

# Flags, Medals, and Decorations

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## INTRODUCTION

Awards are recognition of a person by superiors, peers, or friends that can take the form of a simple bunch of flowers, a speech, a certificate, a plaque, or a medal. If a medal is awarded, it should be in a style and form which allows the recipient to display it proudly. This practice of recognition began in ancient times—the Greeks called such awards *ta falara*. The ancient Romans made them in the form of metal discs attached to armor, called *phalerae*. Hence, the discipline of studying orders of knighthood and merit, and civil and military decorations in general, became “Phaleristics”.

## OVERVIEW

This article examines the development of flags in connection with medals and their ribbons. It will focus on the emergence of orders of knighthood and chivalry during and after the Crusades, taking a Eurocentric point of view. The Crusades, waged between 1095 to 1289 to free Christian sites in the Holy Land from Islamic control, are of scholarly interest to many sciences and disciplines. Vexillology is one of them.

During medieval times, Europe was divided into numerous states whose rulers were involved in tedious and petty territorial disputes. Only the Catholic Church had the control, power, and means to launch an international movement such as the Crusades. Long before the Lateran Treaty of 1929, the Holy See was the only body in Europe with international legal authority.

Contingents from different realms and regions of Europe, fraternal orders of knighthood made up of pious knights, began to distinguish themselves under banners bearing crosses of different shapes and colors. These orders proved very effective at a time when there were no organized nations in Europe, and Islam threatened the continent. Among the many orders battling the forces of Islam were the Sovereign Hospitaller Order of Knights of St. John of Jerusalem—known today as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (formally founded in 1113), the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon—the Templars (1118), and the Order of Teutonic Knights of the Hospital of St. Mary the Virgin (1128). The struggle to free the southern Iberian Peninsula from Moors led to the establishment of the Military Order of Calatrava (1158), the Order of Santiago [St. James of the Sword, or St. James of Compostela] (1170), and the Order of Alcántara (1176) in Spain and the Order of Avis (1144) in Portugal.

Most of these orders were founded as coalitions of noblemen and knights to defeat the “infidels” and preserve Christian civilization and culture. The Holy See and successive popes gave these private groups their full support. For example, the Order of Malta resulted from a private initiative, later approved by the papacy. While it began with an orientation toward the church and Christianity by reason of its constitution and motivation, it was independent in its creation, statutes, and internal structure. Most of these orders adopted unique uniforms and devices. Some had navies and thus hoisted flags, jacks, and banners to identify their ships and the ranks of their commanders, as well as signal flags to convey messages from one ship to another. The Order of Malta was divided into “langues”, contingents from particular areas of Europe. Each langue had a flag and some of those devices are still in use today.

As the Renaissance emerged after the end of the Crusades, many European rulers consolidated their position and status. Their rule became more absolute and monarchs identified themselves with the state and religion, changing their relationship with the orders of knighthood, which developed into two different types: the pontifical and religious orders versus the military and non-pontifical orders (which retained only remnants of their former strictly Christian character and became totally secularized).

Powerful monarchs attempted to control these secular “sovereign” and wealthy orders. Those which refused to submit to the power of the ruling monarchs were suppressed, as in 1304 when Philip IV of France disbanded the Knights Templar, or when in 1386 the king of Poland challenged the Teutonic Order.

But the altruistic concept of orders of knighthood remained fashionable in Europe long after the Crusades. New, secular “orders of chivalry” were founded, more of a historic and honorific character than of piety or knighthood—something the old crusader knights might never have understood. The English Order of the Garter, instituted by Edward III in 1348, took its name from an incident with the garter of a lady during a court ball (which prompted the king’s famous words “*Honi Soit qui Mal y Pense*”—Shame on him who thinks evil of it). Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, founded the Order of the Golden Fleece in 1430 to mark the occasion of his marriage. The Spanish Order of Charles III was founded in 1771 by the king of the same name as a token of thanks to God for giving him a grandson.

