

Flags over Kythera

by Ralph Kelly, Flags Australia

Historical Background

As one of the Ionian Islands, Kythera has shared a complex history of conquest, trade and shared culture with Greece, the Byzantine Empire and Venice. In ancient times Kythera was settled by Greeks from the Peloponnese, which became controlled by the Roman Empire, and from 395 AD, by the Byzantine Empire. As a consequence of the conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Crete became controlled by the Republic of Venice, whilst Kythera became a possession of a Venetian noble, Marco Venier and the island was renamed Cerigo. Venice took formal control in 1325, though the Venier family remained major feudal landowners for several centuries.¹ This was the first of the Ionian Islands to become a possession of Venice.²



Venier family coat of arms

The Venetian Republic was dissolved by Napoleon Bonaparte, resulting in Kythera being occupied by France in 1797. However the island was captured by a Russian-Turkish fleet in October the following year. From 1800 to 1807 it was part of the Septinsular Republic (State of the Seven United Islands), nominally under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, but in practice controlled by Russia.

The Ionian Islands were reclaimed by France in 1807, but control was lost to Great Britain in October 1809 when the islands were captured by British forces. The Congress of Vienna established the British protectorate of the “United States of the Ionian Islands” in 1815, including Kythera. The Ionian Islands were regarded as being strategically important, being located near Greece and Italy and the trade routes to the Ottoman Empire. After the independence of Greece from the Ottoman Empire was achieved the islanders began a movement for union with Greece, which was achieved on 2 June 1864 when Britain ceded the Ionian Islands to Greece.

From 10 May 1941 Kythera was occupied by the German Army until 4 September 1944, when it became the first part of Greece to be liberated.

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire survived the fall of Rome, becoming the Byzantine Empire, with its capital, Constantinople.³ The Byzantine Empire reached its peak about 600 AD, after which territory began to be lost to Arabs and Persians in the East and to Slavs and Bulgars in the West. Despite being reduced in area, the Byzantine Empire continued to be pre-eminent in wealth, civic structures, culture and trade until 1204 when soldiers of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople.⁴



Byzantine Empire 1259 - 1453

The Byzantine Empire did not have a national flag or state emblem prior to the adoption of two flags by the Palaiologos Emperors who ruled from 1259. These were the double-headed eagle (now used by the Greek Orthodox Church) and a red flag with yellow cross and four letters B, representing the Imperial motto of *Basileus Basileon Basileuon Basileusi* (King of Kings, ruling over rulers).⁵

During the period that Kythera was part of the Byzantine Empire, the only symbols that would have been seen on the island would be various forms of the Christian Cross, some of which appeared on Byzantine coins, with the obverse having an image of the Emperor. The emblem most associated with this period was the “Chi-Ro”

symbol (X and P are the first two letters of “Christ” in Greek), which was first used by Emperor Constantine as part of the army’s imperial standard called “The Labarum”, as shown on a coin from 337 AD.⁶



Byzantine coin 610 AD



Byzantine coin 830 AD



Chi-Ro Christian symbol



Byzantine coin showing The Labarum, 337 AD

VENICE

The origins of Venice are obscured in legend, but it is generally accepted that Venice was formed as a series of villages built on islands in the Venetian lagoon, possibly in 421 AD, and the city developed to be an important trading centre and a maritime power. The first Doge (Duke) was elected in 726 AD and Venice’s independence from the Byzantine Empire was recognised in 803 AD. The Doge was elected for life, but with limits on the capacity of the Doge to exploit his position for personal gain. The title was not hereditary and the state was called the Most Serene Republic of Venice (Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia). Venice was well positioned for trade between the West and Byzantium and the Islamic lands. To demonstrate Venice’s increasing power and prestige, the Doge built the Doge’s Palace and a Basilica, which was completed in 832 AD (though rebuilt in 1093). In the Middle Ages it was regarded that great cities should have a well recognised patron saint and in 828 AD some Venetian merchants stole the bones of St. Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria and they were interred in St. Mark’s Basilica. A legend was invented claiming that St. Mark was involved in the foundation of the city to justify the adoption of a new patron saint; replacing St. Theodore. Venice developed an extensive fleet which defeated pirates operating in the Adriatic Sea to secure its trade routes and it participated in several of the Crusades, providing naval power and transport for the Crusaders in return for large fees.

