

## Whitney Smith: The Ensignment of the Romani People

**Abstract:** *On the 50th anniversary of the author's invention of the term vexillology, he gives a brief introduction explaining the significance and use of the term ensignment, meaning the progressive acquisition of symbols (for example, by a country). First used in the early 17th century, ensignment has potential value as a concept and analytical tool for scientific vexillology.*

*The body of the text analyzes the stages by which the Romanies and Sintis ("Gypsies") acquired their ethnic symbols. Although today there are perhaps as many as 10 million Romanies in Europe alone, various historical and political circumstances have until recently severely hindered the ensignment of this ethnic group.*

*The presentation examines the stages by which the Romani flag and related symbols were developed including the individuals, activities, and design concepts involved. Stress is placed on the difficult conditions under which ensignment has advanced, including the dispersal of the Romani and Sinti people across Europe, the negative symbols that have been attributed to or imposed on them by other nationalities, and the current state of their progress.*

*The author has made a broad survey of current scholarly literature concerning the ensignment of the Romanies and has been in touch with some prominent Romani scholars and organizations. It is believed that this lecture is the first attempt at a full analysis of the symbols in question.*

You undoubtedly recognize these men - Bill Clinton and Charlie Chaplin.



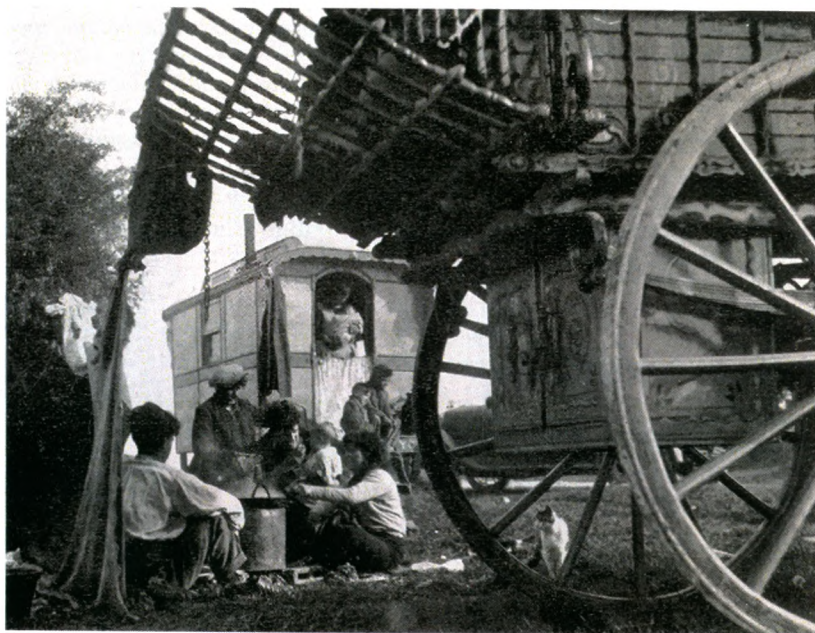
What you may not know is that both were directly descended from Romani, that is, from the ethnic group commonly but improperly referred to as Gypsies. The Romani are the focus of my lecture in the context of *ensignment*, that is, the process by which countries acquire symbols. The Romani today are moving from the wagon that has long

characterized them to recognition by the European Union as a legitimate ethnic community.



Developing flags and related symbols, introducing them into a given society, constantly reinforcing and elaborating their meanings and usages, justifying them as part of the wider culture, suppressing alternative and especially antagonistic symbols, adapting symbols to new circumstances over time, inculcating new generations in accepted forms and meanings – these and other activities vital to the maintenance of social cohesion in every society – are collectively known as ensignment.

63 An encampment on Epsom Downs, where Gypsies assemble for the Derby and other big race meetings.



Very little attention has been paid by vexillologists to ensignment and the stages by which countries acquire national symbols. The date of the first national flag of a country is usually noted but its relationship to political developments in the country typically is lacking or elementary. A cross-cultural analysis of the impact on design selection, the type of



flag usages authorized and those actually employed, the role that technology plays in the process, the types of symbols utilized, and similar issues are usually beyond even the best flag books.

This article represents a preliminary analysis of the ensignment of the Romani (Gypsy) people. Many of the important issues involved in the development of their flag and emblem appear never to have been fully documented or archived. Significant actors, activities, and dates are not readily available even though they occurred only half a century ago. Unfortunately, similar difficulties face the scholar attempting to analyze the symbols of most nations.

