



## Report

# The third way of raising flags in Brittany

**Alain Raullet**

### Abstract

*Alain promised at Sydney ICV26 to talk about a surprising way of displaying flags, mainly identified with Brittany. Such a way is particularly noticeable at local folk festivals, held between April until September. The Festival Interceltique at Lorient, and the Saint Loup festival at Guingamp, taking place in August each year, offer particularly good opportunities to see this way in action, as they include the championship finals of both Bagad and Kelc'h Keltiek groups.*

What a strange title, isn't it?

Firstly, I have made a 'French' mistake as the right word for raising should be rising meaning displaying. *Ah, les faux amis!*

Secondly, this mistake is just to attract your attention, and Peter Orenski would surely add, 'I tell you guys, it's going to be a very nice lecture again.'

Thirdly, because it comes after First and Second – logical isn't it?

May I remind you that first way in Brittany is for political or territorial flags, using a staff usually on the vertical side of the flag.



*Bretons demonstrate against a mining project in central Brittany, April 2017*

As far as the second way is concerned, in Brittany we use it for religious banners, as I showed you at the Sydney congress. However, this 'centre' staff is also used by some others such as Spanish and Syrian religious banners, as well as Italian city *gonfalone*.



*Gonfalons: above, carried in religious processions, Syria and Spain; left, carried in a religious ceremony, Locronan, Brittany, 2013*

Therefore there is nothing especially Breton about these two methods of displaying flags – everyone of us can give many examples. But the third way, that is another story, and I don't know of anywhere else in the world where this uncommon way of displaying flags can be seen.

**What is exactly the third way?**

Instead of being worn on a vertical pole, the emblem is displayed on a horizontal pole. Have you seen that before in your countries? In Brittany, we mainly use that kind of display for cultural flags, especially those of the *bagadoù* and *Kelc'hioù keltiek*.



*A vintage postcard showing a bagad: its flag appears at the rear; the staff is held horizontally but the devices are aligned to appear vertical*



Let me explain these Breton words.

A *bagad* is a band whose members play one of three instruments: bagpipe, drum or bombard (a woodwind instrument distantly related to the oboe and shawm). *Bagadoù* is simply the plural of *bagad*. Some *bagadoù* are nearly 90 years old.

*Kelc'h keltiek* literally means 'Celtic circle' (again *Kelc'hioù* is simply the plural of *kelc'h*). A Celtic circle is a dance group which performs traditional Breton dances, particularly those of their immediate area, wearing their own local costumes. The circles are groups of enthusiasts, of course, but the characteristic form of many Breton dances is also circle, the participants holding hands and sometimes dancing around singers or musicians. Today, Breton dancing is very popular in *fest-noz* (literally a 'night entertainment' but used to mean a folk music and dance festival).



*Breton folk dancing: in formal (left) and informal (above) settings*

#### **Where and when can we see the horizontal way?**

Mainly from May until October, during festival parades or performances by bands and circles, at a local festival or in competitions between the different groups. There are said to be at least some 250 *bagadoù* and over 150 circles.

There are two main festivals that offer the greatest opportunity to see the groups and their flags. The Festival Interceltique at Lorient is the biggest in Brittany, with a four-hour parade of bands, circles and guests from other Celtic countries. The parade is the culmination of a music contest involving over 100 *bagadoù*, competing in five leagues.



*Festival Interceltique, Lorient: the flags are paraded ahead of the groups, whether bagad or circle*

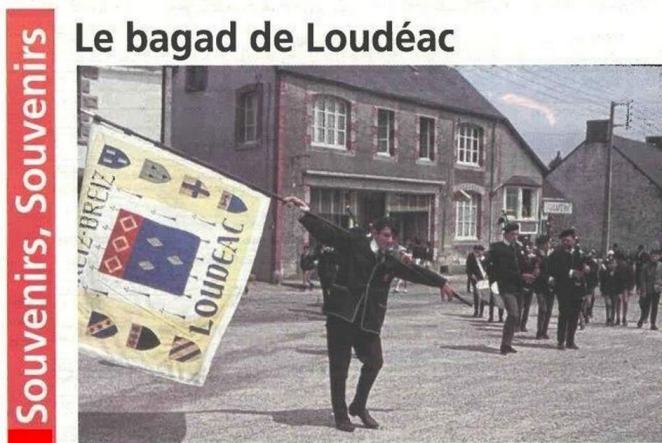


The Saint-Loup Festival at Guingamp is the equivalent of the Lorient event but for the Celtic circles. The parade is shorter, lasting only one hour. Unfortunately for us, and for me, both events take place in early August – so just when this congress is being held. And at Lorient this year the guest country is Scotland, so you can imagine how many more lovely band pictures we are missing.

