

THE SUN OF MAY (ARGENTINA 1810-1818)

Gustavo Tracchia

Introduction:

"The day had been cloudy, and the people took as favorable omen when the clouds parted and the sun shone down above them. That 'Sun of May' came to be recognize as as national symbol..."

Whitney Smith Flags Through the Ages and Across the World. (1976)

"The flag with the sun known as 'The Sun of May' was added in 1818."

William Crampton Flags of the World.(1990)

"The sun added in 1818, is the Sun of May. It commemorates the appearance of the sun in cloudy skies the 25th of May..."

Alfred Znamierowski - The World Encyclopedia of Flags (1999)

These three great works of encyclopedic nature listed numerous sources however; Argentine authors are almost non existent in their bibliographies. (1)

The idea of equating the sun symbol of Argentina, with the events which occurred in Buenos Aires (BsAs) on May 25th, 1810, is not entirely correct.

The politically motivated event of May 25th have nothing to do with the sun.

The events started on May 19th. when most of the influential citizens of Buenos Aires rebelled peacefully and very democratically against the authorities appointed by the King of Spain reaching its climax on May 25th.

The reason for the rebellion was since there was no longer a lawful King in Spain, the authorities appointed by the King, including the viceroy, no longer had a mandate.

The core of the matter was due to Napoleon Bonaparte crowning his brother Joseph as King of Spain and the Americans domains.

The initial purpose of this rebellious movement was the formation of a native government called "The Junta" which was to represent the rights and possessions of the lawful prisoners King of Spain and the House of Bourbon.

However, from that day on, the Junta formed in Bs As on the 25th of May 1810, launched a momentum for self rule that could not be stopped.

This momentum produced, six years later, the total declaration of independence of the former viceroyalty of the River Plate.

I

During the first two years of self rule, (1810-12) with the exception of a cockade of blue and white, no other symbols were adopted.

But to the contrary, all official papers were stamped with the seal bearing the royal Bourbon Coat of Arms and all the official ceremonies were performed beginning with an oath of loyalty to the "prisoner" King, Ferdinand VII.

The Spanish ensign was hoisted daily from the fort of Bs As which was the residence of the Junta.

In January of 1813, different winds caught the politics of Bs As:

A Constitutional General Assembly was formed.

These three words: Constitutional, Assembly and General were indicators that a radical new order was about to be established.

The term General was used to imply authority over any other government previously established.

The usage of the term Constitutional implied that the main function of that new body was to write a constitution.

Finally, the term Assembly, was used in lieu of the word Congress.

This new body known as the Assembly of the Year XIII (AXIII) was inspired by the USA Continental Congress of 1776.

Replacing the royal seal used up to that date and adopting a new seal to stamp documents produced by this new body, was one of the first acts of AXIII.

The elements of the new seal for the AXIII were termed, in those days, as "so republican that they needed no description". In all fairness, the devices of this new seal were a radical departure from the eagles, griffins, lions and other supernatural beasts and elements seen in other Coats of Arms and symbols of the time.

The seal adopted by the AXIII was very simple but at the same time it conveyed information about liberty, brotherhood, and new ideals on Americanism and sovereignty.

A national anthem was also adopted and the usage of the "national" cockade of blue and white was reaffirmed.

The AXIII fell short of adopting a flag, although some authors claim that it was done. Unfortunately no record of that act exists today, although we know that flags of blue and white were tolerated and used.

The AXIII put to work the transparent information and principles shown on the devices of the seal:

Social and judiciary reforms were implanted from the start.

Slavery, the Inquisition and tools of torture were abolished.

The aboriginal population were declared free and equal citizens.

The white population was also affected by the reforms introduced by the Assembly, as nobility titles and prerogatives were also abolished.

The Royal Coat of Arms was replaced in public buildings with reproductions of the AXIII seal and devices or shields of nobility displayed in front of private houses had to be removed.

In brief, by the many resolutions adopted and enforced by the AXIII, it was obvious the Assembly was imposing its authority not only over the people but also over well established institutions.

