

THE LION FLAG

Norway's First National Flag

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On 27 February 1814, the Norwegian Regent Christian Frederik made a proclamation concerning the Norwegian flag, stating: *The Norwegian flag shall henceforth be red, with a white cross dividing the flag into quarters. The national coat of arms, the Norwegian lion with the yellow halberd, shall be placed in the upper hoist corner. All naval and merchant vessels shall fly this flag.* This was Norway's first national flag.

What was the background for this proclamation? Why should Norway have a new flag in 1814, and what are the reasons for the design and colours of this flag?



The Dannebrog Was the Flag of Denmark-Norway

For several hundred years, Denmark-Norway had been in a legislative union. Denmark was the leading party in this union, and Copenhagen was the administrative centre of the double monarchy. The Dannebrog had been the common flag of the whole realm since the beginning of the 16th century. The red flag with a white cross was known all over Europe, and in every shipping town the citizens were familiar with this symbol of Denmark-Norway. Two variants of The Dannebrog existed: a swallow-tailed flag, which was the king's flag or state flag flown on government vessels and buildings, and a rectangular flag for private use on ordinary merchant ships or on private flagpoles. In addition, a number of special flags based on the Dannebrog existed. The flag was as

frequently used and just as popular in Norway as in Denmark.

The Napoleonic Wars Result in Political Changes in Scandinavia

At the beginning of 1813, few Norwegians could imagine dissolution of the union with Denmark. The two countries were so closely linked politically, administratively, financially, culturally, and not least, dynastically that a dissolution of the Danish-Norwegian unified state was hardly an issue. However, awareness was dawning that it would be right for Norway to have a more prominent position in the unified state, and that distinctively Norwegian administrative bodies should be established. However, this sentiment did not extend to the country becoming an independent state.

The Napoleonic Wars changed the political situation in the Nordic countries. Denmark-Norway was in alliance with France, while Sweden had joined Napoleon's opponents. Consequently, Denmark-Norway and Sweden were at war.

In the summer of 1813, the Swedish Crown Prince Karl Johan stood with his main army in Northern Germany and could have, at any time, invaded Denmark. The military situation was critical for Denmark-Norway. At the same time, the territorial connection between Denmark and Norway had been broken by a blockade in Skagerrak-Kattegat. In May 1813, King Frederik VI consequently appointed his cousin and successor to the Danish-Norwegian throne, Christian Frederik, to be vice-regent of Norway. He was to act on behalf of the King, and govern Norway from there as long as the connection with Copenhagen was problematic. Disguised as a fisherman, the 27-year old Christian Frederik arrived in Norway on 21 May. The new vice-regent, Christian Frederik, was well received in Norway, and he immediately took charge of the country.

However, Norway's fate was not determined at home, but on the international scene in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. During the night between 14 and 15 January 1814, the Treaty of Kiel was signed, in which His Majesty, the King of Denmark, ceded Norway to Sweden. The victors of the Napoleonic Wars, led by England, had spoken. Norway was forced into a union with Sweden, and Norway's fate seemed sealed.

Norway's Short Period of Independence in 1814

In this new situation, Christian Frederik stepped forward and became the leader of a national uprising in Norway. He proclaimed himself Regent of Norway. At a meeting with the most prominent men in Norway, Christian Frederik rejected the Swedish claim for a union. Norway had thus become an independent realm for the first time in several centuries. The Norwegians would

work for freedom and independence through a constituent assembly. They were well aware of the fact that this would cause conflict and perhaps even war with Sweden and the major powers of Europe.

The Flag as a National Symbol

Distinct national symbols and colours with which people and the new government could identify were important when a new state was to be established, and Christian Frederik was well aware of this fact. That is the reason why he proclaimed a new Norwegian flag in February 1814. A new state should have its own flag.