These orders originally required members to profess the Catholic faith. However, through the changes wrought by the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, such rules changed with the times. Today His Catholic Majesty, King Juan Carlos of Spain, is a full member of Protestant Britain’s Order of the Garter, while members of the British royal family are members of Catholic Spain’s Order of Charles III. Furthermore, in tune with the trend of globalization, the emperors of Japan have been members of the Order of the Garter since 1906. The late Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was also a member. These ancient but active orders of brotherhood, knighthood, and merit still foster togetherness under one cause.

New orders have continued to be established. For example, General George Washington instituted the Purple Heart in the United States in 1782, to recognize soldiers wounded in battle in service to their country. Simón Bolívar, founded the “Orden de los Libertadores” in Venezuela in 1813. General San Martín created the “Order of the Sun” in Peru in 1820 to honor those who fought for the independence of Latin America. He

instituted three categories, the first of which (Founders) he bestowed on Bolívar, Bernardo O’Higgins, and himself.



*Figure 1 (left). His Royal Highness the Prince Vittorio Emanuele, Grand Master of the dynastic Orders of the Annunziata and Saints Maurice and Lazarus (Italy).*

*Figure 2 (right). Sash and badge of the Banda das Tres Ordens (green-red-purple).*

## TITLES AND REGALIA

The ruling monarch is usually the titular head of an order, generally bearing the rank of “grand master”. For dynastic orders under non-regent houses of nobility, the head of the royal house is still the grand master, such as in the cases of the houses of Braganza, Hapsburg, and Savoy. (Figure 1) When monarchy becomes a republic and the order is maintained, the president of that republic is usually the titular head of the order, and is known as “chancellor”, such as in the French Legion of Honor (created by Napoleon I in 1802), which still exists under the French Republic. On the other hand, the Republic of Portugal (formerly a kingdom), with a long history of ancient orders of knighthood, created a new order with the president of the republic as its grand master. Portugal’s president wears a tri-color sash of purple, red, and green known as the “Banda das Tres Ordens”. (Figure 2) The purple is for the Order of Santiago, the red for the Cross of Christ, and the green for the ancient Order of Aviz. (Figure 3)

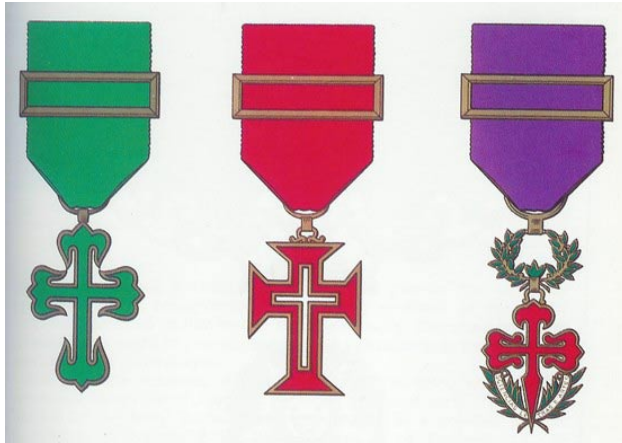


Figure 3. Crosses of an Officer of the Orders of Avis (green), of Christ (red), and of Santiago (purple).

Each order has its own uniforms. In the beginning, as in the case of the ancient Spanish monastic orders of Calatrava and Santiago, the particular cross identifying the order was shown in the center of the tunic or on the left shoulder of the cape. (Figure 4) These uniforms became more elaborate and regal in keeping with the fashion of the period. A well-known example is the vestments of the Knights of the Garter during the yearly procession from Windsor Castle to the Chapel of St. George. Hats with white plumes, richly embroidered capes, and other garments are meticulously detailed in the statutes of the order. The statutes also prescribe



Figure 4. Uniforms of some orders during the Middle Ages.

minor items such as types and numbers of buttons, cuff colors, pockets, shoes, buckles, etc.