The armies fighting in different fronts of the United Provinces of the River Plate, (UP, the new name given to the formerly known Viceroyalty of the River Plate), were instructed to swear an oath of loyalty and obedience to the Assembly by depicting the new seal in white flags or banners.

The devices of the new seal were so strong that a few days after the AXIII adopted the seal, the executive branch of the government, requested to the assembly be allowed to use the seal as an instrument of authority to stamp its own documents.

The request was granted by the Assembly. With this measure the seal of the AXIII was gradually becoming the new "official" coat of arms for a nation state brewing under these new legal documents and resolutions emanating from the AXIII. (Fig. 1)



Today we call the seal of the AXIII the Argentine National Coat of Arms.

Among those "so republican" devices on the AXIII seal, the rising sun, shown as the crest of the seal, is perhaps the most talked about it.

Its significance was never officially described, but contemporary sources described it to symbolized "a new emerging nation among the nations of the world".

That "new emerging nation" had its beginning in May of 1810, despite the fact that the 25th of May of that year, was a cloudy and rainy day and therefore no sun was seen over the skies of Buenos Aires.

Furthermore, by the time the new Junta was announced to the people assembled outside the Cabildo (City Hall), it was around 6 or 7 in the evening and already dark. (The month of May, is late fall in Argentina.)

Nevertheless, on May 25th of 1813, the AXIII, to commemorate the third anniversary of the glorious Junta of 1810, decreed that May 25th was to be a holiday.

As part of the ceremonies to commemorate the holiday, a ritual was performed for the first time. It consisted of greeting for the sunrise with a cannon fire salute and cheers from the crowds and the army.

This ceremony is still performed today.

Therefore the symbolism of the sun in the Coat of Arms adopted in 1813 is an abstract one rather than a real event related to the weather in 1810 as described by the above authors and commonly taken as a fact by many including some Argentines.

However, the Assembly of the Year XIII did something which would have repercussions regarding the adoption of a totally new symbol for the emerging nation.

Among the many reforms legislated, and as a further step in imposing its autonomy and sovereignty, the AXIII decided to mint its own coins to replace the Spanish coins with the portrait of the King, which were still in circulation. (Fig. 2)



The new coins had a sun on one side and the Seal of the Assembly on the other. (2)

No one knows whose idea it was or what the sun was to symbolize.

Later, historians speculated that the sun was to represent the ancient pre-Columbian cultures; mainly The Incas.

This point, made by many historians and copied later on by others, has some validity. In 1816, the Congress played with the idea of having a constitutional monarchy and crowning a descendant of the Incas as King of the new nation of the River Plate.

At first, this initiative had some support, but was quickly discarded due to the impossibility of its implementation, together with the opposition of many of the congressmen, general public and newspapers.

However, the idea of reviving the ancient cultures of the Americas by forming autonomous government outside the European influence gave a romantic touch to the revolutionary movement.

Consequently, the sun no longer symbolized only a new emerging nation, but also ancient cultures destroyed by the Spaniards without necessarily involving members of those ancient cultures.

In fact the Spaniards only destroyed the ruling class; The Inca, its entourage, and their empire.(+) This was The Tawantinsuyo, which is the proper name of what we call the Incan empire. But the Spaniards did not destroy the different ethnic groups that lived in the region: the Quechuas, Queros, Aymaras and Collas just to name a few.

The declaration of Independence of 1816 was written in Spanish, Quechua and Aymara, and posted widely over what is today northern Argentina and Upper Perú (today's Bolivia), then an integral part of the UP.

It is important to recall that the centers of law as well as higher learning such as universities and colleges were located in Upper Perú.

Many of the congressmen participating in the government of the UP had graduated and made careers in cities like Charcas (today La Paz) where the high court of the viceroyalty La Real Audiencia- was seated.

In addition to the centers of learning and law, the silver mines of Potosí, also located in Upper Perú, were part of the territory to which the AXIII claimed sovereignty.