The proclamation about the flag was, however, not very specific. It said nothing about the shape of the flag, its proportions or the shade of the red colour. Nevertheless, no Norwegians were in doubt as to how to understand the proclamation. The flag was identical to the one Norway previously had, decided by Copenhagen in 1696 and later on in the 18th century. The flag was a Dannebrog with the Norwegian lion in the upper hoist corner. Consequently, it was a new flag, but its continuity with the old flag was clear. Without it being explicitly said, everybody approved of the two variants of the flag, one with swallowtails and the other without. The areas of use were the same as earlier. The swallow-tailed flag was the state flag, while the rectangular flag was the private merchant or national flag. All illustrations from 1814 show the swallow-tailed flag hoisted outside the Eidsvoll Building, where the Norwegian constitution was drafted, while the flag without swallowtails flew from merchant vessels in Norwegian and foreign ports.

The Lion Flag was Christian Frederik's Idea

The lion flag was, no doubt, designed by Christian Frederik himself. In February 1814, his ambition was a future reunion with Denmark, and many Norwegians supported him in this. Their loyalty to the regime was still strong, and many Norwegians were afraid of coming under Swedish control. The introduction of the flag was thus probably a conscious political act. By designing a new flag that was almost identical to the old one, Christian Frederik indirectly demonstrated continuity in Norwegian history and his own politics. The breach with Denmark could easily be changed visually in the future by removing the lion from the flag.

At the same time, the flag could be justified on the basis of financial considerations. The government, shipowners and people in general were facing harsh economic conditions. Thrift and moderation were important in almost all respects. And neither the government nor industry was burdened with any costs by the introduction of this new flag. On the contrary, the old flag could be

used just as before by adding a yellow lion, and any purchase of new fabrics was consequently not required.

By placing the lion with the halberd in the flag, Christian Frederik also ensured that Norway's only national symbol dating back to the Middle Ages was brought into prominence in a positive way. And the lion with the halberd was a symbol which ordinary Norwegians knew from ship names and coins; to them, this symbol was synonymous with Norway. Consequently, the new Norwegian flag was a logical and wise choice for Christian Frederik and those who saw a reunion with Denmark as a possible alternative to a union with Sweden.

The Location and Position of the Norwegian Lion

Christian Frederik had several possibilities with respect to where in the flag he could place the lion. He could, with advantage, have decided to put a big lion in a square at the point of intersection of the cross. The reason why he nevertheless chose to locate it in the canton could be that very few Danish flags had this design. It was used only in the Greenland company flag and in admiral flags with one or two stars. The top hoist corner was the least common and least-used location for a symbol in the Danish-Norwegian special flags prior to 1814. The flag designed by Christian Frederik for Norway was thus the one that most easily could be distinguished from the other Danish flags, and which easily could be recognized as a Norwegian national flag.

The Lion Should Face Away From the Pole

The design of the lion raised, however, certain practical problems. Because the proclamation of the flag was expressed in such general terms, the head of the naval shipyard in Kristiansand, Captain Jens Peter Stibolt, made draft drawings of how the lion could be placed in the flag. The regent thanked him for his proposal, but requested in a letter of 18 March that he change the lion so that it "...looks away from, and not as now, towards the pole ...". At the same time, Christian Frederik gave Captain Stibolt detailed instructions as to how the lion and the halberd should be placed relative to each other. As early as 15 March, Stibolt had prepared new drawings which he forwarded to the regent. Christian Frederik replied immediately that the drawing was "fully accepted" by him. He also ordered the new flags to be put into production. Consequently, there is no doubt about how the lion should be designed in general, and to which side it should face.

This decision made by Christian Frederik about the design of the lion and to which direction it should face, is clearly expressed in several patterns that were made and sent to various military institutions. The depictions there clearly show that the swallow-tailed flag is identical to the

Dannebrog, and that the Norwegian lion with halberd turns it back on the flagpole.