In addition to the Ionian Islands and Crete, Venice obtained control of several cities along the Dalmatian Coast (Istria, Dalmatia, Durazzo), Peloponnese (Morea) and some of the Aegean islands, increased its territory in Northern Italy and it acquired Cyprus in 1489. Venice became famous for its opulent architecture and art and its vibrant culture. After the fall of Constantinople, Venice lost valuable trading partners and it began to be attacked by the Ottoman Empire and it gradually lost control over the Adriatic Sea.

There were several attempts by the Ottoman Empire to reclaim the Venetian possessions. The sacking of Paiochora (then the village of Agios Dimitrios on Kythera) by the Ottoman Grand Admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa in August 1537 was part of his campaign to reclaim Corfu and the other Venetian islands to the west of the Ottoman controlled Greece. This was the start of a period of Ottoman naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, which lasted until 1571, though there continued to be periods of conflict, such as the Cretan War of 1645-69 and the Ottoman - Venetian War of 1714-18.



Barbarossa’s War standard 1537

Venice suffered from several plagues, war and competition from Genoa and Pisa and the reduced levels of trade in the Mediterranean following the discovery of the Americas had diminished the once powerful Venetian Republic. This decline in power made it easy for Napoleon Bonaparte to conquer Venice in 1797 and, in a swap for Belgium, Venice was given to the Hapsburg Empire (Austria). It was not until 1866 that Venice was freed and it became part of the new Kingdom of Italy.



The flag of Venice has historically been the Lion of St. Mark, a winged lion holding a book. The earliest known flag dates from the 1100s; some included an actual representation of St Mark dressed in patriarchal robes and others were a square blue flag with a gold cross in the centre. By about 1300 Venetian flags featured a winged lion with the face of St. Mark. The lion was shown in golden yellow on a red field and the emblem underwent a multitude of artistic renditions over the centuries. From the earliest illustrations, the flag of Venice was a *gonfalon* – a flag with six squared tails (originally four tails). The lion of St. Mark was widely used as an iconographic symbol in architecture and municipal decorations.⁷

As Venice became more powerful and opulent, the traditional flag was embellished with elaborate gold decorations. The six long square-ended tails of the gonfalon represented the six *sestiere* (districts) of the city and religious illustrations were placed around the central emblem of the lion of St. Mark. The illustration above is of a Venetian flag from the late 17th Century.



Simplified version of the flag of Venice as sold to tourists and the general public.



Venice merchant shipping flag

In practice simpler versions of the Venetian flag are made with less elaborate decorations, though they usually retain the gonfalon. In many depictions the lion stands on both water and land (often with a castle on a mountain) symbolising the Venetian Republic's dominance in the hinterland as well as in the

Adriatic. Venetian merchant ships used a rectangular flag which showed the Lion of St. Mark above a blue stripe, which represented the sea.

There was no single standard official flag design until 1997 and a multitude of artistic variations in the elements continue to exist. Among the various drawings of the lion, there are two main versions – a “peaceful” one with the lion standing and holding an open book with one foreleg raised, the other “warlike” version, the raised leg holds a sword and the other foreleg stands on a closed book. Other examples exist with the paw holding a cross or resting on the ground holding nothing. Most examples add a halo over the lion’s head, a traditional Christian symbol of holiness.

On the open book is the Latin inscription *Pax tibi Marce evangelista meus* (Peace to you, Mark, my evangelist), which relates to the legend of how St. Mark, whose ship on his journey from Aquilea to Ravenna was forced by a storm onto the Rialtine islands in the Venice lagoon. He had a vision of an angel who used the words of the motto, together with *Hic requiescet corpus tuum* (“Here will rest your body”). But the legend is doubtful: it is understood to have been first recorded around 1350, while the event could only have happened around 50-60 AD, four centuries before Venice was founded, and six centuries before its first *doge* in 726 AD.⁸