In general, that northern region of the former viceroyalty was much attached to the rest of the new country and it was vital to take hold of this area because of its academic and political importance as well its metaliferous richness.

We think that the idea in 1813 of placing the sun on the coins was to gain the much needed sympathies from the aboriginal population of the northern regions to the cause for independence. Or something like: The Inca Sun God Inti is back to redeem us from foreign occupation and rule.

The war for independence being fought in the north was not going very favorable. Despite some successes, Upper Peru was under the firm political and military occupation of the Viceroy of Perú, who was taking the upper hand in that battle front.

It got to a point, that by 1815, the idea of fighting the royalist through the north was totally abandoned. This is when the proposal of launching a new front throughout the Pacific was suggested to the government by the Commander of the Northern Army, General José de San Martín. He proposed attacking the Viceroy of Peru directly in Lima.

To achieve that, San Martín formed a new army, The Army of the Andes in the Andean province of Mendoza to go to Chile and from there by sea to Lima.

San Martín didn't reach and conquered Lima until 1820, but by 1818 the territory of today's Argentina was militarily and politically secured. At that point congress resolved to add the sun at the middle of the presidential sash and to create a war flag and ensign of three horizontal bands of b- /w/b- with the sun at the center.

Summarizing, the sun that was earlier to symbolize a new nation was now to symbolize the rebirth of an ancient civilization and culture.

It was on the coat of arms, on the coins, on the flag and on the sash of the president.

However this information about the sun symbolism is not forthcoming in any of the official documents of the time.

We can read on official documents of the time about the adoption of all these measures but no explanation for its meaning and or symbolism can be found.

The interpretation for the meaning and role played by the sun in all of its representations is the result of letters, memoirs and writings in newspaper articles of the time.

On the other hand, another well known historian, Bartolomé Mitre (1821-1906) sustains that the sun is not the classical symbol of ancient European cultures, but de sun of the Incas.

"The sun of the Coat of Arms is the symbol of the new estate and cannot be a symbol of antiquity nor the sun of the Incas," writes Agustin de Vedia (1843-1910), while Vicente Fidel Lopez (1815-1903) agrees with Zeballos adding that the design of the sun is based on a study of heraldry.(3)

Contemporaries to the events such as Feliciano Chiclana (1761-1826), governor of the Northern Province of Salta, upon seeing the AXIII seal for the first time in May of 1813 on the flag that Belgrano used, said: "it symbolized the dawn of our happiness" coinciding with Antonio Luis Berutti (1772-1841), an active member of the 1810 revolution, recording basically the same thought on his "Memories."

However none of these authors, contemporary witnesses, or later historians made any mention to the Sun of May.

II

We have reviewed in Part I the usage of the sun on the most important symbols of the new nation: The flag, Coat of Arms, presidential sash and coins.

It would be interesting now to explore the Inca relation with the sun.

We have alluded to the fact that the members of congress, from 1813 up to 1818, made use of the sun and the Inca relationship as a constant underling reason for its adoption although never on official papers.

As far as we know today there is no evidence of the Incas using a sun as their main symbol. The Incas main deity was Viracocha , The Creator.

Inti The Sun God- was also revered in the Tawantinsuyo, but Viracocha statue was higher in the temples than all others.

If there was a representation of Inti as a sun disc, no record has been preserved of such a devise.

The archeological evidence as to how the deities venerated by the people of the Tawantinsuyo really looked, leads us to an empty trail.

Written records are mainly based on oral sources and personal memoirs from soldiers, priest and Quechua elders.