However, the most important elements of the uniforms are the regalia. Some orders have a collar or a ribbon from which the main badge is suspended around the neck. Others have a sash, usually crossing from the right shoulder to the left hip across the chest with the badge of the order suspended from the sash. Some orders show the knight's rank by placing the badge of the order on a neck band or on the left side of the chest. This badge is called the star of the order, and is usually an eight-pointed star-like cluster with the main insignia of the order at the center of the star.

## FLAGS

Many of the flags, devices, and symbols used by the orders during and after the Crusades are the forerunners of today's European national flag designs, which in turn inspired many other national flags. Furthermore, some of those devices are also used today in modern military or civic flags. For example:

The Danish Order of the Dannebrog was founded by Waldemar II in



*Figure 5. The Grand Cross Star of a Grand Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog (Denmark).*

1219 (in Denmark it is second only to the Order of the Elephant, which can be traced to 1182), and is also known as the Order of the Flag of the Danes. Brog is Danish for flag or cloth, and the original Dannebrog was said to have fallen from heaven, but was probably presented by the pope to King Waldemar after defeating the pagan Estonians. The cross of the commander of the order is of white enamel with red borders, imitating the configuration of the Danish flag. (Figure 5)



*Figure 6. The Silver Medal of the Order Merito Melitensi, awarded by the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.*

The cross of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem—the Sovereign Order of Malta—derives from the Amalfi cross on the Italian ensign. (Figure 6) The current flag of Malta retains the traditional red and white of the order, and the main device of its civil ensign is the “Maltese cross”.

The Teutonic Order had a strong influence on flags. The Teutonic cross, used in flags and as the main insignia of its knights, inspired imperial German flags and ensigns as well as the Iron Cross, the military decoration established by Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1813. (Figure 7) The most interesting stage of the Teutonic brotherhood was under the rule of the Third Reich. The Nazis fabricated a complete mythology claiming that the Teutonic Knights were the forerunners of the Third Reich. Despite using Teutonic symbols as part of its propaganda and regalia under this misguided doctrine, the Nazis dissolved the Teutonic Order due to its Christian Catholic character, confiscating its properties and persecuting its members. The Teutonic cross is



*Figure 7. Insignia of the Knights of the Teutonic Order (Germany).*



Figure 8 (left). The cross of the Order of Christ used with the royal arms (Portugal).

Figure 9 (right). The Imperial Flag of Brazil, 1822-1889.

still used today as the roundel of Germany's united air force, although it is often wrongly described as a "Maltese Cross".

The symbol of the Portuguese Order of the Cross of Christ, founded by King Denis in 1317, has been extensively used in flags featuring the arms of the king of Portugal (the order's grand master). That "Cross of Christ" was also used on green flags during the restoration of the Portuguese monarchy in 1591. (Figure 8) It also appears on the imperial arms of Brazil (Figure 9) and on the current flag of Madeira. (Figure 10)

The Polish Order of the White Eagle, founded in 1325, provides the main symbol of Poland, a white eagle over red, used in the national flag and coat of arms. (Figure 11)

One of the most flag-friendly medals is the Order of Canada. (Figure



Figure 10. The flag of Madeira (Portugal).

12) In 1966, Lester Pearson (the prime minister who had led the battle for a new flag for Canada) initiated an effort to create a national honor for Canadians. Its unique design is a near-reproduction of the national flag. The lapel badge is the actual flag of Canada. In 1994, John





*Figure 11 (left). The Badge of the Order of the White Eagle (Poland).*

*Figure 12 (center). The Chancellor's chain of the Order of Canada.*

*Figure 13 (right). The Badge and Star of the Order of the Rising Sun (Japan).*

R. Matheson, one of the creators of the order and designer of the flag, was invested as an officer of the Order of Canada.

The two major decorations of the Empire of Japan are little more than the vivid representation of the flag. Emperor Muts-Hito founded the Order of the Rising Sun founded in 1875 (Figure 13) and the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum in 1876 (Figure 14).