Is the book a Bible? St. Mark is attributed as the author of the *Gospel of Mark* which mainly contains the sermons of the apostle Peter about the ministry of Christ, and this is one of the books of the New Testament. The winged lion has an established symbolism representing St. Mark, part of the iconography of the Four Evangelists referred to in the *Book of Revelation of St. John* 4:7. So it seems reasonable to assume that the winged lion, symbolising St. Mark, is holding a Bible containing the *Gospel of Mark*, rather than merely an anonymous blank book. Although the motto on the open pages of the book is not recorded in any holy book, I believe it is reasonable to view the book as unconnected with the Latin motto and to consider the book to be a Bible containing the *Gospel of Mark*.⁹



Official flag of Venice from 1997
(source: *Origin of the flag of the Venetian Republic* by Alfredo Betocchi)

The flag of the City of Venice was given formal specifications by a decree of the President of Italy on 8 January 1997. All of the traditional elements were retained in the official design – it was not simplified. The winged lion in gold holds an open bible and stands on the edge of an island with a turreted fortress, with the rear feet on water, all on a red field.

A border with gold interlaced filigree decorations includes eight squares upon which are representations of the Archangel Gabriel, a dove (the emblem of the Holy Spirit), the Blessed Virgin, a depiction of

the Virgin and Divine Child, and the symbols of the four Evangelists - an eagle for St. John, a winged ox for St. Luke, a lion for St. Mark and an angel for St. Matthew. On each of the six tails appears an armillary sphere in blue and gold.



Left: The Lion of St. Mark has two versions - “peaceful” holding an open book inscribed *Pax Tibi Marce Evangelista Meus*, and the “warlike” version, holding a sword, and the book closed under its paw.

Most drawings of the lion use the “peaceful” version with its open book. The “warlike” version with the raised foreleg holding a sword is said to be the version used in war-time. This does not seem to be correct, but it has been observed that a motto that includes “Peace to you” is inappropriate on the flag of a naval vessel, so the version with the closed book and sword was used as the naval ensign while the open book (often with a cross) was used by merchant ships.¹⁰

PROVINCE OF VENEZIA

The city of Venice is the capital of the Province of Venezia, which since 2002 has had a white gonfalon (with six tails) featuring the arms of the province. These arms show the Lion of St. Mark, with only the head and wings showing front-on, plus the open Bible. This version of the lion with only its head and wings is styled *in moleca* (like crab pincers). This representation of the lion of St. Mark has been on the provincial arms since 1875, and is associated more with the lagoon than the city, though it appears on the city’s coat of arms.



Flag of **Venezia Province** from 2002.
The previous flag was the same except it was a standard rectangular shape.



Flag of **Veneto Region**
From 1975

VENETO

The Region of Veneto also has Venice as its capital, having been formally created in 1970, and it features on its flag similar imagery, though it is distinguished by a blue background for the lion and the gonfalon tail has seven tails, each bearing a small shield for each province in the region. The flag was adopted on 20 May 1975, though the words *Regione del Veneto* were deleted from the blue background in February 1999.

NAVAL ENSIGN ITALY



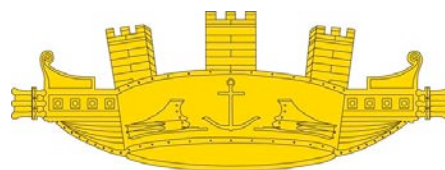
Italian Merchant flag
from 9 November 1947.

The Lion of St. Mark also appears on the shield of the Italian maritime flags. Italy had used the coat of arms of the Royal House of Savoy (a white cross on a red shield with a blue border) on its national flag, and civil and naval ensigns until 9 November 1947, when the monarchy was abolished.

From 1947, a new shield was added to the white stripe of the Italian tricolour for use by Italian shipping. This is a quartering of the traditional arms of the four maritime republics of Venice (a lion with open book), Genoa (a red cross on white), Amalfi (a white Maltese Cross on blue) and Pisa (a white cross with internal markings on red).

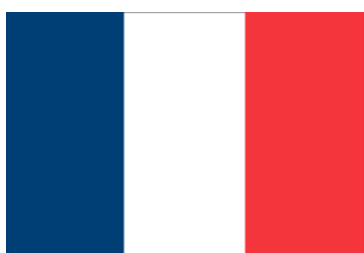
The naval ensign added a turreted naval crown and changed the lion on the shield to be holding a sword and a closed book - a variation that mirrors the traditional difference between the ensigns of Venice. The new naval emblem lacked any artistic style, particularly the Venetian element which had a crudely drawn lion and included three lines below the hind legs and three small lilies of unknown meaning.