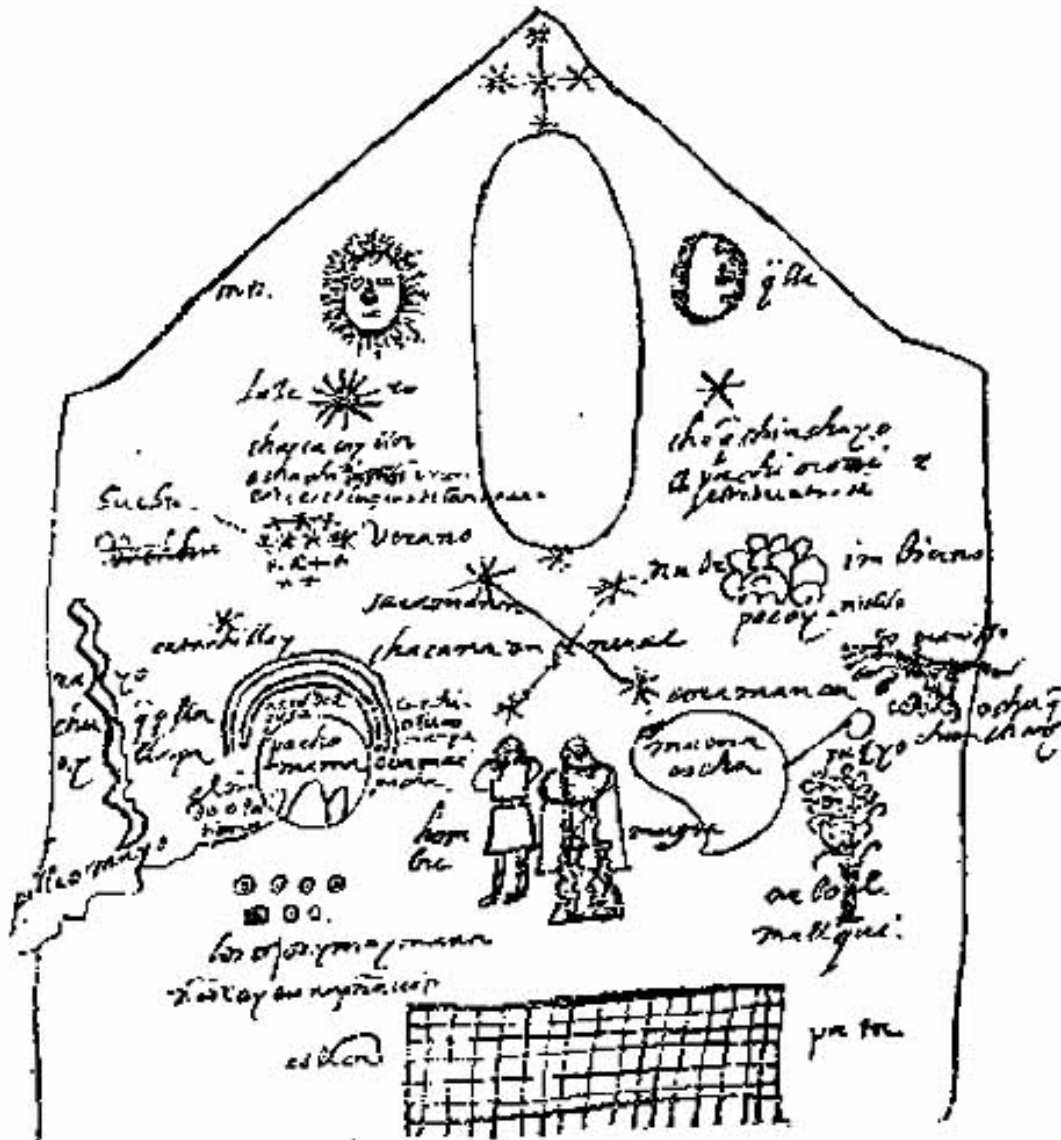
Unfortunately, we can show nothing conclusive as solid proof.

We know the Inti Raimi (which in Quechua, the language of the Incas, means "resurrection of the sun") was a sun festival/ceremony practiced every June in the Tawantinsuyo. The description we have of this ancient June solstice ceremony does not mention the veneration of the sun as artifact, but the sun itself.

The ceremony consists of kneeling down and awaiting the rising sun. As the sun broke the horizon worshipers would raise their arms with open palms to the sun.

In the center of the imperial capital of Tawantinsuyo, the City of Cuzco, the "Templo Mayor" was located: Coricancha, or the "House of the Sun."