Many of the earliest symbols associated with the Romani were ones imposed by other peoples. This was in part due to the fact that the Romani, originally inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, did not live in a single clearly defined part of Europe after their migrations began in the 12th century. The peoples already living in Europe attributed characteristics to the Romani, who were divided into many communities stretching from Turkey to Spain. None of those Romani had title to a homeland and many constantly moved around Europe. Thus European populations, partly by default, created the first symbolic attributes that defined the Romani. Few of the characteristics imputed to the Romani were positive and many were strongly negative. For example one tradition defined the Romani as a people who were not only non-Christian but who historically opposed Christ. It was denigration similar to the long-held conviction of many Christian Europeans insisting that all Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

For centuries a belief was widespread to the effect that the Romani, many of whom made their living as blacksmiths and ironmongers, had gladly accepted a commission offered them, namely forging the nails to be used in impaling Christ to his cross. Moreover, since attributions of "trickster" and "cheat" were often applied to Romani, many Europeans believed the story that the Romani who made the nails short-changed the purchasers. That tale was used to explain why, in many paintings and sculptures, Christ was shown as having both feet pierced by a single nail. This is but one example of the negative ensignment

involving characterization of the Romani by other individuals or communities. Moreover, the Romani lacked the possibility of effectively countering their image among the Gadje (the Rom term for non-Romani).

Not surprisingly, the Romani flag was one of the last among European national banners to be created. The reasons for Romani tardiness in establishing a flag make the delay understandable. For example, in the late 19th century in Europe some "Gypsies," as they were known, could still legally be bought and sold as slaves. The Romani today still have never held any territory in their own name, let alone as a sovereign state. Nevertheless this nationality exists in substantial numbers in many European countries as well as in the United States, Brazil, and elsewhere but - at least until recently - often without citizenship and other legal rights. Even a common name was lacking for the Romani until the 1970s and some groups still do not use it.

During the Second World War the Romani were no less despised by the Axis powers than were the Jews, homosexuals, and Communists. An estimated half million Romani died at the hands of the Nazis and their allies. At the end of the war, however, the Romani received neither reparations nor an established homeland. Many were recruited by Communist regimes in eastern Europe, which increased anti-Romani prejudice among those who opposed Communism because of their religion, social class, or political beliefs.

### **The first flag of the Romani**

Historically, many national flags have been created before international recognition was achieved by the nationalities involved. Indeed during the 20th century the ensignment of non-selfgoverning peoples became a significant part of the process whereby many minorities under the rule of other nations or of multi-national states successfully presented themselves in the eyes of the world as legitimate candidates for statehood.





*Green signifies the land covered by its vegetation, which allows us to live [and also] the hope of one day seeing reconciliation across a world without borders...*

*Blue signifies the cosmos and liberty.*

*The shapes: the very basis of our philosophical conception lies in the horizontal and the perpendicular. Thus our flag is made horizontally of linen and the [vertical] pole signifies the line of profundity of our thinking.*

*We will soon be authorized to place on our flag an emblem, about which we hope to speak when the time comes.*

As part of the triple program proclaimed on 24th May 1959, the ethnic (or national) Romani flag, with its unique design and symbolism, was revived. The attribution of symbolic meaning to the flagstaff is unusual: worldwide, there are few other explanations of symbolism associated with flagpoles.

While green was mentioned before blue, the flag was simply being described with the lower stripe mentioned first. The mention of an emblem for the flag - one which was not described - hints at the possibility of a disagreement over its appropriate choice. While purely speculative, it would be plausible to suggest that Voëvod wanted a royal symbol on the new flag while others preferred a symbol of greater appeal to Romani communities across Europe and the world.

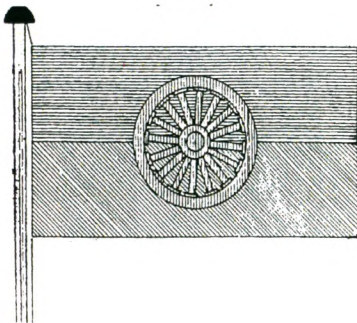
A news report two years later indicated that Voëvod, identified as "head of the European gypsy community," was working toward the organization of a world congress to discuss acquisition of territory - perhaps an uninhabited island - where an independent "Romanestan" could be developed. In noting that "a green and blue national flag had been adopted two years" previously, he claimed that the colors were to be understood expressing "green as a symbol of the earth and of hope, blue as a symbol of freedom."