The design was subject to periodic criticism and the military heraldist Michele D'Andrea researched the historical designs of the elements of the naval emblem. In February 2012 he recommended a "renovated" design that substantially improved the appearance of the Venice and Pisa quarters and the naval crown. This improved stylisation was approved by the Marina Militare on 26 December 2012 and now appears on the Italian naval ensign and jack.¹¹ The crown now more clearly shows that it is a stylised Roman trireme with ram bows and towers (that would have been used by archers) and for the Venetian quarter, the book of Gospels has a red cover, the lion is rendered more artistically and the coastline and sea clearly defined. The cross of Pisa is now distinctly *clechée* and uncluttered. The merchant flag is unchanged from the 1947 version.



Above: The Naval Ensign from 26 December 2012, and **right,** detail of the naval shield, its quarters representing the historic maritime republics of Venice, and with cross emblems, clockwise, Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi.

FRENCH OCCUPATION OF THE IONIAN ISLANDS



Municipality of Venezia
May 1797 – Jan 1798

Ionian Islands
1807 – 1809 (1814 on Corfu)

The Venetian Republic surrendered to the French General, Napoleon Bonaparte on 16 May 1797 and it was replaced by a provisional French municipality of *Venezia* until it was ceded to Austria in January 1798. During the short period of French control of Venice and the Ionian Islands the French tricolour was used. A simple blue and yellow bi-coloured flag is also reported as having been used.

Bonaparte recognised the naval strategic value of the Ionian Islands, so it was excluded from the transfer of Venice to the Austrians. Kythera was occupied by the French from 28 June 1797 and from 7 November 1797 the Ionian Islands became the French departments of Corcyre (Corfu), Ithaca and the Aegean Sea (Mer-Égée), which included Kythera.¹² The noble families on the islands resented the loss of privileges under the French.

THE SEPTINSULAR REPUBLIC

French rule was short-lived as the Ionian Islands were captured by a Russian-Turkish fleet in October 1798. In April 1800 the Septinsular Republic (which included all the Ionian Islands) was established as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, ruled by a Senate of nobles representing each of the islands, though real power was held by the Russian Commissioner.

The Venetian heritage of the Ionian Islands is reflected in the continuing use of the Lion of St. Mark as the flag of the Septinsular Republic, albeit changed to a blue field and the book is more clearly shown to be a bible with the addition of a cross and seven arrows are held together by a ribbon inscribed “1800”.

The French Army again occupied the Ionian Islands in July 1807 when Emperor Napoleon I entered into a peace treaty with the Russian Tsar Alexander. Napoleon abolished the Septinsular Republic, which became a province of the French Empire; the French flag replacing that of the republic.

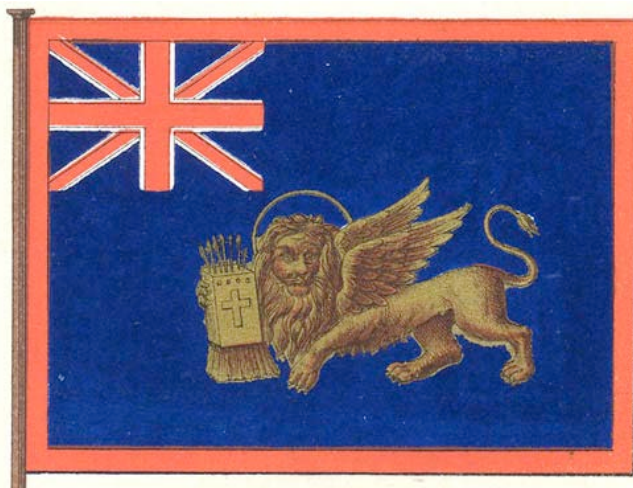


The Septinsular Republic
13 Jan 1801 – 1807
1809 - 1817

UNITED STATES OF THE IONIAN ISLANDS

Again the French control was relatively short-lived. The British navy defeated the French fleet and occupied Kythera and the other Ionian islands in October 1809¹³, except for Corfu, where the French fortifications were too strong (it did not surrender to the British until June 1814, after Napoleon’s defeat). Sensitive to Ionian nationalism, initially Brigadier-General Oswald replaced the French flag with that of the Septinsular Republic rather than the Union Jack. Oswald stated that the British presented themselves not as invaders, but as Allies who would liberate them from the French yoke and provide the benefits of British protection.