The reason why the issue of the lion's orientation relative to the pole or the fly nevertheless has been discussed up until the present day can be found in the practical use of Christian Frederik's flag and the fundamental confusion of heraldry and vexillology. Contemporary drawings, gouaches and paintings of Norwegian vessels flying Christian Frederik's flag clearly show that people have been unsure of the design. Many have the lion facing the fly, while just about as many have it facing the pole. There is, of course, a possibility that these sources are erroneous and that the confusion is due to the artist, rather than the shipowners. However, when the same artists present both variants of the flag, we should think that both were used. Over time, though, the correct flag design seemed to emerge. One example of this is Dreier's painting of Jekteviken in Bergen in 1815, where the brig *Twende Brødre* has the lion facing the pole, while his watercolour of the barge *Flora* from 1820 has the lion facing the correct direction.

Very few original examples of Christian Frederik's flag still exist. One of them is located in *Grimstad Bymuseum*, and is said to have been hoisted on shipowner Chr. Pharo's vessel, the *Wintheren*. Only the upper quarter of the fly is intact, but the flag has the lion facing away from the pole. Another of his flags is kept at *Fredriksten* fortress in Halden. This flag was brought to Sweden when the Swedes withdrew from the fortress in 1815, but was handed back to *Fredriksten* in 1962 and is now kept in the fortress museum. This flag also has the lion facing the correct way. On a third flag, located in the Eidsvoll building, the lion is facing the pole. This flag was donated to the museum around the turn of the previous century and is said to have been flown outside the Eidsvoll building during the historic days in April-May 1814. It is, however, hardly likely that a flag with such design was flown there at that time, considering the fact that Christian Frederik was so concerned about the position of the lion.

Heraldry Contra Vexillology

The misunderstanding as to the position of the lion can probably be explained with reference to heraldry. The theory relating to the colours and metals in coats of arms, divisions into horizontal and vertical fields, and depictions of figures, have strict rules as to the composition of the various elements. The lion has been one of the most highly valued figures in the coat of arms of sovereigns and nobles. The figures and lions almost always face dexter (right), and hardly ever sinister (left). The lion in the Norwegian national coat of arms was in compliance with this rule. On official occasions prior to 1814, the lion was always depicted facing the heraldic right. Whether placed on a shield, on coins, on stove plates, or in other situations, the lion with the halberd was facing the

heraldic right. And it was this lion that both the learned and the unlearned were familiar with, and this was how it should be according to the general public. Consequently, it is quite understandable that shipowners flew the new Norwegian flag with the lion facing the pole on their vessels.

The reason why Christian Frederik chose the unconventional lion facing the heraldic left could be that he had seen that great European realms such as Spain and France at the end of the 18th century had stopped using heraldic-inspired flags. Instead they had, just like the Netherlands and Russia, taken up new simple symbols that divided the bunting into three parts with strong, contrasting colours. New vexillological rules were replacing the heraldic guidelines. Christian Frederik was a very well-informed man with a strong interest in art and culture. In addition, he was surrounded by a group of wise, Danish and Norwegian persons who were professionally very competent, in addition to being tolerant and knowledgeable. They were aware of the importance of symbols for a nation and paid attention to what was going on elsewhere in Europe. A new post-revolutionary era required new and unconventional solutions. That might be one of the reasons why Christian Frederik was not so concerned about heraldic principles when he decided which way the lion should face.

The main argument for the position of the lion was nevertheless probably based on practical considerations. The flag was still mainly used at sea. During the years around 1814, flags were mostly seen along the coast and in harbours. Merchant and naval vessels with flags and pennants flying from masts and sterns were impressive sights. On shore, few or no flags were seen. Consequently, it is no wonder that Christian Frederik was thinking in terms of ships when he designed the flag. To him, it probably was essential that the lion should fly in the same direction as the ship's movement. At a time when ships were driven forward by sails in the wind, flags stood out from poles in the same direction as the course of the ship. And the lion should run in the same direction. So the direction in which the ships were sailing was probably the main reason why the lion was facing the fly.

The Weakness of the Lion Flag

The flag was quickly adopted by Norwegian shipowners who proudly hoisted it on their vessels. However, Christian Frederik's lion flag had a serious weakness. Because the flag was to demonstrate a certain connection to Denmark, it could only with difficulty be distinguished from the Dannebrog. Spotting the lion in the Norwegian flag could be difficult even at a short distance. For a new state wishing to be noticed, it was a disadvantage that the flag could be confused with the flag of another nation. Consequently, it was suggested that the lion should be placed on a square or

circle of white material, and some shipowners had such flags made.