### **Standardization of the Romani flag**

The First World Congress of Romani Leaders, which met in London in 1970, worked for advancement toward Romani national aspirations. From the practical standpoint it organized the long-discussed conference of European Romani, which finally took place in Orpington, Kent, in early April 1971. That conference was the first



Europe-wide Romani gathering since 1933. International recognition of Romani human rights, standardization of their language, creation of an international Romani newspaper, and similar issues were on the congress agenda. The leaders also called for an on-going World Romani Congress to be established.



Participants in the 1971 meeting also addressed the Romani flag. After discussion of many design options, the participants decided that the flag of blue and green created in 1933 should be officially accepted, but with a red wheel symbol added to the design. The symbolic meanings to be associated with the stripes and symbol were established. The design and symbolism were described as follows:

*The colors of the cited flag are blue, green, and red. They are part of a cloth divided into two horizontal stripes of equal width, the top of blue and the bottom of green. In the center of the same there appears a carriage wheel of red.*

*The colors of this ensign and the central motif that dominates it symbolize the sole traditional possessions of the Romani people, who are covered by the blue of the sky and use as their bed the green of the fields. The carriage wheel is the symbol of an itinerant people who consider themselves citizens of the world.*

Some of the design details of the Romani flag do not appear to have been established precisely by the World Romani Congress. The shades of blue, green, and red have been identified neither by the Pantone nor any other standard color system. So far as is known the width to length proportions of the flag have not specified, nor the artistic details of the wheel and its diameter.

From the standpoint of design consistency, the greatest problem with the flag concerns the rendition of the wheel. One source shows it in a form approximating an actual carriage wheel



with 16 spokes. A highly stylized version of the wheel, associated with the 1971 Romany Congress held in Britain, shows 16 spokes but with the areas between them in a tear drop shape.



The most recent interpretation corresponds exactly to the model of the *chakra* appearing in the center of the national flag of India, although in dark red rather than India's dark blue. Its

unidentified author, in describing the Romani flag, states:

*The Gypsy flag is based on three colors: the blue of the sky and of the sea, the green of the forests and prairies, and the red-brown of spilled blood. The central wheel is the same as that of the flag of India -- where it is found on the white stripe between the orange and green [stripes] -- and symbolizes the chakra, or wheel of Asoka: with its 24 spokes it evokes the 24 hours of the day and, beyond that, the evolution of humanity across cycles of time and morals. This wheel is likewise included as that of the ancient caravans of the Gypsies.*

Available evidence does not make clear who created the artwork for these different designs nor what standing each has as an official model.



In addition to the variants of the authorized flag, there have been other completely different designs presented as flags to symbolize the Romani. For example, the leader of the Albanian Roma, H.R.H. Prince Alexander of Epirus, is said to use a standard of blue with a white cross throughout bearing a coat of arms in the center that

features a double-headed black eagle holding a staff in its sinister claws and one of a different design in its dexter claws. (An alternate version shows an orb in the dexter claws.) The prince has called for "a strong and independent Epirus that our people from all over the region will have a place to call home."

The following reference appeared in a Dutch book about "King Koka" and his "Gypsy flag," as reported in a Dutch vexillological newsletter:



“Koka Petalo.. our [Netherlands] national Gypsy king.. showed me a card whereon in English was printed *Identity Certificate for the Nation of King Petalo*. ‘This is the first Gypsy passport in history,’ he said, delighted. ‘Henceforth every Gypsy may possess that passport.’ The passport was bordered with the colors yellow, white, and red. ‘That is our flag. It is necessary that we as a people make progress [i.e. by creating a flag].’ It should be looked into in order to know on what basis Koka Petalo chose yellow, white, and red as the flag colors... “

These alternative flags were limited to small audiences and apparently had little if any influence on the Romani community in general.

### Recognition for Romani symbols

The first official acknowledgement of the standard Romani flag apparently occurred in 1972 when the government of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, then a constituent part of Yugoslavia, gave the 200,000 Roms living there official status as a “national group.” Grattan Puxon, joint general secretary of the World Romani Congress, and Sanije Ibraim Puxon, assistant secretary of the Romani Institute, stated that:

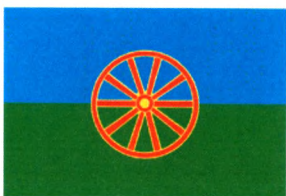
*“Yugoslavia, which has more than half a million Roms, officially recognizes our national flag and no longer officially permits the word ‘cigan’ [i.e. Gypsy] but only Rom.”*

In 1996 the Romani national organization in Slovakia had a flag vertically divided in half. The hoist was vertically divided dark blue and

green and bore the traditional carriage wheel in yellow below the initials of the group’s name (HAR). The national colors of Slovakia - horizontal stripes of white, dark blue, and red filled the fly end of the flag. Doubtless there have been many other Romani flags and related symbols in use but unrecorded.