The Congress of Vienna, which dealt with the consequences of the defeat of Emperor Napoleon, in June 1815, placed the Ionian Islands under the protection of Great Britain. A British Lord High Commissioner was appointed to govern a “free and independent” United States of the Ionian Islands, including Kythera. The British permitted a high level of autonomy, restoring the elected senate, encouraged the development of local shipping, and developed infrastructure and government services such as schools and law courts.¹⁴



United States of the Ionian Islands

The Treaty of Paris¹⁵ declared that the flag in use before 1807 would be recognised as the flag of the Ionian Islands. To better reflect its status as a British protectorate, but not a colony, the Ionian Islands adopted a new flag in 1817, which added a small Union Jack to the flag of the former Septinsular Republic. This flag also had a red border, which made it unique amongst British ensigns.¹⁶

UNION WITH GREECE

After the independence of Greece from the Ottoman Empire was achieved after its War of Independence (1821 to 1832), the islanders began to object to colonial rule and there was a movement for union with Greece. Initially Britain resisted, but finally, on 2 June 1864 Britain ceded the Ionian Islands as a sign of support for the new pro-British King George I of Greece. The changes to the Greek flag over the past 150 years is another story.

ENDNOTES

1. The Venier family land on Kythera was confiscated in 1363 due to Venieri support of a Cretan rebellion, though some of the land was restored in 1393. It is unlikely that the Venier family used a flag on Kythera, however the coat of arms of

the family was three horizontal red stripes on a white shield. The illustration is of the arms used by the Venetian Doge Francesco Venier in 1554-56.