The similarity with the Dannebrog doubtlessly caused problems. In the short term, the shipowners could nevertheless accept this similarity. In the Nordic waters, this hardly posed any problems, but the situation was different for shipowners sailing on the Mediterranean. Previously, the Norwegian vessels had, just like the Danish ones, flown a Dannebrog with the king's monogram in the middle to distinguish it from the Maltese flag. The Danish flag with the monogram was protected from North-African pirates as Denmark had paid great sums to the Barbary states in order to sail freely south of Cape Finisterre. But the new Norwegian flag gave no protection, and several Norwegian ships flying Christian Frederik's flag were captured by Arabian pirates and brought to Alger where they were arrested. From the Arabic side, the message was clear: ships flying the Norwegian flag would for the future not be tolerated unless the Norwegian state paid taxes to the Barbary states just like Sweden and Denmark. The new Norwegian lion flag consequently caused both practical and financial problems that were difficult to resolve in the long run.

Postscript

Norway had gotten a flag of its own in February 1814. In May 1814, an assembly elected by the people appointed Christian Frederik to be king of Norway and gave the country a constitution. Sweden refused to accept both the king and the constitution, and declared war on Norway in 1814. Norway had no possibility of fighting this superior force and had to accept a union.

Under the union negotiations with Sweden in the autumn of 1814, the Swedes demanded a common flag for Norway and Sweden. This meant, in fact, that the state flag should be a union flag and should fly not only from naval vessels, but also from all fortresses and public buildings in Sweden and Norway. The union flag was identical to the Swedish swallow-tailed flag, but with a union mark in the upper hoist corner. The union mark consisted of a red field with a diagonal white cross.

However, during the same union negotiations, it was decided that Norway could have its own merchant flag, and in practice this meant that the lion flag was upheld. Consequently, Christian Frederik's flag was for many years the symbol of Norway. Only in 1821, Norway got a new merchant flag, but that is a different story.

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The lion flag of Norway 1814 - 1821



Two variants of the Dannebrog:

1. A rectangular flag for private use
2. A swallow-tailed flag was the king's flag or the state's flag.





Denmark–Norway was in a union from 1380 to 1814



Christian Frederik

Christian Frederik was cousin to the Danish-Norwegian king and successor to the throne.

After the Kiel Treaty in January 1814 the king ceded Norway to Sweden, and Norway was forced into a union with Sweden.

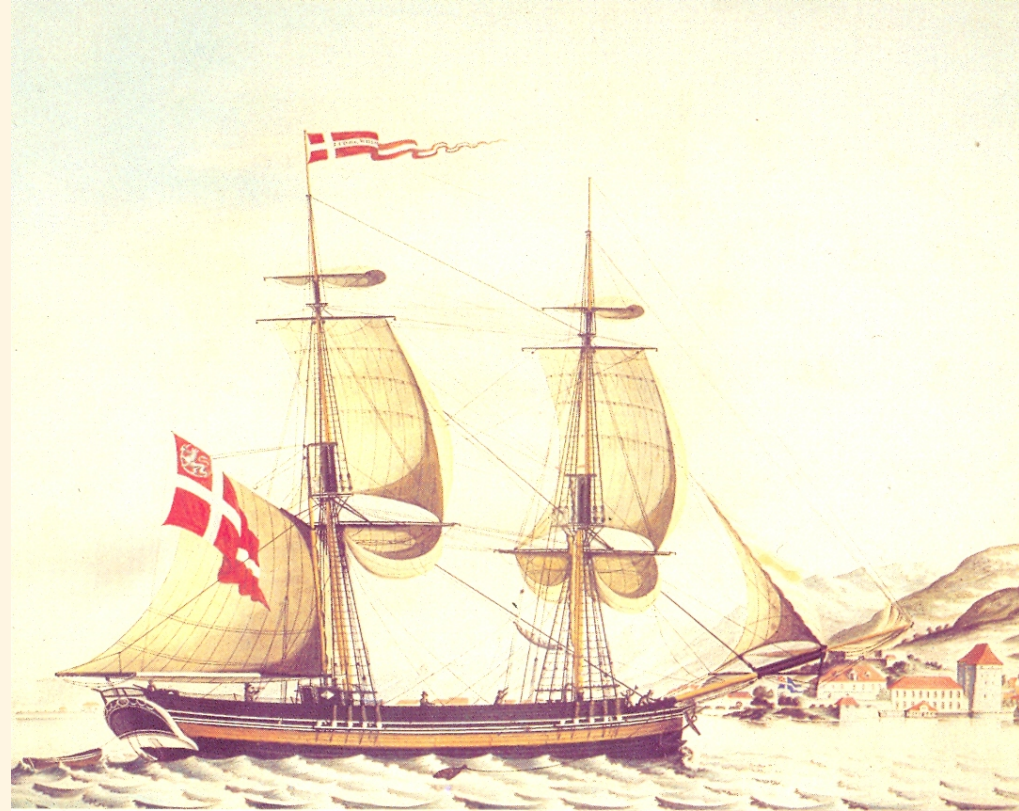
Christian Frederik stepped forward and became the leader of a national uprising in Norway.