The logo of the Barcelona-based *Unión Romani* showed its red wheel ringed by the group's name and *Unión del Pueblo Gitano* (Romani Union), both in black. The same logo appeared in the center of a scroll of green and blue, apparently representing its flag. In the flag of the Romani



Party of Croatia (Stranka Roma Hrvatske) the wheel was shown as yellow rather than red while a flag seen in Bonavista, Spain, had its top stripe of light blue and its 10-spoke carriage wheel was red outlined in yellow, the colors of Catalonia.

Recognition for Romani symbols has also appeared in settings where victims of the Holocaust were commemorated. At the fiftieth anniversary in 1995 of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Romani flag was displayed among the banners of peoples who had been massacred there. At the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in April 2004 there was a Flags of Remembrance Holocaust Memorial in which 10,305,000 Nazi victims were honored. Some 2061 small flags, each one representing 5000 deaths, were planted on the university lawn. Among these were 80 blue flags commemorating 400,000 Romani and Sinti.

Recognition of the Romani flag has been slow, considering the size of the population it symbolizes, even in the vexillological community. Apparently the first book on flags to mention the Romani was one published in 1992. Although the existence of the Romani people was noted, there was no flag assigned to them collectively by the author, nor did a Romani symbol appear among his own proposed designs, which supposedly represented all European peoples. The second flag book to mention the Romani appeared seven years later. Its text concerning the Romani flag consisted of three brief sentences.

The failure of other flag books to include the Romani flag, representing as it does a nationality without a sovereign territory of its own, is perhaps not surprising in books dedicated principally to national flags. However, even specialized publications have ignored the Romani. One flag chart included 100 European nationalities, presented with their national flags and a map indicating areas where those nationalities live.



Two nationalities were omitted on the map, although their flags were illustrated at the very end. One was Occitania (in southern France) and the other "Romanistan," i.e. Romani.

Remarkably, the Romani flag is missing from a flag book published in Hungary soon after the overthrow of the Communist regime there. The author was so determined to include every vexilliferous and armigerous territory that he invented flags and coats of arms for territories without any recognized designs - arms for New Caledonia and the Torres Straits Islands and flags for St. Eustatius and St. Martin, for example - yet the Romani were ignored in his book.

The editors of a Catalan encyclopedia, with a sensitivity to the national pride of other ethnic groups lacking sovereignty, included the Romani flag in the color plates of their circa 1992 publication under the heading "Flags of Associated States, of Nationalities, and Non-Sovereign Peoples." All the publications mentioned here, however, are specialized vexillological sources unlikely to be seen by the media, government officials, the general public, and other groups. Thus, even in those publications that include it, the Romani flag so far remains in the "exotic vexillologica" rather than among those "standard flag" category.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps the most reliable constant in human society is change. Vexillologists generally soon become aware of new national flags. Life is a continuum, however, and a meaningful understanding of flags and other symbols requires that the investigator do more than collect dates and images.

Ensignment begins when a people start using characteristic symbols that set them apart from others. Over time some symbols change or lose their meanings. Events associated with symbol changes are usually crucial ones in the life of the group, tribe, or nation involved. Why and how the symbols are altered ultimately usually tell us more than the designs and colors of those symbols. Indeed emphasis on those characteristics by vexillologists can actually be misleading.

The Stars and Stripes has survived 230 years of usage, but the number of stars, their arrangement, the shades of red and blue, and similar details tell us less about American society than do the relationships between the flag and such events as the Revolutionary War, the contest between abolitionists and Southern nationalists, those opposed and those supporting the American acquisition of colonies, and similar events. Understanding the ensignment process is thus ultimately mandatory for understanding the real meanings of every nation's symbols.



#### About the author



**Whitney Smith**, PhD, is director of the Flag Research Center in Winchester, Massachusetts, USA, and editor of "The Flag Bulletin, the International Journal of Vexillology". He founded the North American Vexillological Association and served as its president for ten years. He co-founded FIAV, served as its secretary-general from 1969 to 1991 and was named Laureate of FIAV in 1991. He has authored 23 books on flags, coined the word "vexillology" and designed the national flag of Guyana. Formerly a professor of political science at Boston University, he lives in eastern Massachusetts.

#### Address of the author:

Whitney Smith, PhD  
P. O. Box 580  
01890 Winchester, MA  
USA  
e-mail: [vexor@comcast.net](mailto:vexor@comcast.net)