The ancient Scottish Order of the Thistle has in its medallion the image of St. Andrew holding the saltire cross, the form of today's flag of Scotland (Figure 15).



*Figure 14 (left). The Star of the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum (Japan).*

*Figure 15 (right). The Star of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle (Scotland).*



*Figure 16. The Star of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (England).*

England's Most Noble Order of the Garter originated in the European fascination with courtly manners and chivalry, and its creation had more to do with King Edward III's fascination with Arthurian legends than with the incident when Lady Salisbury lost her garter during a ball. Some historians explain the order, "a society, fellowship, and college of knights" as an attempt to revive the spirit of revival of King Arthur, Camelot, and the Knights of the Round Table. The Order of the Garter features the cross of St. George, which actually preceded the order in the form of a flag. (Figure 16) The banners of the members of the order hang in St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle (Figures 17a, 17b, 17c, and 17d), demonstrating the order's diversity.

In Spain the Crusades were fought on its own territory against the occupation by Moorish kings of Andalusia and Granada. Spain has four orders whose grand master is the current king of Spain, Don Juan Carlos of Bourbon: the Order of Calatrava, the Order of St. James of the Sword (Santiago), the Order of Alcántara, and the Order of Montesa. (Figure 18) Furthermore, the crosses of Calatrava and Santiago had been used in flags before. (Figure 19)



1. H.M. The Queen



2. H.M. Queen Elizabeth  
The Queen Mother



3. H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh



4. H.R.H. The Prince of Wales



5. H.R.H. Duke of Kent



6. H.R.H. The Princess Royal

Plate 1

1

Figures 17 a. Banners of members of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (England).



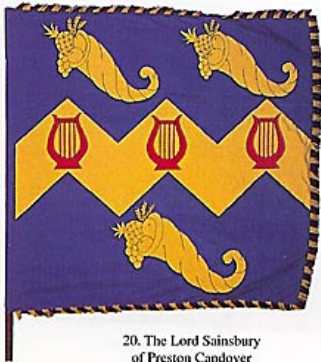
17. Field Marshal the Lord Bramall



18 Sir Edward Heath



19. The Viscount Ridley

20. The Lord Sainsbury  
of Preston Candover

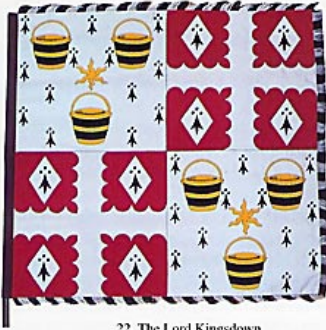
21. Sir Ninian Stephen

Plate 5

12

*Figures 17 b. Banners of members of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (England).*





22. The Lord Kingsdown



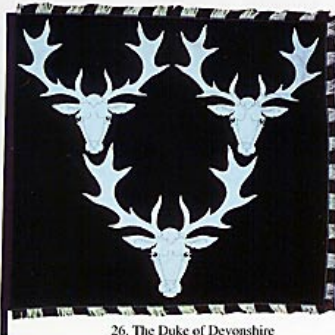
23. The Lord Ashburton



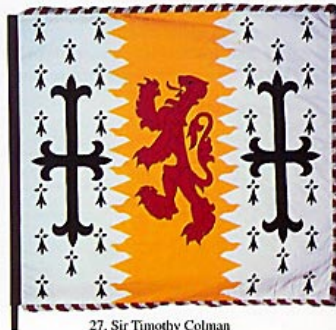
24. The Lady Thatcher



25. Sir Edmund Hillary



26. The Duke of Devonshire



27. Sir Timothy Colman

Plate 6

Figures 17 c. Banners of members of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (England).