He proclaimed a new Norwegian flag, the lion flag, in February 1814.



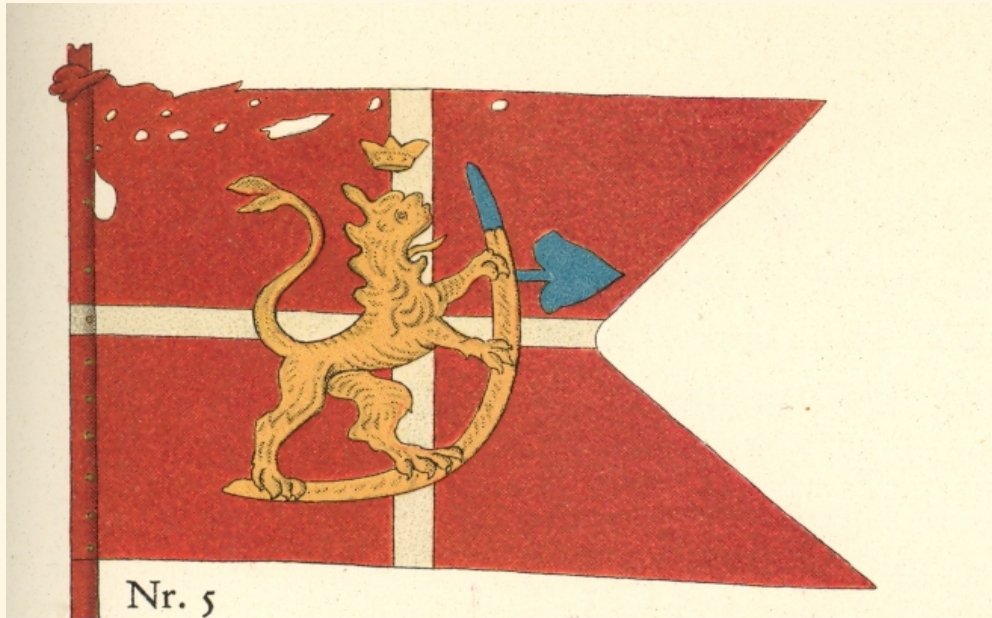


Distinct national symbols were important when Norway was to be established



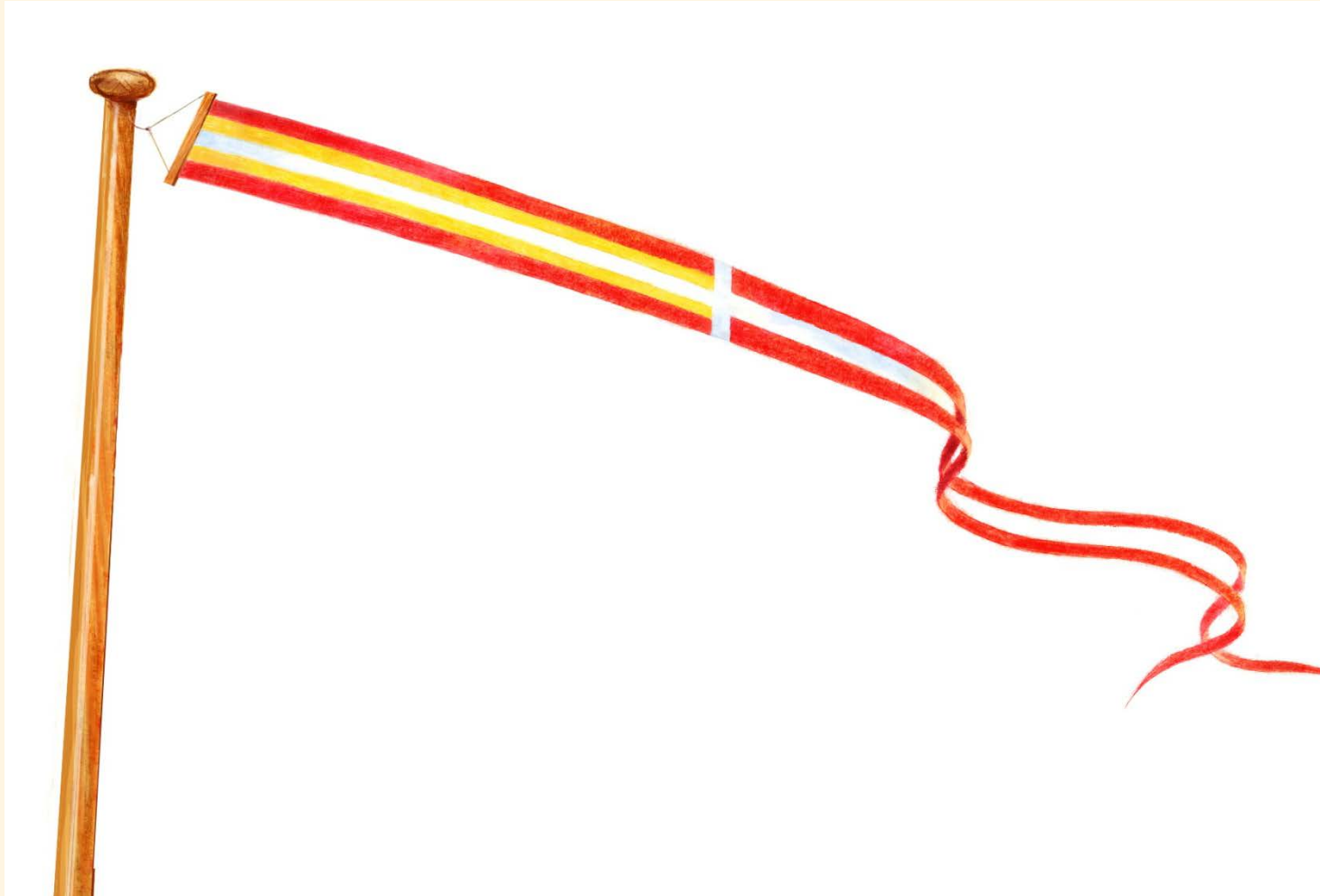


Different locations of symbols in the Dannebrog





The correct position of the lion



A warship pennant with yellow stripes instead of a yellow lion