This structure richly ornamented without a roof was the most elaborate in Cuzco. In the main altar a gold plate was located that shined with the sun. (Fig. 3)



That golden monolithic plate was engraved with many symbols and figures, among them; the sun, the moon, Venus, a rainbow, the southern cross, etc.

The symbols and other devices on the plate are not the subject of this paper, but I would like to remark that some kind of sun disc with a face was used by the Incas which are nothing close to the sun design we see in the Argentine symbols. Further it is clear that the sun was not the only object worshiped in Tawantinsuyo.

It's important to make reference to an older and more ancient culture which preceded the Tawantinsuyo. I am referring to the culture that proliferated on the shores of Lake Titicaca, where a great metropolis had once flourished, I am referring to: Tiahuanacu.

Begun, by some accounts, well before 4000 B.C., the most important surviving structure is a monolith called "Portal of The Sun." (Fig. 4)



See detail on Figure 5.



Little is known about this civilization which fell from prominence after Lake Titicaca's water level lowered and the shoreline receded from the city.

We do know that around the year 1100 the culture around Tiahuanacu disappeared to be incorporated by 1438 AD into the Tawantinsuyo by Pachacuti Inca.

Noted archeologists tell us that the deities Viracocha and Inti were worshiped by this pre-Incan culture and the theory is being fostered that Tiahuanacu was originally the cradle and home of the Incan Empire.

Many venture to prove that the deity depicted at the center of the Portal, suggests Viracocha, Inti or a distant ancestor.

If those theories are proven to be true we will then have a good idea as to how Viracocha, The Creator, or Inti, the Sun God were depicted.

III

If the design of the sun for the Argentine symbols does not have any similarity to the possible representation used by the Incas, which source was used for its original design?

We do not know who the actual graphic artist of the elements and devices we see on the Coat of Arms is, but it is evident that the Arms of the City of Buenos Aires were the source of inspiration for the colors of the field.

The sun on the Coat of Arms of 1813, on the coins, presidential sash and flag is one in the same.

On the Arms we see it as emerging from a hypothetical horizon, like a rising sun. We see it again as a full circle on the coins, sash, war flag and ensign.

The names of assemblymen instructed to implement the actual minting of the coins are very well known. We know also the resolution describing the elements to be shown on the coins: "Gold and silver coins with the arms of the assembly on one side and a sun on the other."

We also know who actually put those ideas into the metallic mold to stamp the documents.

His name was Juan de Dios Rivera, a Peruvian residing in Buenos Aires.

Rivera was the person who designed dies for all the royal seals as well as for the seal of the AXIII.

Rivera's previous works indicate that he was well versed in heraldry. He must have taken previous works of artistic value as raw models for the die of the AXIII seal.

There is also an array of drawings, paintings, and many kinds of pictographic representations coming from different cultures and civilizations dating from the early Mesopotamian cultures, Nile valley, the Renaissance, as well as European versions of the American pre-Columbian cultures.

However, and once again, documents are silent on the issue as to which model was taken for the sun. We only can conjecture.

There is other corner yet to be explored.

The sun as a Masonic symbol.

Freemasons were very active in the government of the UP and many of them, members of the AXIII.