1. H.R.H. Princess Juliana  
of the Netherlands



2. H.R.H. Jean Grand Duke  
of Luxembourg



3. H.M. Queen Margrethe of Denmark



4. H.M. King Carl Gustaf of Sweden



5. H.M. King Juan Carlos of Spain



6. H.M. Queen Beatrix  
of the Netherlands

Plate 7

41

*Figures 17 d. Banners of members of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (England).*

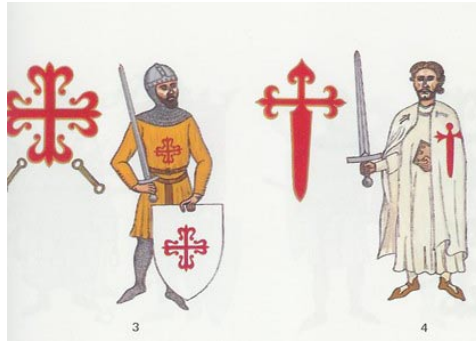


Figure 18. Order of Calatrava (1147) and Order of Santiago (1170).

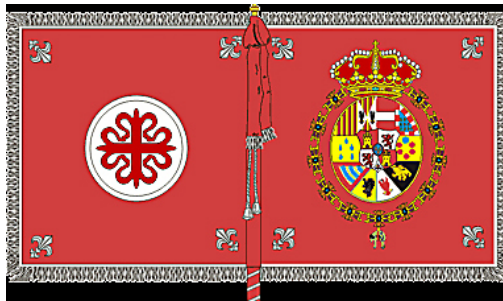


Figure 19 Cavalry Standard of the "Calatrava" Regiment (1768-1833).

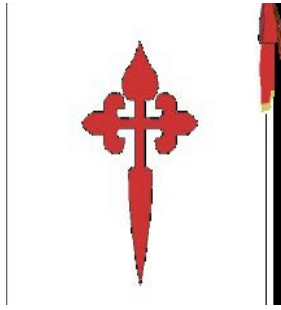


Figure 20 Flag of the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Figure 21 Flag of the Province of Santiago del Estero, Argentina.





*Figure 22. Cross of St. James (Santiago) on the regimental flag “Coronela” of Tercios de Gallegos (1806).*



*Figures 23. Charles III in the regalia of the Grand Master of the Order of Charles III, which he founded in 1771 (Spain).*



Some of these flags are also found in America, especially in Argentina, such as the flag of the city of Buenos Aires (Figure 20) and of the province of Santiago del Estero. (Figure 21) Both flags have as the main device a cross closely connected with an ancient order of knighthood. (Figure 22)

Many historians trace the colors and design of the Argentine flag to the Spanish Order of Charles III. (Figures 23-25) When Napoleon imprisoned King Ferdinand VII (Figure 26) and the people of Buenos Aires wore portraits of him with the celeste/white/celeste sash of the order in support of their king. Later, as early as 1810, the sash in the form of flags and ribbons began to be used.



Figure 24. Regalia of the Order of Charles III (Spain).



Figure 25 (left). King Charles IV of Spain and his family, wearing the sash of the Order of Charles III (Francisco de Goya). Figure 26 (right). King Ferdinand VII wearing the sash of the Order of Charles III (Spain).

**AFTERWORD**

Unlike Heraldry and Vexillology, Phaleristics cannot be catalogued under a single realm of learning, and it struggles to define its own scope and depth beyond its source disciplines. While in the past 50 years Vexillology has developed into a recognized and organized field of study, Phaleristics still has a very limited literature and structure. Most still place it within the realm of Numismatics, but others consider it part of honorific law (also known as peerage law).

I was exposed to Phaleristics during the 10th International Congress of Vexillology in 1983 through “Vexillology and Phaleristics”, a lecture by Fr. David Drake-Brockman. A new world opened for me and since then I have discovered several examples of very close relationships between medals and flags. However, there is much yet to learn, as the points of contact are extremely close between medals and decorations on one hand, and flags, their colors, and their symbols on the other. Phaleristics thus presents an underutilized but important source of information and research for the study of flags.



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