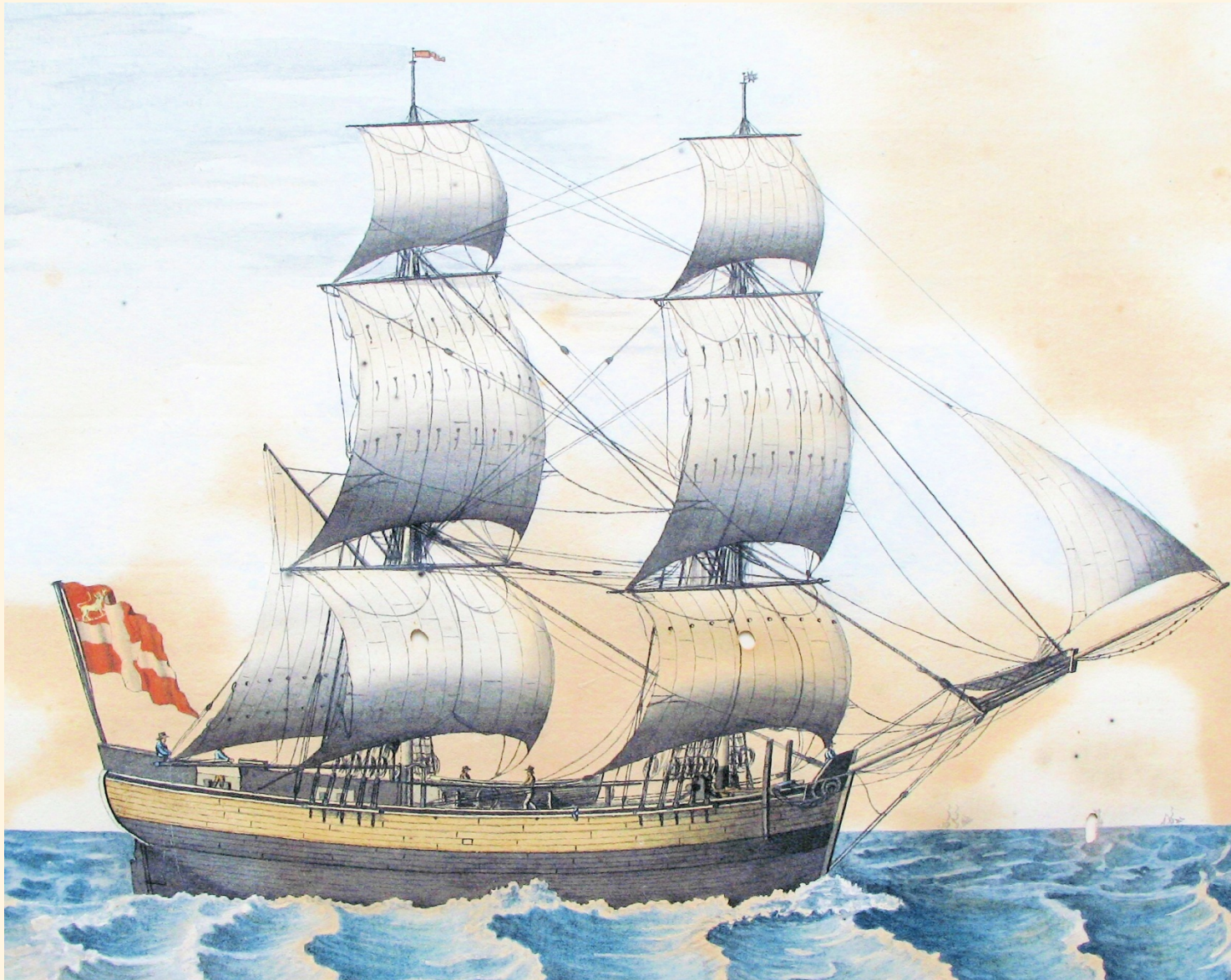


Original canton in the lion flag 1814 - 1821.

Grimstad Town Museum , Norway



Jan Henrik Munksgaard, Nordic Flag Society
Norway's first National Flag





The lion flag could only with difficulty be distinguished from the Dannebrog.
St. Helena 1814





The lion on a white square

Spotting the lion in the Norwegian flag could be difficult even at a short distance. Consequently, it was suggested that the lion should be placed on a square of white material, and some shipowners had such flags made.





A Norwegian slave vessel in Marseilles harbour in 1806. The king's monogram C7 in the cross.





The union flag (the Swedish-Norwegian state flag) 1815 - 1844