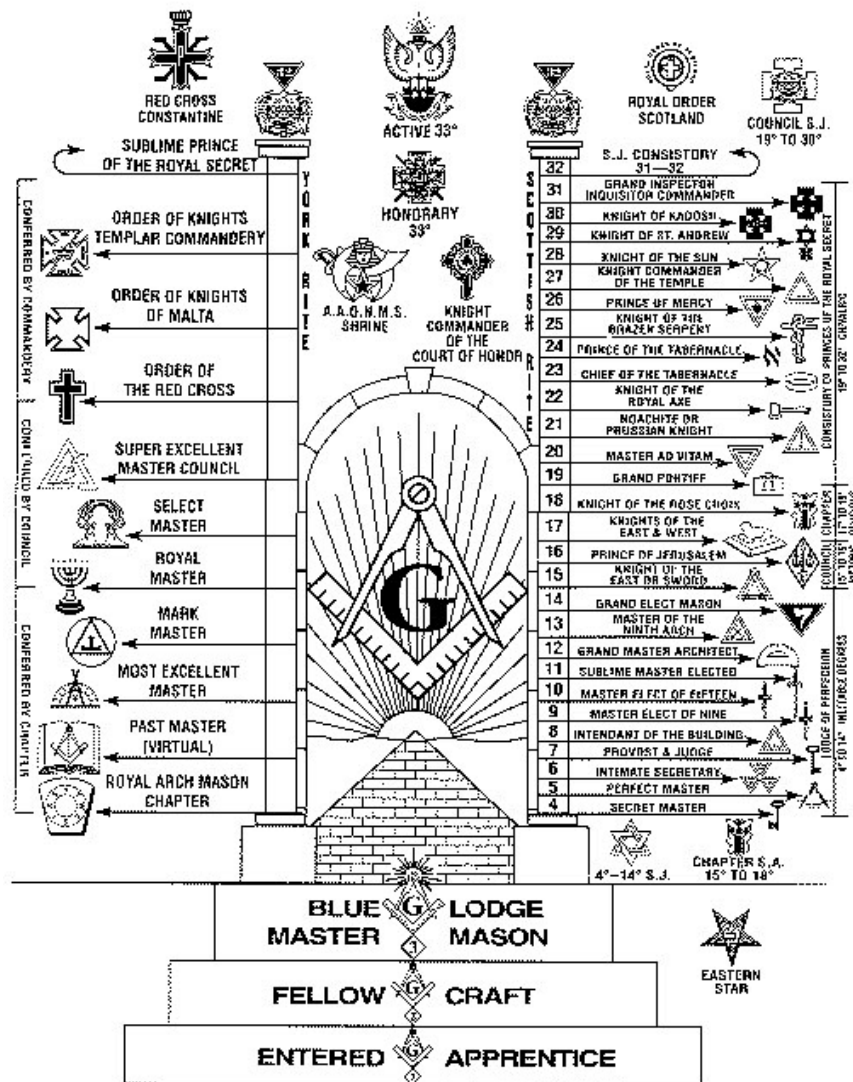
The liberal ideals of the AXIII are, in many aspects, those championed by masons and it's not odd to think that there is an underling current of thought which explains that the sun is there as a Masonic representation.

Freemasons have several symbols and emblems. The sun is one of them and perhaps the most clearest and most neutral of all Masonic emblems.

This option is questioned and disputed by many and ignored by others, but we cannot leave it unexplored.

On the other hand the symbols used by Freemasons are not limited to the sun alone but many others that are of more relevance to their doctrine and practices. The Square and the Compass, the All Seeing Eye, the Triangle, the form of a Pyramid, Crescent and Star, and the Apron are also used as symbols and in rituals. (Fig. 6)(*)

EMBLEMATIC STRUCTURE OF FREEMASONRY



Each of those symbols is part of an "Emblematic Structure of Freemason."

Therefore, I found it somehow doubtful that a group of practicing freemasons - some of them members of the AXIII - would take upon themselves to take one of the many complex symbols and emblems, in our case the sun, and to introduced it "in disguise" I suppose, as a national symbol of the new country.

Freemasons emblems are not to be widely and freely appropriated or to be used for purposes other than those which they were created.

IV

The name of Juan de Dios Rivera was mentioned before as the artisan born in Cuzco in 1760, who resided in Buenos Aires and manufactured the dies to be used as the molds for the seals and for the coins.

Aware of Rivera heraldic knowledge, this author believes that he was perhaps acquainted with the royal Coat of Arms used by King Charles III (1716-1788) who was the founder of the Viceroyalty of the River Plate in 1776 and son of King Phillips V, the first Bourbon of Spain.