2. Byzantine rule was restored for a period from 1275 to 1308, when Venetian rule resumed. Corfu voluntarily became a Venetian colony in 1386, Zante was captured in 1485, Cephalonia in 1500 and Ithaca in 1503. Lefkada was the last island to become controlled by Venice in 1718. Crete was taken from Venice by the Ottoman Empire in 1669.
3. The new Eastern Roman Empire was established by Emperor Constantine in 330 AD in the city of Constantinople, originally called Byzantium, and called Istanbul since 1923. By 1100 AD the area controlled by the Byzantine Empire was the modern countries of Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus, but only the western coastal parts of Turkey. In 1054 there was a Great Schism with the relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church being broken and the Papacy attempted to assert its authority over European monarchs.
4. The Holy Lands and the City of Jerusalem had been part of the Roman Empire from the time of Jesus Christ, but they fell to Muslim Arabs of the Rashidun Caliphate in 634 AD, only two years after the death of Muhammad. Despite centuries of peaceful co-existence between Christian pilgrims and Muslims, in 1096 Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade to reclaim the Holy Lands for Christianity, with Jerusalem being captured three years later by knights and soldiers, mostly from France and Germany. The Holy Lands became the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem until 1187 when it was captured by Sultan Saladin. Following the failed Third Crusade, led by the English King Richard the Lionheart, a Fourth Crusade began in 1202. Venice agreed to supply ships to transport the Crusaders, but the fleet was diverted to Constantinople, which was attacked by the Crusaders as part of a conspiracy to usurp the Byzantine Emperor. The Crusaders captured the city and sacked it – pillaging or destroying the wealth of the city. The Sixth Crusade recovered Jerusalem in 1229, but it was lost again after only 15 years of Christian rule. In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, and the last vestiges of the Byzantine Empire ended.
5. The form of cross is called a “tetragrammic cross” (“four-lettered” cross). The Bs, two of which are inverted, are sometimes described as “fire steels”, which were high carbon steel tools used with flint to create sparks to start a fire. The cross and fire steels continue in use as a shield on a double headed eagle on the coat of arms of Serbia.
6. The Labarum of Constantine, which was similar to the Roman *vexillas*, was used by the Byzantine army from 350 AD to about 400 AD, after which it was moved to a church and venerated as a relic of Constantine. This was a single ceremonial standard and the Empire did not continue to use a similar banner.
7. Refer to *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* by Whitney Smith, 1975, McGraw-Hill, New York, pp140-141.
8. The angel’s prophecy was used (after the event) as the justification for the theft of his bones from Alexandria in 828. However, that there is any truth in the legend of the vision is highly doubtful: *New Advent*, the on-line Catholic Encyclopedia (www.newadvent.org/cathen/09672c.html) refers to St. Mark’s time preaching in northern Italy as “the saint’s alleged connection with Aquileia”. The legend that St. Mark preached the Gospel in northern Italy started after 828. The Coptic Church, which he founded in Alexandria, attributes the first part of the text to a vision of Christ that St. Mark had the night before he was martyred in 68 AD (See “St. Mark the Apostle, the Founder of the Coptic Church” at website of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States (<http://www.suscopts.org/coptic-orthodox/church/saint-mark/>)). It would seem that the Alexandria legend was co-opted to create the Venice legend.
9. The contrary view is taken by Joe McMillan, who wrote on the Flags of the World mailing list (FOTW), 9 March 2001: “since the text is not biblical, I conclude that the book cannot be a bible.” But then, if it is not the Bible, what is it? The official descriptions of the arms and flag usually only refer to it as “a book”, but a 1942 decree described it as “the book of the Gospel”. Alfredo Betocchi describes it as a “gospel book” in *Origins of the Flag of the Venetian Republic* (ICV22 Proceedings at p.119). The books of the Gospel are contained within the Bible.
10. The observation about the inappropriateness of the motto on a military flag was made by Joe McMillan, FOTW, 9 March 2001. A 1759 source quoted by Ralf Stelter (“Venice – Historical flags”, FOTW, 9 March 2001) stated “the lion presents either the cross or the sword, but only the cross on merchant flags”.
11. For further information on the new Italian naval ensign and jack, see <http://www.marina.difesa.it/storiacultura/storia/tradizioni/Pagine/LaBandiera.aspx>, ... part of the Marina Militare website.
12. The main islands under the control of Venice (and then transferred to France as a Department) were Kythera, Zante (Zakynthos on the West coast of Greece), the Strofades (Stamfani and Arpia) and Dragamesto (modern Astakos) on the Greek mainland.
13. The army force consisted of 1,700 troops with the main detachments from the 35th Regiment of Foot and the Royal Corsican Rangers. The naval squadron was led by HMS *Warrior*, whilst troops from HMS *Spartan*, captured Kythera.
14. The British Order of Saint Michael and Saint George was established in 1818, initially as an honour for natives of the Ionian Islands and Malta and British subjects holding high office in the Mediterranean. The first Governor of Queensland was Sir George Bowen, who had been awarded the KCMG for his services as chief secretary to the government of the Ionian Islands from 1854 to 1859.
15. Whilst determined by the Congress of Vienna on June 1815, the actual terms were set out in a treaty between Great Britain and the Allied Powers (Russia, Austria and Prussia) in respect to the Ionian Islands, signed on 5 November 1815, one of the Acts of Paris (1815).
16. It is unclear if the flag of the Septinsular Republic included this red border. Many modern depictions have only a plain blue field and the contemporary illustrations are of the emblem only. However Roberto Breschi, in his web-site *Bandiere*, confirms that the original flag had red border on three or four sides.

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Ralph Kelly is one of Australia's leading vexillologists – an expert in flags. He has presented papers at nine international flag conferences based on his research into the history of Australian flags, his involvement in the Australian flag debate and a general interest in world flags. Ralph is a regular contributor of articles and illustrations for “Crux Australis”, the journal of Flags Australia. He is web-master for the flagsaustralia.com.au website, treasurer and a former president of Flags Australia. Ralph is the principal organiser for the next international flag conference to be held in Sydney in September 2015. By profession he is a former investment banker and is now a company director.



This article on the flags of Kythera is based on an article that appeared in *Crux Australis*, issue No. 112 in October 2014, entitled “Bibles on Flags”. The term *vexillology* means the study of flags and was derived from the Latin “vexillum” (the banners used by a company of Roman soldiers) and “-ology” the Greek suffix for the “study of”. Flags are an interesting area of interest because flags can be emotive objects and the designs of a national flag can reflect that country's history, geography, flora and fauna, culture, religion, politics and the aspirations of its people. A good flag design combines meaning and excellence in graphic arts to result in an object that is inspirational.