navis hominum Massilie portet et portare teneatur in nave vexillum communis Massilie cum cruce (...)“ („We decree that any ship of the people of Marseille shall bear and shall be urged to bear the flag of the municipality of Marseille with the cross“) [48].

The most obvious influence of the *vexillum*, however, can be seen in the form of several flags showing the form of the *vexillum*, namely a flag hanging from a crossbar. Church procession banners show this form, at least since the second half of the middle ages [21] (Fig. 23). These church banners influenced the form of municipal flags in Italy (gonfalone) (Fig. 24) and Central Europe (Bannerfahne) (Fig. 25). *Vexillum*-like flags were readopted in the 18th century for the military, especially for ceremonial cavalry units such as the Prussian Garde du Corps (Fig. 26) [66]. Better known are the standards used by Italian fascists and German national socialists (Fig. 27) [93]. Not only the hypertrophic flag cult of these movements, but also their quasi-religious pretension is symbolized by these flags [83; 91]. Of course these standards should also pretend a link to ancient Roman, imperial traditions, especially when combining the *vexillum*-type flag with the eagle as imperial symbol.

## 12. Vexillology

Finally, our own discipline derives its name from the *vexillum*. The term “vexillology” was coined by Whitney Smith in the 1950ies, first published in *Flag Bulletin* in 1961 [104]. Beside adapting the English term for other languages (*Vexillologie*, *vessillologia*, *vexilología*, *vexilologie* ...), vexillologists are eagerly inventing new terms from the root *vexill-*: *vexilloid*, *vexillography*, *vexillophilately*, *cybervexillology*, *vexillonaire* ...

Although vexillology seems to be an established discipline, proven for instance by the biannual International Congresses of Vexillology, Orenski recently placed in doubt our claim of doing “science”, therefore placing in doubt the *-logy* in vexillology [69]. On the other hand, I want to propose that vexillologists should more frequently research the roots of flags in antiquity. Otherwise, without proper knowledge, for instance about the *vexillum*, this science might not be called *vexillo*-logy.



*Figure 23 Church procession banner, originally in the cathedral at Mainz (Germany, early 16th century). Illustration from [21].*



*Figure 24 Municipal gonfalone of Lignano-Sabbiadoro (Italy, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia).  
Photograph by author, 27 September 2002.*



*Figure 25 Municipal flag of Schönberg (Germany, Mühldorf county), in the form of a Banner. Photograph by author, 30 May 2002.*





Preussische Garde- du-Corps-Standarte  
1740- 1798

Figure 26 Standard of the Prussian  
Garde du Corps 1740-1798.  
Illustration from [66].



Standarte der Deutschen Polizei  
1937

Figure 27 Standard of the German Police  
1937-1945. Illustration from [66].

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- [3] Hyginus (Hyginus Gromaticus/Pseudo-Hyginus) (approx. 100-200 AD) De munitioibus castrorum/De metatione castrorum.
- [4] Lactantius (Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius) (approx. 316-321 AD) Liber ad donatum confessorem, de mortibus persecutorum.
- [5] Livius (Titus Livius) (29 BC - 17 AD) Ab urbe condita.
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