**Why does it happen like this?**

As you can see from the picture below, the band banner carried by this man is heavy because it is embroidered like a religious banner. At this time (c.1964), banners were handmade and were paraded with religious banners on the saint's day of a parish, one following the other.

## Clin d'œil



*Flag of the bagad of Loudéac (Loudig), c.1964*

To distinguish between the banners, however, the two groups had to be carried differently. You know from my lecture at Sydney that religious banners were carried on a central pole but how could the music and dance groups present their emblem in a distinctive way? That is the question, as Hamlet once said, close to where I am speaking today.



*Olympic weightlifter Leonid Jabotinsky carries the USSR flag in one hand*



At first, the bearer held the flag over his head, just to differentiate it from the religious banners. But, of course, after hours of parading the bearer needs to rest while the musicians are playing. This could be achieved by resting the staff across the shoulders, but with the emblem still well visible, and that is how our third way of displaying flags in Brittany began. We must be honest and admit that it started as a resting position, because we Bretons are not as strong as, say, the Olympic weightlifter Jabotinsky (pictured above), who in 1968 carried the Soviet flag at the opening ceremony of the Mexico City Olympics with his arm totally horizontal.

The advantage of this manner of display is that it gives a real opportunity to show correctly and clearly all the details of the emblems of each cultural group, whether *bagad* or circle. And the best way to describe these emblems is simply to present pictures of festivals, mainly from Lorient and Guingamp.



*Flag of the Circle of Rostrenen (Rostren): obverse and reverse*



*A bagad parades at Guingamp (Gwengamp), 1950s: the flagbearer rests the flag across his shoulders*



*Flag of the Bagad of Saint-Brieuc (Sant-Brieg)*



*Flag of Les Blés d'Or, a circle from Saint-Nicolas-du-Pélem (Sant-Nikolaz-ar-Pelem)*



*Flag of the Krollerion Mourieg, a circle from Moreac (Mourieg)*



Flag of the Circle of Nort-sur-Erdre (Enorz), near Nantes: obverse and reverse



Above, flag of the Circle of Paimpol (Pempoull), obverse and reverse; left, the paddle and lifebelt is the symbol of the children's section



The Bagad of Lann-Bihoué Naval Air Base



A different flag of the Circle of Nort-sur-Erdre, near Nantes





*Flag of the Circle of Tressignaux (Tresigne): obverse, the civic arms; reverse, the stylised headdresses of the dancers*



*Bagad of Pont l'Abbé (Pont-'n-Abad): its flag reflects the distinctive tall hats of the Bigouden area, which are worn by its female members*



*Bagad of Pont l'Abbé (Pont-'n-Abad): the flag of the junior section*



*Flag of a bagad from Locoal-Mendon (Lokoal-Mendon), with triskell symbolism well to the fore*



*Flag of the Circle Dansérien Ar Vro Pourlet, from Le Croisty (Ar C'hroesti)*



*The bagad Keriz welcomes Bretons living in Paris: its name is a pun on the*



*Flag of the Kerfeunteun Circle, from Quimper (Kemper)*



*legendary drowned city of Ys, and the supposed 'remoteness' of Paris*



*The flags of the Bagad and Circle of Bourbriac (Boulvriac) are almost identical*

Instead of a conventional flagpole, some groups use a traditional work tool, such as a paddle from the port of Saint-Malo, or a scythe from Auray.



*Scythe of Auray (An Alre): the flagbearer wears a black cloak to represent Ankou, a personification of Death in Breton mythology*



*A bagad from Saint-Malo (Sant-Maloù) uses a paddle as a flagstaff*

Some groups have a distinctive finial: an ermine spot, a triskell, a salamander.







*Left, an ermine finial; right, a finial in the form of an ermine spot*



*A triskell finial*

The 'band master' of the champion band (the *Penn Soner*) at each year's Lorient festival receives a specially embroidered pipe banner.



*The pipe banner of the Penn Soner: the winner at Lorient in 2010 was Bagad Kemper, from Quimper, champions 22 times since 1951*

Again, I have no idea whether in other parts of the world flags are displayed in the way used by Breton bands and circles, except perhaps some Celtic or other national groups that once visited Lorient or elsewhere in Brittany and are now copying us. Here in London, however, 'Trooping the Colour' is another horizontal display too, isn't it?



*The Welsh Guards troop their colour on the Queen's Birthday in almost identical fashion!*

So I do hope you've enjoyed discovering that unusual Breton way of displaying vexillology.

#### **Author biography**



Alain Raullet is a founder member and President of the Breton vexillological society, the Kevarzhe Vannielouriezh Vreizh.