The main device, see (Fig. 7) (**)



on the livery of the tenants is a sun of 16 rays. On the top of the full achievement of the arms, however, a scroll with the motto "A solis ortu usque ad Occasum" a full sun disc with 32 rays alternately straight and flamigerous can be seen as symbolizing the Empire were the sun will never set as is written in the Latin inscription.

Could this be the model used by Rivera?

The similarities are so striking that it is hard to believe otherwise.

However the lack of more data leave us with a hypothesis only.

Final Remarks:

We have seen in other symbols the inclination to equate them to some kind of phenomena.

We all are aware of the cross seen by Constantine in 312AD at the eve of the battle of Milvian Bridge with the legend "In hoc signo Vinces." This is the Cross that he later ordered to be displayed on the flags.

The Dannenbrog fell from the sky in June of 1219 to help King Waldemar of Denmark to win the battle against pagan tribes.

We also have seen natural events as sources of inspiring peculiar devices or colors. The case of the red and white of Peru as been attributed to a flock of flamingos flying over the bay of Paracas when San Martin, in October of 1820, was disembarking his troops. San Martin took this as a good luck omen and decided to put those colors, red and white, on the flag he created for the Peruvian troops, so the story goes.

The case of the "Sun of May" is not outside this type of event which in fact, gives to the study of flags a touch of myth and of urban legend.

NOTES:

1 Dr. Whitney Smith quotes Luis Canepa's book "Historia de los Simbolos Nacionales Argentinos BsAs, Ed. Albatros 1953."

However after a re-reading the book no such quotation is made by the author on the subject of the sun.

Contributing to this work, Dr. Smith showed to this author the quote on the "Sun of May" in a letter to him written in June of 1958 by Argentine vexillologists Juan Aparicio. (5) Mr. Aparicio and our research, leads us to the idea that the "Sun of May" is a romantic one without historical foundation.

Mr. William Campton does not quote any Argentine authors in his book while Mr. Alfred Znamierowski cites the book of Carlos A. Ferro, "La Bandera Argentina, Inspiradora de los Pabellones Centro Americanos. Ministerio de Cultura, BsAs 1970."

While Ferro's book is breaking new barriers on vexillologist research about the connections of the Argentine flag with the flags of the Central American republics, once again no quote or mention of the "Sun of May" is made in this book either. Mr. Znamierowski seems to use the book as a source for the origin of the Centro American flags in conjunction with the Argentine flag, but not as documentation of the Sun of May idea.

2 For more information on the sun on the coins and flag refer to essay by Francisco Gregoric: "El Diseño del Sol de la Bandera Argentina", part of the Vexilobaires 2005- ICV 21 Proceedings.

3 Information researched and provided by Alberto R. Perazzo, president of the Argentine Association of Vexillology.

4 This rough drawing is to be from a 16th century manuscript discovered in 1873 at the National Archives of Madrid, Spain.

The variety of symbols depicted, are evidence of the complex cults and rites followed by the inhabitant of Tawantinsuyo.

5- Juan Aparicio was a pioneer on Argentine vexillology and an earlier contributor of the Flag Research Center and its director Dr. Whiney Smith.

(+) Inca, is the title equivalent to king or emperor. To the name of the ruler, the word Inca was added, for example: Atahualpa Inca, Yupanqui Inca, etc.

(*) Picture obtained from website: <http://www.pacific50.org/01f00.htm>

(**) Picture courtesy of Ignacio Gavira Tomas website Heraldica Hispanica: <http://www.heraldicahispanica.com>

By Gustav Tracchia- Kew Gardens, NY, June 2005

gustracc@aol.com



Gustav Tracchia is a long time active NAVA member serving as officer for many years. He also is a member of SEV/CFA/AAV and CIDEDEC. He specialty is flags of Argentina and Latin-America writing articles for publications of different vexillological associations. He also has written articles on the relation of flags with heraldry and phaleristics.

Tracchia has received twice the William Driver Award given by NAVA for the best lecture during a NAVA congress. He also has been awarded CIDEDEC's Ottfried Neubecker Medal. He is a Fellow of the International Federation of Vexillological Associations.

